Developing Access between Universities and Local Community Groups: A University Helpdesk in Action

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Abstract

In this article, the authors offer the University of Brighton's Community-University Partnership Programme (CUPP) Helpdesk as a model of an "enabling platform" for university-community engagement. Despite the growth of practical and scholarly activity in this area, there is a relative lack of research focused on the processes by which higher education institutions establish and sustain community partnerships. An account of the development of the helpdesk is related to a discussion of its role in capacity building, both within the university and externally. The authors review some of the organizational barriers to effective university-community interaction and suggest that, while concrete models remain elusive in the literature, a mechanism such as the CUPP Helpdesk can help overcome the barriers that hinder the facilitation of engagement work.

Introduction

*T*his article presents the University of Brighton's Community-University Partnership Programme (CUPP) and its helpdesk as examples of the way structures designed to assist effective engaged scholarship and community partnerships can be established and maintained. At the time that CUPP was established, academic literature with a focus on the enabling role of universities in developing community partnerships was sparse, although it is now beginning to emerge, for example, on project work *(Fogel and Cook 2006; Lerner and Simon 1998a)*, "communities of practice" *(Hart and Wolff 2006)*, and "clusters" *(Fielden et al. 2007)*. However, detail of how and by what organizational means relationships are initiated and maintained is hard to find. The University of Brighton's collection of papers setting out the organically emergent experiences of CUPP *(Hart, Maddison, and Wolff 2007)* is a recent example of such work, and includes a chapter on the helpdesk *(Rodriguez with Millican 2007)*. Nonetheless, there is a relative lack of discussion of the mechanisms that might help people find their way through a complex bureaucracy such as a university. The aim of this article, therefore, is to reflect on the role

of the helpdesk in broadening out access between the university and local communities and to contribute to the development of a broader framework for analytic purposes and comparative study.

CUPP is an enabling service that is developing alongside the widening and deepening of engagement activities across the university[1]. This expansion of activities relates particularly to the broad area of health and social capacity building rather than local economic development and assessing local economic impact, although universities are increasingly engaged with their communities over a wide spectrum of interactions *(see, for example, UUK 2007)*. In the United Kingdom, university-wide structures to articulate and support such activity systematically are still relatively rare, although in the United States and in Australian universities they are more developed, with dedicated offices and officers *(Lerner and Simon 1998a; Maurrasse 2001; Sunderland et al. 2004)*.

"The scale and complexity of such work requires innovative approaches to problem solving at both strategic and operational levels."

In 2003 the University of Brighton successfully attracted seed money from Atlantic Philanthropies to establish CUPP, with the stated aim of being innovative in its exploration of mutually beneficial relationships with the community. Since 2007 external core funding has ceased and this community-university partnership has become central to the university's strategic plan. The university now funds the offices and core staff of CUPP (director, administrator, research helpdesk manager, and student learning development manager), maintaining them as an autonomous unit within the university's Strategic Planning Unit. Two senior professors, located in their schools, are funded centrally as part-time academic directors for CUPP. In addition, there are externally funded program staff.

A significant step forward came in 2007 when the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded CUPP to facilitate the South East Coastal Communities Programme, a project which sees the University of Brighton, in collaboration with eight other universities and their community partners, developing community-university partnership projects aimed at improving health and well-being within disadvantaged and excluded communities. The scale and complexity of such work requires innovative approaches to problem solving at both strategic and operational levels. Through such joint work, the universities are expanding their community engagement activities, including the helpdesk,

and exploring the potential of "Communities of Practice" (CoPs) to address local health inequalities. As CUPP has extended the scale and scope of its community partnerships, it has also begun to systematically evaluate the impact of its work *(see Hart and Wolff 2006)*.

The aim of CUPP is to tackle disadvantage and promote sustainable development through working partnerships. Focused on creating sustainable partnerships that provide an enduring benefit to local communities and to the university, CUPP helps develop ideas into projects, provides start-up funding, and helps networks and communities of practice to develop. Its work spans the community and the voluntary, social enterprise, and public sectors in Brighton and Hove and across Sussex. Currently CUPP encompasses four areas of engagement: the Research Helpdesk; Student Community Engagement; Brighton and Sussex Community Knowledge Exchange (BSCKE); and the South East Coastal Communities Programme (SECC).

Recognizing that developing productive relationships between partners with very different backgrounds, cultures, and needs does not just happen without serious, attentive work, a facilitative role for the CUPP Helpdesk was incorporated into the original funding bid when CUPP was established. However, its evolving nature has resulted in the helpdesk expanding its geographical territory, with a newly established satellite office away from the main campus, and it has proved that it is able to respond to a wide variety of inquiries with increasing confidence. This article examines the ways in which the helpdesk has shaped the provision that the university makes in responding to the growing needs of both faculty and citizens as collaboration has developed.

The Helpdesk Role in Community-University Capacity Building

Our interest in the helpdesk was to explore its emerging role as a model of an "enabling platform" *(Alter 2005)* for university-community engagement. Part of the problem in identifying examples of such institutional innovations is the lack of a common terminology for what is depicted here as a "helpdesk." Thus, reflections on the *mechanics* of facilitating and building lasting relationships within the complex organizational structure of the university had to be gleaned from the wider literature.

In undertaking the literature search, flexibility in choosing search terms led to discovery of an extensive range of developments. The ISI Web of Knowledge (all citation indexes) was searched for

papers in the last five years (2003–2008), using the terms "university helpdesk," "community university engagement," "university public engagement," and "community university collaboration." A total of 240 papers were returned. The search term "university helpdesk" produced only eight papers, all of them concerned with IT helpdesks for students and, in one case, laypeople. The other search terms produced a wide variety of papers covering service-learning; international development; urban and rural regeneration; industry partnerships; professional education; quality of life/health improvement; Web-based information; and individual university-community partnership projects. Only ten drew attention specifically to broader-level strategies for developing community engagement and the processes by which universities and their citizens might constructively build the enabling links needed for effective university-community partnerships, and how such work might be assessed. We focus on these papers in the discussion that follows.

It is not that there is a lack of imaginative practical activity; Web searches revealed many examples of community-university engagement both in the United Kingdom and internationally. Rather, there is a relative lack of research focused on the processes by which higher education institutions establish community partnerships and how they are sustained *(Buys and Bursnall 2007; Kezar 2005)*.

There is, nonetheless, a considerable degree of consensus as to the barriers to effective university-community interaction. Jongbloed, Enders, and Salerno *(2008)*, basing their conclusions on a stakeholder analysis of higher education at a time when traditional functions of teaching and research are being reassessed in terms of universities' "public" responsibility to society, argue that the barriers are both historical and regulatory. Notwithstanding the potential benefits of interacting with business and communities, "universities mostly engage in interactions with their traditional stakeholders, such as students, fellow researchers, funding organizations, research sponsors, et cetera" *(316)*. They identify three types of institutional barrier to community engagement: determination of the research agenda and the contents of the curriculum by faculty, mainly along traditional academic lines; an internal reward structure that favors refereed publication and internal teaching responsibilities; and the lack of an entrepreneurial culture in universities.

Jacobson, Butterill, and Goering *(2004)* identify similar barriers in relation to knowledge transfer. According to participants they

interviewed in a series of focus group discussions with doctoral-level researchers employed in a university faculty of medicine, activities central to knowledge transfer such as outreach, building partnerships with nonacademic organizations, and plain-language communication were "not widely accepted as legitimate forms of scholarship" *(248)*. These findings concurred with the knowledge transfer literature. A particular barrier identified was a reward and incentive system (i.e., promotion and tenure) that values traditional academic output.

Aligning the institutional needs of the university with the needs and demands of local communities to create a "public scholarship" *(Peters et al. 2005)* is therefore not straightforward. Bruning, McGrew, and Cooper *(2006)* argue that although "the notion of a seamless community and university has increased in popularity" *(125)*, most engagement is focused on either providing students with experiences *in* the community or providing university expertise *to* the community, while less emphasis is given to the benefits that accrue from giving members of the community access to a university.

This situation is reflected in the United Kingdom. While "outreach offices" have been established in some UK universities (see, for example, the Web pages for the universities of Aston and East Anglia), "outreach" puts the emphasis less on the mutually beneficial relationship implied in the idea of "partnership" than on one "where the balance of power tilts towards the academic entity" *(Jongbloed, Enders, and Salerno 2008, 313)*. Similarly, the increasing involvement of the community in health and social care strategic planning is having a discernable impact on university organization, with academic collectives such as research centers tapping into service user/community consultation strategies. Such research centers are not necessarily a formal part of a community-university engagement program; however, UK universities will increasingly be expected to define the nature and extent of any such activity through providing engagement indicators that reflect the commitments set out in their institution's corporate plans.

Picturing the Helpdesk

Nutley, Davies, and Walter *(2003)* found that a common conclusion from existing research on the impact of research on practice was that ways must be found "to develop better, ongoing interaction between evidence providers and evidence users" *(9)*. This fits with the rationale behind the CUPP Helpdesk, which is a deliberate

Examples of Helpdesk Functions 2004–2008

- Responding to over 1000 requests for research-related support
- Providing places in research training courses and workshops to members of the local community and voluntary sector
- Referring inquirers for one-to-one support via the Senior Researchers Group (see pg. 51)
- Facilitating involvement in a regular Community Research Forum (see pg. 52)
- Supporting the development of research partnership projects
- Supporting community- and university-based networks
- Helping support a range of citywide consultation activities
- Providing support to students seeking community research and work placement opportunities
- Putting academics in touch with others working in their field
- Providing links to other funding opportunities within the university
- Working with CUPP's trustee-matching service

attempt to build the necessary bridges between community and university.

The helpdesk service can be described as a user-friendly point of entry to the University of Brighton for local community, voluntary, and statutory organizations who wish to inquire about research and possible collaborative opportunities. It also acts as a first point of contact for university personnel and students wanting access to, or information on, specific community and voluntary organizations for research and teaching purposes. Increasingly, it provides a link that facilitates inquiries from external institutions and individuals, many from overseas, and assists in the setting-up of exchanges of information for visitors. A helpdesk manager supports this work, and CUPP and its helpdesk are promoted via the university Web pages as well as through local publicity, newsletters, and conferences. The helpdesk now has two locations, in Brighton and Hastings, and it operates within the context described in endnote 1. Examples of helpdesk functions are given above.

Conceived in the original application for CUPP funding through Atlantic Philanthropies, and corroborated through a needs assessment with community partners, the rationale through which a helpdesk would assist the process of change in community engagement was set out by University Vice Chancellor David Watson:

> The helpdesk will be available to support members of the community and community groups carry out their own research and/or access University expertise. This is likely to be a "virtual" desk in terms of the connections to the range of University expertise, but will have

a human face in the form of a helpdesk officer who can navigate and negotiate within the University in support of community contacts. A community research fund will accompany the helpdesk and enable University staff time and other expertise and resources to be made available in response to proposals from community groups. *(University of Brighton 2002)*

This needs-led approach was supported by community partners, and although the helpdesk's emphasis has shifted away from being a specifically "research-centered" facilitator, its core services and aims have not changed since its launch in 2004. These are:

- To promote research partnerships between academics, students, voluntary and community organizations, and the communities that they serve, for mutual benefit

- To support the development of an evidence base for the services provided by voluntary and community-sector organizations

- To enhance the capacity of voluntary and community organizations to undertake research activity

- To support the development of research skills of voluntary and community-sector practitioners

- To address social exclusion through enhancing the research capacity of voluntary and community-sector partner organizations

Senior Researchers Group

Inquiries to the helpdesk are facilitated through the Senior Researchers Group (SRG): senior academics from different disciplines across the university who support the aims and principles of CUPP and who wish to pursue research interests with their local community. The SRG holds regular referral meetings (usually every six weeks) to discuss requests for support, and assigns projects to the most suitable researcher. An inquiry, once assessed, is allocated a specific amount of one-to-one support from a senior researcher (anything from one to five days). Since 2007, the SRG has broadened to include a senior community practitioner in family welfare (the director of a local charity), who brings a wealth of applied experience and increasing research experience through involvement with CUPP. SRG members are all willing to put aside time to be involved in partnership research, and most referrals to them are

collated by the helpdesk manager. An example of SRG involvement in the helpdesk is given in endnote 2.

An important enabler in the helpdesk's activity is that in return for their services in the Senior Researchers Group, CUPP makes a nominal contribution to senior researchers' time by making a financial contribution to their school or department, or in the case of the community partner, to their organization. Through its work the SRG has become a key driver of academic debate. It has also grown to influence and extend CUPP's work, combining its innovative role with that of strategic development, as its wide reach across schools and faculties, alongside the seniority of its membership, makes the SRG a key mechanism for strategically influencing university structures and policies.

> *"[Senior Researchers Group] members are all willing to put aside time to be involved in partnership research, and most referrals to them are collated by the helpdesk manager."*

Community Research Forum

Established at the request of community members via the helpdesk, the Community Research Forum (CRF) provides the opportunity to discuss common research themes and to develop communities of common interest. Sessions are often cochaired by a key person from an interest group and an academic. The helpdesk also provides support for interest groups to meet outside the CRF structure.

Discussion: The Helpdesk as an "Enabling Platform"

Identifying many of the same barriers to developing university capacity for community engagement previously discussed, Alter *(2005)* emphasizes the importance of creating "enabling platforms" that can bring together community-based experience and academic study in a deep mutual understanding. The partnership model of Science Shops is similarly concerned with building up longer-term relationships between scientific knowledge and civil society groups to meet local needs *(European Commission 2003)*.

In examining the barriers to accessing the university for local community groups, there seem to be three key areas where the CUPP Helpdesk, as an "enabling platform," plays a crucial role in capacity building, both within the university and between the university and the local community:
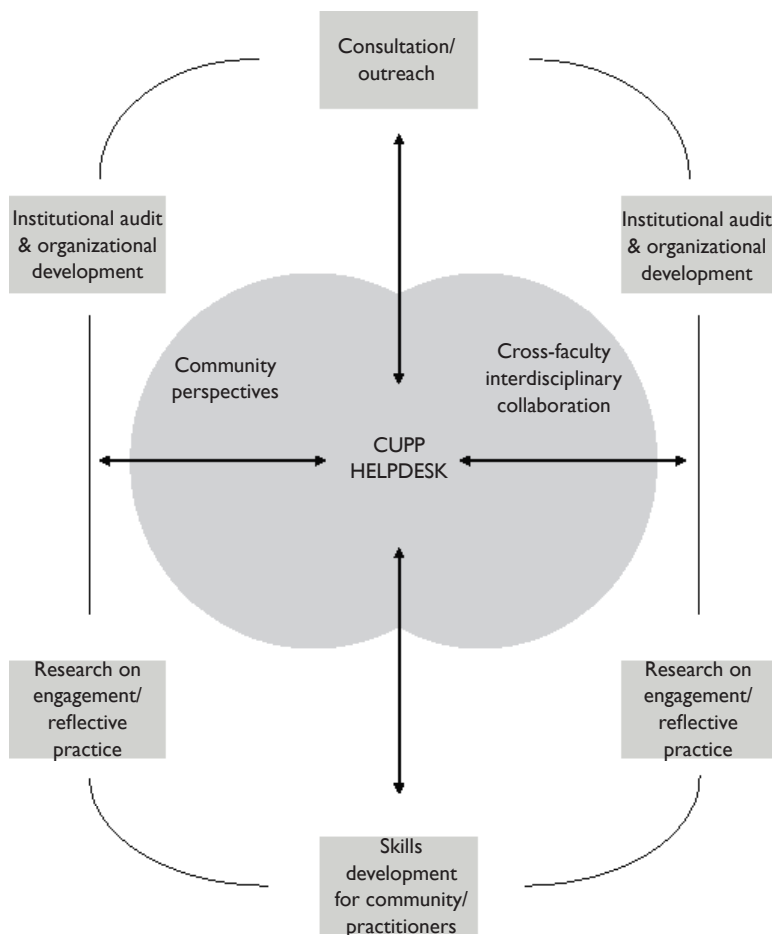
- In building trust, commitment, and understanding

- In providing recognition and resources, and

- In sustaining community partners

First, much time has been invested in building up trust, commitment, and mutual understanding. The helpdesk has worked hard to balance the needs and perceptions of academic professional advancement with those of community and voluntary organizations, and of the community as a whole. While CUPP acknowledges the existence of tensions arising from power sharing, the helpdesk has played a part in enabling partners to learn from each other in reciprocal arrangements, and has emphasized communicating research results so that those who are implicated in them can gain access to research outcomes. A helpdesk that can play a central role in coordinating academic input as well as understanding community perspectives is in a good position to point out links, connections, and possible consequences arising from collaborative and engaged work, which is a vital part of validating, and consequently building on, such partnerships. The helpdesk works closely with community members in setting the research agenda, as shown in having a community member on the Senior Researchers Group, and in supporting a Community Research Forum.

Second, while University of Brighton staff have been brought into CUPP's work from different faculties and schools on the basis of their experience and enthusiasm, the establishment of the Senior Researchers Group formalizes the university's recognition of their contribution, and CUPP can provide modest financial support both for the time of academic staff and the project costs of community partners.

Third, the helpdesk has been mindful of the different operating contexts in partner organizations. For example, because of high turnover in parts of the voluntary and community sector, the helpdesk has offered in-house training to groups of staff, to make its impact more effective in the longer term by ensuring skills can be nurtured within organizations *(Rodriguez 2005)*.

Finally, a helpdesk can play a significant role in supporting the university in auditing its engagement activities and their benefits. The University of Brighton has recently published its first such audit *(University of Brighton 2009)*. The complexities of such auditing should not be underestimated *(Hart, Northmore, and Gerhardt 2009)*. However, the creation of a platform such as a helpdesk reflects an institution's commitment to open engagement with its communities

Figure 1. Bridging Role of CUPP Helpdesk

Consultation/
outreach

Institutional audit
& organizational
development

Institutional audit
& organizational
development

Community
perspectives

Cross-faculty
interdisciplinary
collaboration

CUPP
HELPDESK

Research on
engagement/
reflective
practice

Research on
engagement/
reflective
practice

Skills
development
for community/
practitioners

and provides a practical mechanism that can assist in establishing a baseline for the evaluation of the impact of the university's community engagement work over time. It also supports the learning purposes of evaluation by providing feedback to all the stakeholders involved: academic staff, management, funders, and the wider community.

This bridging role of the CUPP Helpdesk is represented in figure 1. With cross-faculty academics and community partners involved through the Senior Researchers Group, the helpdesk acts as a bridge both between the university and the community and within the institution itself.

Watson *(2007)*, reflecting on the changing nature of the university, argues that for community-university interaction to work well

there will need to be greater dialogue on the increasingly permeable boundary between modern universities and their communities. The notion of permeable boundaries is to be found also in Lerner and Simon's summary of lessons drawn from their collection on university-community collaborations in the United States. They see the need to "utilize/incorporate" those who have benefited from work undertaken, so they become empowered and integral to the continued functioning of the partnership *(Lerner and Simon 1998b, 477–78)*.

The Community-Campus Partnerships for Health conference *(CCPH 2007)* addresses the topic of "authentic community–higher education partnerships" from the perspective of community partners. "Bridge-builders," the conference reported, were often critical to the success of a partnership, supportive factors being "employing a community-academic liaison officer familiar with both community and academic contexts, who can play a 'translational role' between each partner" *(6)*. CUPP and its helpdesk acknowledge that it is important to develop such bridging roles through ensuring that community partners, and not solely university academics, are leading and making significant, identifiable contributions to partnership projects.

> *"[T]he helpdesk acts as a bridge both between the university and the community and within the institution itself."*

Equally important is the development of research on engagement. *Research on engagement* differs fundamentally from *engaged research (Stanton 2007)*. Research *on* engagement is a dimension of developing new knowledge, and needs facilitating and support. Our literature search highlighted that research in this area is as yet underdeveloped. A helpdesk, together with those working toward expanding and developing community-university engagement, has a role to play in encouraging reflective practice that is disseminated not only through local community links, but also through academic and scholarly outlets, and hence through to mainstream research agendas.

Conclusion: Building Bridges

What is needed in engagement work, Overton and Burkhardt *(1999, 223)* argue, is vision: "Establishing the vision that binds a group in common purpose offers the first departure point between

institutional and community leadership." Cartwright *(1998, 105–6)* also sees the need for a new vision of the university campus culture,

> . . . [one] in which faculty and administrative roles are integrated, categories of scholarship are less important, while quality and excellence of a variety of contributions are paramount, and in which the formation of effective problem-solving teams is a priority.

In this article, we have offered the University of Brighton CUPP Helpdesk as a form of organizational structure that helps challenge and overcome the barriers that impede engagement work. In particular, this model prioritizes mutually beneficial relationships and the pursuit of a shared goal over departmental organization or academic specialism. The bridge-building role of the helpdesk promotes sustainability by enhancing the research capacity of voluntary and community sector partners; ensures that the knowledge base of the university is accessible to its local community; and addresses issues of marginalization and inequality by providing recognition and resources for local partnerships.

We do not claim that the current functions of the helpdesk have solved the problem of how to address the diversity of challenges now facing the university sector in its efforts to engage with local communities and community groups. However, its strategic positioning and engaged role enable the helpdesk to go some way toward providing a reflective focal point. Furthermore, it can be evaluated and adapted as community-university engagement activity itself develops.

Endnotes

1. The CUPP Helpdesk setting is a university with 21,000 students and staff, set in the county of East Sussex, which has a population of 506,000. A recent audit estimated 1,600 community and voluntary-sector organizations in the city of Brighton and Hove, employing approximately 8,000 people and contributing £96 million to the Brighton and Hove economy each year. Over two-thirds of respondents considered their organization to be a community organization, a voluntary organization, or both *(Brighton and Hove CVSF 2008)*. There are a wide range of local and national government-funded sector services across various government agencies. The town of Brighton sits on the south coast of England, and the University of Brighton has several other campus sites, including at Eastbourne and Hastings, both of which are also seaside towns.

Brighton is home to both the University of Brighton and the University of Sussex, and with increasing collaboration in the area of health and social capacity building between the two universities through the facilitation provided by CUPP, the helpdesk can service the needs of both academies where their interests overlap.

2. Example of a helpdesk inquiry: A local charity requests assistance via the helpdesk with evaluating their service. The helpdesk manager discusses the request in detail, including its relative urgency. She logs it as an inquiry on her database, which is distributed to Senior Researchers Group members. At the next SRG meeting, the referral is discussed and the group pools its knowledge to explore how best to help. The referral is allocated to a member of the group who has expertise in the area. Three days later she makes an arrangement to meet colleagues from the charity and assess their request in more depth. Following this meeting, the charity is offered two days of one-to-one support in developing for their evaluation a framework drawing on materials developed by members of the SRG. They are also referred to the research training program. Six months later the charity returns with a further helpdesk request. With the help they were given previously, they raised £20,000 to support further evaluation. An appropriate researcher to undertake the evaluation is identified within the university, and a partnership develops. This leads to the establishment of an evidence base demonstrating the worth of the charity's work on social exclusion, three joint grant applications, a publication, and two conference papers.

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