

Not Just a Talkfest: Fighting for Genuine Impact in Remote Communities

1. Summary of the impact

Young people living in remote areas of Australia have very limited opportunity in pursuing an education after finishing high school, which results both in a lack of motivation to study as well as a lack of hope in doing meaningful work in the future. Declining infrastructure in these towns as well as a lack of interest from broader society to help continue to worsen the situation.

UTS PhD student and town planner, Allan Teale, has teamed up with academics Campbell Drake, Michael Day and government officials to tackle this issue from two front; first, by facilitating a research project in remote areas for UTS Interior and Spatial Design students, and second by connecting to government institutions, TAFE and UTS to develop and fund a teaching program which can be delivered locally.

As a result of the community-centred approach of these initiatives, the team have been able to establish the all-important trust between the town and UTS, which has already helped in opening pathways to university and has seen the development of feasible infrastructure proposals.

2. Problem

For many young people living in remote Australian communities, education past high school often means moving and leaving their community.

Apart from the obvious financial barrier of moving to major capital cities, it is also an emotional challenge. Especially for young Indigenous people, higher education entails

leaving family, community and country behind to enter a world and culture very different from their own. In many cases, it also means entering a hostile environment.

These daunting prospects correlate with the low levels of motivation for students in year nine and ten who understandably do not see the benefit in studying if there is no opportunity for them to continue in their familiar surroundings. As a result, remote communities continue to suffer in terms of infrastructure and development as there are neither facilities to deliver courses on planning and sustainability, nor the qualified teachers needed to deliver this training.

3. Beneficiaries

The Lake Cargelligo and Murrin Bridge initiatives directly benefit the local community by identifying community needs and developing proposals for new facilities and projects related to the education of young people in the area. The community in this area is comprised of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Furthermore, the project is beneficial for UTS students who are able to get this hands-on experience as part of their course. This is particularly important as they recognise the significance of their skills and abilities in making an impact.

Finally, the work benefits UTS as a whole as it establishes the university as a key partner for both prospective students as well as government bodies who are dedicated to rural and Indigenous matters.

4. Approach to impact

A number of UTS academics have come together to tackle the declining infrastructure in remote towns as well as the lack of pathway opportunities for local students.

The people to get the ball rolling was the team of Campbell Drake, Michael Day and Allan Teale.

On his 40th birthday, Allan Teale discovered his Aboriginal heritage thanks to his wife's research into his family tree. His heritage was tracked to the Euabalong area in

western New South Wales. In order to connect with his community and learn more about his ancestry, he travelled to Murrin Bridge. It took many visits and many years to connect with the elders and become part of the community. In the process, he learned about their increasing concern for the future of the town's younger generation, mostly compounded by rundown facilities and the absence of educational opportunities.

In collaboration with Campbell Drake, Interior and Spatial Design lecturer at UTS Design, Architecture and Building, Teale facilitated a program in which Interior and Spatial Design students could travel to Lake Cargelligo and neighbouring town, Murrin Bridge, as part of their course and engage in a real-world learning experience. Teale's role in this is to connect the students with the community, and to facilitate the work on the ground.

For the past three years, groups of UTS students have been taken to the area to spend five days interviewing residents, visiting sites and studying historical documents. They are then in a position to develop feasible proposals which aim to address the infrastructure needs outlined by the community. The benefit of this, Teale argues, is that the students use a community-centred approach and as such develop proposals which serve the community. This differs significantly from a government proposal which may not be based on such research and as a result, may indeed fail to solve some of the issues at hand.

For the UTS students, it is both a discipline-specific learning experience, but also a cultural one. It allows them to get an insight into the realities of rural and Indigenous communities, and gives them the opportunity to realise their potential in solving some of these issues through their work.

Furthermore, Teale is dedicating much of his time and resources in developing a pathway program which could be delivered locally and would not require students to relocate to major cities. He argues that many local students do indeed have an interest in higher education but never consider it a real option due to the adjustments involved in pursuing it. He believes that especially many Indigenous students would be interested in Arts and Design degrees as they grow up in an arts-conscious culture, and this would be beneficial for the community as a whole. Furthermore, the

community elders have identified the need for training in sustainability and town planning, which is currently not being taught anywhere near the area.

Teale believes that existing spaces could be enhanced to convert into teaching facilities with little extra cost, and collaboration with both TAFE and UTS would enable teachers to deliver block courses of 3-4 weeks which the students could attend in their hometowns. This would open up opportunities for ongoing education not only locally, but provide the opportunity to transition to UTS with more help and support if desired.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

Since the initiative is relatively new, much of the work is still in progress. However, one key outcome is that UTS has now enrolled the first Indigenous undergraduate student from Lake Cargelligo which is a direct result of the collaboration between UTS and the local community. This early outcome indicates that this initiative does indeed aid in the transition and enable students to take up opportunities with the much-needed support of a large institution.

Furthermore, Teale argues that the UTS students who have participated in the community project have developed high-quality proposals that are ready for submission and have saved the local council hundreds of thousands of dollars. The next step will be to secure the funding needed to turn these proposals into practice and make visible enhancements to the town's infrastructure.

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Teale has caught the attention of both the State and Federal Government. This is in an effort to secure the funding needed to address the infrastructure needs, but also the support required to establish and deliver the first pilot program of higher education courses in the area.

In recognition of his work, Teale received a commendation in the UTS Indigenous Excellence Award category at the 2018 UTS Human Rights Awards.

5.2. Impact

Whether the initiatives by Teale and his partners, Campbell Drake and Michael Day will indeed change the trajectory of young people in remote communities is yet to be seen as the work continues to expand, gain traction and unfold.

However, Teale argues that there is already an important and visible impact – trust.

Many remote communities have been the target of academic interest but have also been subject to government programs aimed at improving their situation. What all those initiatives have so far had in common is that they have let the community down again and again. Researchers wrap up and publish findings behind paywalls without feeding them back to make a meaningful change, and government programs end and disappear. Historical artefacts are discovered, but not publicised and celebrated. The overall message has been that ‘nobody truly cares’ about them and what happens to them in the future.

Teale argues that this has been the reason why it was difficult for him to be accepted, and why it was difficult to establish UTS as a trustworthy partner. He believes that UTS, most notably with the help of Jumbunna, has given locals the clear message that they are here to stay, will return and will fight until change is achieved.

He noted this change when shopping at a local IGA where the cashier enquired whether he was part of the UTS team. When he confirmed that he was, the cashier said “Thank you. We appreciate that you care about us and are trying to help.”

Demonstrating that the team is genuinely working towards making practical changes, rather than just having locals engage in a ‘talkfest’ with UTS students once a year, has been key in establishing this mutual trust and appreciation.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

Undoubtedly, Teale is fuelled by his own discovery of Aboriginal ancestry. Since then, he has taken an explicit interest in remote communities, even making it the focus of his current doctoral research.

7. Challenges

One of the key challenges in improving both infrastructure and education in remote communities is funding.

Teale has been focusing much of his efforts in getting State and Federal Government on board with the plans to ensure the hard work is actually going to be implemented. Unfortunately, this is often directly related with the limited political power such small communities hold, especially since there are not many votes to be gained for political parties.

Nevertheless, Teale remains highly motivated in continuing to chase this up. In his words, he will continue to knock on doors until the day he can finally point to the new facilities and show the community that he has kept his promises.