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## Navigating the landscape of local government– university relations

**Richard Howitt**

*Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership, Macquarie University, NSW, Australia*

**Sam Cappelli**

*Manager, Environment, City of Ryde Council, NSW, Australia*

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# Navigating the landscape of local government– university relations

**Richard Howitt<sup>1</sup>**

*Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership, Macquarie University, NSW, Australia*  
T: +61-2- 9850 8386 E: richie.howitt@mq.edu.au

**Sam Cappelli**

*Manager, Environment, City of Ryde Council, NSW, Australia*  
T: +61-2-9952 8263 E: scappelli@ryde.nsw.gov.au

University campuses' contributions to their local communities in terms of sustainability are often ambiguous. In developing a research-based partnership with City of Ryde Council, Macquarie University has aimed to contribute to the city's community strategic plan which prioritises liveability, connections and environmental sensitivity amongst others. The partnership is also aiming to harness research capacity to key sustainability issues in the local area (including transport, energy and waste), develop the campus as a living laboratory for community engagement with sustainability research, and contribute to institutional goals for sustainability and social inclusion. Drawing on an approach that links local scale social and environmental justice to sustainability, this paper discusses progress in the partnership and identifies key challenges, including differences in understanding of the nature of research, the local politics of environment and planning in a rapidly growing hi-tech precinct, the competing demands and tensions on research capacity from a business sense, and the ever-present scarcity of resources and the opportunity to build robust foundations for long-term change in short-term performance settings in both councils and universities.

**Keywords:** research collaboration, sustainability partnerships, local government

## Introduction

In December 2011 Macquarie University and the City of Ryde Council signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at fostering a relationship research activity that would build a strong foundation for collaboration across a wide portfolio, including sustainability and social inclusion – both of which are key performance areas for the university and the council. The university's ambitious institutional targets for sustainability outcomes<sup>1</sup> matched the council's enthusiasm for improving sustainability performance across council portfolios and the City as a whole (City of Ryde, 2011).

This paper reviews the developing scope of our partnership, identifies its achievements and the challenges it faces. These include different understanding of the nature, cost and management of research, the complex local politics of environment and planning in a rapidly expanding and intensifying hi-tech precinct, competing demands on research capacity, the ever-present scarcity of resources and the opportunity to build robust foundations for long-term change in short-term performance settings in both councils and universities. We also draw some more general conclusions about partnerships between universities with local governments. We aim to encourage the development of similar partnerships elsewhere as part of a wider strategy towards improved engagement between local government and the

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<sup>1</sup> In 2007 Macquarie University commissioned a report on the sustainability performance of its campus. The university subsequently committed to action that would ensure the university was moving to be ecologically sound, socially just, and economically viable in all its activities ([http://www.mq.edu.au/about\\_us/strategy\\_and\\_initiatives/sustainability/about\\_us/vision/](http://www.mq.edu.au/about_us/strategy_and_initiatives/sustainability/about_us/vision/)). In 2011 Macquarie University Property adopted a program targeting an institutional footprint of one planet by 2030 ([http://mq.edu.au/business\\_and\\_community/property\\_and\\_facilities/esd\\_ecologically\\_sustainable\\_development/](http://mq.edu.au/business_and_community/property_and_facilities/esd_ecologically_sustainable_development/)).

higher education sector on social inclusion, environmental and social justice and sustainability.

## Local council–university relationships

Research and learning-and-teaching dominate the performance portfolios of most universities. 'Service' remains an enduring, but less compelling element of academic life; assessed for promotion and central to institutional reputation, but a poor cousin in terms of strategic thinking. The larger notion of engagement (Boyer, 1996) is perhaps even more marginalized and engagement with local communities around issues of sustainability has not emerged as a strategic priority in most Australian universities. Under pressure to compete globally, thinking about an institution's local footprint can seem unimportant – yet the campus is *inter alia*, an important intersection of local, regional, national and global realities. The landscape of community-university relations is fraught – much discussed and poorly understood. As one commentary put it:

Historically, partnerships between universities and community organizations have been either non-existent or unconstructive; this state of affairs being the result of opposing philosophies and practices (Martin, Smith, & Phillips, 2005, p. 1).

For some US universities, engagement has been a key strategic driver (Rissman, Reiner, & Merenlender, 2007; Sandmann & Weerts, 2008), and it has been considered as 'one of the major innovations within higher education over the last 20 years' (O'Meara, Sandmann, Saltmarsh, & Giles, 2011, p. 84). Similarly some Canadian universities have used engagement strategies to address important social obligations, for example to First Nations (Turner, Lambin, & Reenberg, 2007). In comparison, Australia's higher education sector lags behind in many aspects of participation and engagement (Peach & Gamble, 2011). In contemporary Australia, university-community engagement is diverse, focusing on issues from regional development to local service learning (Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2006). Student engagement with local community organisations is relatively common (Mackaway, Winchester-Seeto, Coulson, & Harvey, 2011), longer term collaboration with local government is generally much rarer (Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 2003, 2004; Wang, Levenbach, & McBride Gates, 1996). And although both the local government and higher education sectors prioritise sustainability as a goal, local cooperation to build on their sectoral strengths towards demonstrable outcomes has been surprisingly rare.

Lovegrove and Clark (2008) put the task of local engagement into a broad context for the Australian higher education sector in a period of rapid change. They suggest that sectoral challenges in higher education that emphasise global competitiveness have increased the difficulty of prioritising local engagement and maintaining commitment to a local mission. Yet, there is something genuinely foundational about the local geography of research universities. For Macquarie University, the campus as a site, and its situational context in Macquarie Park, the City of Ryde and Greater Sydney all shape the ways in which it works as a globally competitive research university. The Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership thus offers a window on both local engagement for sustainability at the campus scale and a wider context of university-community engagement.

## Macquarie University and City of Ryde

Macquarie University was established in the mid-1960s. It developed as a non-traditional university (Mansfield & Hutchinson, 1992). It currently has a student body of over 34,000 students, including more than 1,500 higher degree research students (Table 1). The Ryde LGA has a total population of 103,038, of whom 53% were born overseas and 73.7% are Australian citizens (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012) (Table 2).

The university was established in an area that even in the early-1960s remained largely rural in character and was a marker of the northern edge of the growing suburban sprawl of the Sydney metropolitan area (Freestone, 1996). The adjacent suburb of Macquarie Park has

become a hi-tech business park (Figure 1). The planners' original vision was for a university campus linked to its hi-tech neighbourhood by research, infrastructure, social connections and outreach. The grand vision, however, was not realised. Macquarie Park did not reproduce the synergies of California's Silicon Valley (Searle & Pritchard, 2005), although it is set to become the 4<sup>th</sup> largest business centre in Sydney by 2013 and the workforce in the area is expected to more than double over the next 25 years..

**Table 1: Macquarie University Summary Statistics, 1 April 2013**

Source: Macquarie Analytics

<b>Students</b>		
<b>Type of attendance</b>	Full-time	23722
	Part-time	10889
	Total	34611
<b>Gender</b>	Female	18999
	Male	15612
<b>Broad course level</b>	Higher Degree Research	1674
	Postgraduate Coursework	7699
	Undergraduate	24544
	Non-award	480
	Enabling	214
	Equivalent Full-Time Student Load	21570.8
<b>Staff</b>	Full-Time Equivalent non-casual staff	2169

**Table 2: Summary Comparative Statistics to illustrate the local context of the Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership<sup>2</sup>**

	<b>2001 Census</b>	<b>2006 Census</b>	<b>2011 Census</b>
<b>Macquarie Park - Marsfield (Statistical Area)</b>			
Total Persons	17,837	18,837	20,166
% increase		5.6	7.1
% born overseas	41	44	50
Median Age	33	33	33
Median rent (\$/wk)	250	275	385
<b>Ryde LGA</b>			
Total Persons	95,744	98,520	105,047
% increase		2.9	6.6
% born overseas	35	37	41
Median Age	36	37	36
Median rent (\$/wk)	220	255	370
<b>Greater Sydney</b>			
Total Persons	3,997,321	4,148,574	4,429,034
% increase		3.8	6.8
% born overseas	31	31	34
Median Age	34	35	36
Median rent (\$/wk)	210	250	355
<b>New South Wales</b>			
Total Persons	6,371,745	6,585,736	6,958,812
% increase		3.4	5.7
% born overseas	23	24	26
Median Age	35	37	38
Median rent (\$/wk)	170	210	300

<sup>2</sup> Note that change in the suburban areas surrounding the campus (Macquarie Park-Marsfield) have produced a younger, more expensive and more international setting than in the wider local government area, or Greater Sydney or NSW as a whole.

**Figure 1: Changes over time in the North Ryde Area.**

Far Left, 1956; Centre, 1994 (Source Freestone 1996); Right, 2012 (Source <http://maps.six.nsw.gov.au/>)



There was ambivalence and uncertainty about the university in the early phases of development. Local landholders hoped they would cash in on development opportunities (Freestone, 1996). Local, state and Commonwealth governments also disagreed over development controls and large scale metropolitan development at various scales (Forster, 2006; P. McGuirk & O'Neill, 2002; P. M. McGuirk, 2005). Planning controls for the area passed from the NSW government to City of Ryde Council in the early-1970s, but council could exercise only limited influence over site development at the university (High Court of Australia, 1978). In 2005 the university was registered as a 'state significant site' which further limited council's influence on campus development.

Growth of this hi-tech and education precinct largely relied on private transport solutions. While it is accessed by major feeder arteries in Sydney's road network, it was generally poorly serviced by public transport until the opening of the Chatswood-Epping rail link in 2009. It is now rapidly emerging as a transport hub, facilitated by new Urban Activation Precinct status and the investment of state funds in transport-related development, but continues to face issues associated with traffic congestion and accessibility from many areas in western and south west Sydney.

The local context in which the university operates will affect the evolution of the Macquarie-Ryde-Futures Partnership. The partnership is likely to support an evolving sense of place that develops around the campus and the urban precincts of which it is part. Changes in infrastructure, employment and planning controls as well as student recruitment and local demography are all important drivers of institutional responses to the opportunity presented by the partnership. Sustainability is an important element of the strategic value of the partnership to both the university and the council.

Macquarie University's situation in Sydney's knowledge economy (Searle & Pritchard, 2008) is unique and compelling. Macquarie Park (Figure 2) is considered as the northern end of Sydney's 'global economic arc', and it is currently experiencing rapid economic, residential and commercial growth, including rapid campus-based development including new university-industry-government partnerships such as the Macquarie Park Transport Management Association<sup>3</sup>, the Macquarie University Hospital<sup>4</sup>, the global headquarters of Cochlear<sup>5</sup> the Australian Hearing Hub<sup>6</sup> and new transport-oriented development as part of the Herring Rd

<sup>3</sup><http://connectmacpark.com/>

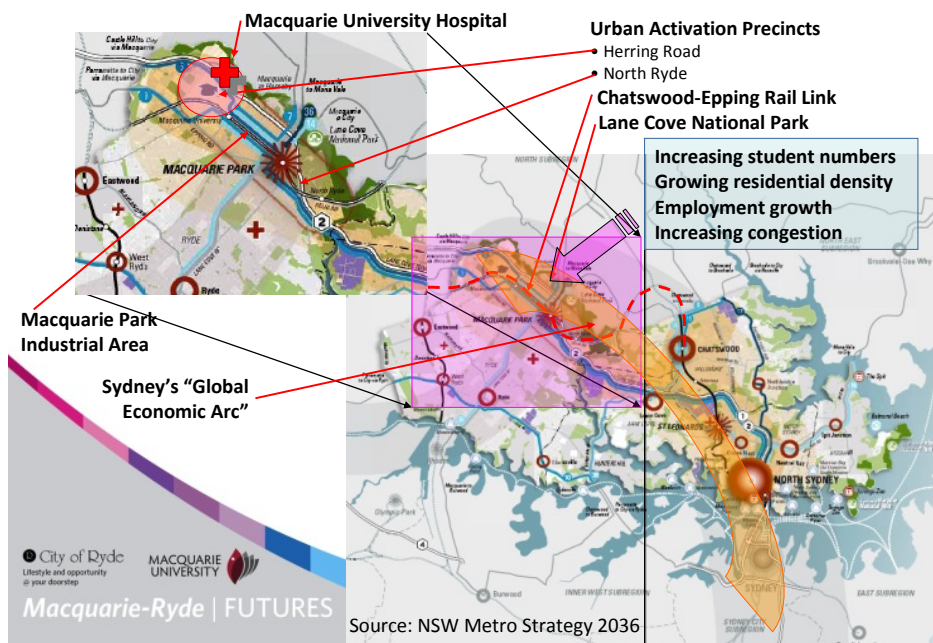
<sup>4</sup><http://www.muhs.org.au/>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.cochlearcareers.com/working-at-cochlear/cochlear-global-HQ>

<sup>6</sup><http://hearinghub.edu.au/>

Urban Activation Precinct<sup>7</sup>. The role of the university in fostering strong research linkages to organizations in Macquarie Park is seen by the state government, City of Ryde Council and many stakeholders in Macquarie Park as central to the success of this urban design exercise. Simultaneously, the university's success in managing integration of its land, environmental and built environment assets into a vibrant and viable commercial, cultural and transport hub will be central to the future success of the university.

**Figure 2: Local Context of the Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership**



## Ryde Council's Community Strategic Plan

In 2009, the NSW Government introduced new planning and reporting requirements for all NSW local councils. This standardised planning and reporting across the state and required councils to lodge a community strategic plan and clear plans for delivery of the strategic objectives and management of finances, workforce and assets. Ryde's Community Strategic Plan (City of Ryde, 2011) emphasised sustainability in several key areas (Table 3). The Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership collaborated on elements of this process for City of Ryde Council, contributing to both the workforce planning exercise and the evaluation of community responses to the Community Strategic Plan. The emphasis on transport, accessibility, energy, connectivity and justice are all issues that have been drawn into activities of the university-council partnership.

**Table 3: Extracts from the City of Ryde Council Community Strategic Plan 2012**

Outcome: A City of ...	Goals	Strategies targeting sustainability
Liveable Neighbourhoods	Our neighbourhoods thrive and grow through sustainable design, planning and regulation that support community needs	To pursue sustainable design and adopt best practice in the planning of our suburbs and neighbourhoods.

<sup>7</sup><http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/HousingDelivery/UrbanActivation/HerringRoadMacquariePark/tabid/615/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

Prosperity	Our city is well-designed and planned to encourage new investment, local jobs and business opportunities	To respond in our planning, now and in the future, to global and metropolitan trends. To provide innovative and integrated solutions to locate jobs, transport and housing together, to reduce time and travel costs and improve amenity
	Macquarie Park is recognised globally and locally as an innovative education and technology hub	To brand, design and activate Macquarie Park as a distinctive, attractive and sustainable high technology centre of regional excellence. To take a leadership role to improve movement to, from, through and within Macquarie Park.
Environmental Sensitivity	To encourage and enable all our residents to live a more environmentally sensitive life	To collaborate with relevant partners to facilitate simple and flexible planning controls, to encourage our community to embrace sustainable development. To promote and offer education on the benefits and savings that can be achieved by supporting sustainable lifestyles.
	As we grow, we protect and enhance the natural and built environments for future enjoyment and manage any impacts of climate change	To lead by example and demonstrate environmental sensitivity in all that we do. To work collaboratively with neighbouring councils to develop measures to protect our natural environment and bio-diversity. To take a leadership role and enhance our capacity to manage any impact of climate change and protect our community.
Connections	Our residents, visitors and workers are able to easily and safely travel on public transport to, from and within the City of Ryde	To improve transport connections between our centres, neighbourhoods and workplaces, that are accessible and safe. To collaborate with relevant parties to maintain and develop better transport options that are convenient, safe, affordable and sustainable. To encourage the use of environmentally friendly transport options.
	Our community has the option to safely and conveniently drive, park, cycle or walk around their city	To improve connectivity between and accessibility to our suburbs, centres, open spaces and places. To influence decision makers so they respond to our major road, cycle and pathway needs.

Source: Extracted from (City of Ryde, 2011)

## Sustainable transport, waste-to-energy and community engagement

The 2011 MoU between the university and the council made commitments to the development of a number of research projects focusing on areas of need within the council. Both the council and the university agreed to commit funds and other resources to these projects, and governance of the partnership by a steering group drawn from the executive management of each institution was established. There is no single strategic imperative driving the selection of projects. Rather the particular research needs of areas of council activity (public works, environment & planning, community life and corporate services) are able to nominate activities for engagement with the university, and the partnership will also support university staff and students in seeking to develop local research projects of relevance to the council's community strategic plan.

The Macquarie-Ryde Futures Partnership offers a valuable way of thinking in an integrated way about various aspects of the university's 'local footprint' – its relationships with 'neighbours', links to research partners in the adjacent industrial park, opportunities for learning and teaching links through the university's Participation and Community Engagement program, collaboration with the council and other local stakeholders towards reduced environmental impacts and increasing sustainability of the university site, managing social impacts of our local footprint and building strategies for engagement and social inclusion. There is significant scope for the partnership to be developed as a way of framing and

managing the university's local engagement with its stakeholders to simultaneously activate our research capacity and socialise that capacity. For council, this offers a valuable opportunity to strengthen many of its key sustainability goals, increase access to information and understanding of key issues for both council and community and increase connections that will underpin the development of the sort of regional community referred to in the community strategic plan as 'the place to be for lifestyle and opportunity at your doorstep' (City of Ryde, 2011).

For the university, the partnership can simultaneously situate its research capacity and commitment not only in terms of its commercial value to the university as a supplier of research services, but also in terms of key learning and teaching priorities, social responsibilities, strategic commitments to social inclusion and environmental sustainability, and in terms of institutional presence in its local neighbourhood in Macquarie Park and the City of Ryde Council as good neighbours and trusted and reliable partners. In this partnership the university can become a valued presence in its local neighbourhood – a 'destination' and 'venue'; a place where local community members anticipate pursuing their own transformative education, and take up opportunities to engage with research, creativity and performance in all sorts of ways. It would be a source of wealth – not just in commercial terms, but in value terms that are consistent with the historic values of the non-traditional university established in an edge city in the 1960s.

Specific research has been undertaken in key areas of sustainability, including transport, waste-to-energy alternatives and community engagement. There are wider ambitions to develop the campus as a living laboratory that supports researchers, council and the university community to engage the local community in projects such as domestic scale technologies for retrofitting existing housing stock for sustainability outcomes and other activities intended to better integrate institutional goals for sustainability and social inclusion. The approach adopted for developing the partnership links justice, through engagement and inclusion, and sustainability.

#### **Transport issues in Macquarie Park**

Traffic congestion has been an important issue affecting development of Macquarie Park, despite its status as a significant employment and economic growth centre of state and national importance. Peak period congestion has long been seen as limiting growth and performance of the area and council has commissioned numerous traffic reports for the area. Sustainable transport solutions, including increased pedestrian accessibility, improved public transport and improvements in cycle and other alternatives to private cars that are seen as safe, convenient and continuous have been targeted in the council's precinct planning and place management in Macquarie Park:

Macquarie Park currently performs as a car dependent site. Spatial accessibility analysis shows high vehicle route choice for the arterial network and low pedestrian route choice, because the very large blocks produce very long walking distances to facilities (Butterworth, 2009, p. 4).

To help guide the priority of improvements to pedestrian accessibility and mobility in the Macquarie Park precinct, City of Ryde Council has commissioned a pedestrian accessibility and mobility plan that will, when it is completed in late-2013, describe the framework and provide a strategic list of actions for developing safe and more convenient pedestrian routes and fostering improvements in pedestrian mobility in Macquarie Park.

To support likely actions arising from this approach, the Council was particularly interested in exploring the viability of Personal Mobility Devices and electric vehicles in its planning for future transport options and in 2012 funded an internal project to encourage integration of electric vehicles into its fleet and to determine how and when to transition the increasing market driven electric vehicles into the local planning controls, use of electric bicycles by its employees and in partnership with researchers from the Macquarie University Transport Research Group, initiated and conducted a trial of Personal Mobility Devices (PMDs) (Dowling, Irwin, & Faulks, 2013). The trial aimed to evaluate:



1. Rider perceptions and experiences of PMD use.
2. Pedestrian interactions with PMD riders.
3. Infrastructure requirements and operating parameters for PMD use that could be readily adapted to and applied in the existing infrastructure landscape without the need for major and costly infrastructure upgrades.
4. Appropriate research design to provide input into further research into PMDs.

The trial used three types of PMDs – a single-wheeled gyro-stabilised device, a two-wheeled scooter-style device and a three-wheeled gyro-stabilised device. The trial was undertaken between May and June 2013 on the Macquarie University campus, with volunteer participants drawn from the university's employees and using the actual conditions of the shared user paths (not vehicular roads) on the site. The limited trial was principally aimed at establishing the suitability of the site as a living laboratory for such research, along with testing the research design and data collection methods for future research.

In early-2013 the council, Transport for NSW and local stakeholders established a jointly-funded Transport Management Association for Macquarie Park. As part of the university-council partnership, discussions are proceeding to develop extensions of the PMD trial, and to initiate a range of other sustainable transport research projects in the precinct, including projects with students in a range of disciplines from planning to communications and computing.

#### **Waste-to-Energy: domestic scale options**

Another issue of concern to the council is the high financial, asset and environmental costs of waste management and disposal. Amongst its efforts to identify long-term waste management solutions, the council has considered opportunities to develop waste-to-energy conversion options. If waste-to-energy conversion could be made reliable and viable at the scale of the domestic household, for example, not only would the waste stream from domestic sources be reduced or even eliminated, but the requirement for kerbside collections, damage to kerb and guttering from waste collection vehicles, increasing energy costs and escalating waste transport costs to distant landfill sites could also be addressed.

Working with environmental science and engineering researchers from Macquarie University, the council has investigated emerging and potential technologies at the domestic scale, and has also explored options for neighbourhood and precinct scale conversion. Working with the site planning process, there have also been discussions about refurbishment of original domestic buildings on the campus, now used for administrative purposes by Sustainability@MQ, to explore collaborative strategies to develop publicly accessible demonstrator sites for domestic scale retrofit options of sustainability solutions in dwellings that are common across the inner northern suburbs of Sydney.

#### **Community engagement research**

The idea of the campus as both a living laboratory and a demonstrator site has opened many opportunities for staff, research and student engagement with local residential communities and commercial and industry groups. With a strong social science, communications, computing applications, marketing and behavioural research capacity, the university has been drawn into a range of community engagement, consultation and impact assessment-style projects.

A Customer Engagement and Disengagement Project was jointly funded by the council and the university to increase understanding of customer engagement around the Community Strategic Plan. A series of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews was undertaken with selected community stakeholders to support improved community engagement, and to investigate community disengagement with council activities and goals. The research was also linked to the council's pursuit of new social media platforms, communications and consultation strategies and other innovations. These latter projects also involved students from the university as part of the Participation and Community Engagement program.

Student involvement has also been developing in other areas, including projects aimed at studying demographic and workforce change, as well as collecting and analysing data on a

range of planning, transport and social issues, developing applications to support use of smart phones in transport research, development of finance applications and other activities (Howitt, 2013).

## **Conclusion: partnering for sustainability and justice**

There is much work to be done to realise the potential of this partnership. The future holds significant challenges, including the need to:

... broaden and deepen the network of engagement between the two organisations ... The issue is very much of building a better cultural understanding between two organisations which have sharply different missions and cultures (Phibbs, 2013, p. 4).

Despite these challenges, there is much enthusiasm and goodwill in both organisations to seize the opportunity to make a difference, and to make a sustained and sustainable difference in environmental and social outcomes for the communities that both institutions serve. The MoU has supported the initial establishment phase of the partnership and the external review has provided foundations for further development. Leadership change in both the council and the university has not unsettled commitment to the partnership, and completion of initial projects has built trust and better understanding between the parties. There are prospects for new projects to draw in a wider set of players from the university and more sections of the council, as well as profiling the value of information, research and partnership to the council and community.

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