

# **Proposal to strengthen Vancouver Island University's contribution to Regional Development Challenges**

## **Concept**

To establish a Centre for Regional Partnership Development which would enable Vancouver Island University to proactively engage with regional partners in collaborative ventures that would strengthen the health and well being of Vancouver Island and coastal British Columbia communities.

## **Introduction**

Both within Vancouver Island University, as well as across the coastal regions that we serve and support, there is much change underway. As an institution, we are in transition, from a university-college to university, and as such, are redefining a role for ourselves locally and globally. At the same time, across Vancouver Island and the coastal mainland, communities are grappling with turbulent and threatening economic circumstances, and are working hard to retain and strengthen their social, environmental and cultural vibrancy. However, within these complex and sometimes ambiguous circumstances, there are also opportunities; particularly when we adopt collaborative working arrangements to address these challenges. In this context, our school has both the responsibility to contribute to solutions which support our region, and, from this involvement, the real prospect of invigorating its development and reputation as a university and regional leader.

## **Background**

Several points are salient in considering VIU's role in this process of regional development and renewal. In part, the imperative to participate is derived from our historical and current activities – where through our teaching and scholarship we have contributed our time and resources to initiatives that benefit communities, students and our institution. I would further argue that beyond the history, as a publically funded institution situated in and interdependent with this region, we have an imperative - moral and extrinsic - to engage our resources in collaborative endeavours with constituents of the region, for the betterment of all, particularly at a time of challenge or crisis. Such a time is upon us.

Across the globe, we are witnessing an economic crisis not seen in many years. It is now apparent that few will be spare from its impact, including those on Vancouver Island. Already we are seeing many small communities affected, with business closures and lay offs the result. It appears that this downward trajectory has yet to abate. Moreover, as we well know, community health reflects much interdependence, where social, economic, environmental conditions are inextricably linked. Hence, economic downturn also presages serious challenges in other domains.

These circumstances present us with both an opportunity and responsibility – to focus the institution so that it can contribute its resources in collaborative ventures with other regional members in ways that will strengthen the region, create new opportunities for our students, and enhance our reputation and role as a key player in the further growth and development of a region that has much long-range promise and potential.

Reflected in both our past practice and the literature on university – community engagement, we see that such initiatives are often initiated by, and usually rely on the work of faculty and their students. However, the literature is consistent in identifying the need for some form of institutional strategy and infrastructure that sets a direction for how such relationships can be developed, and provides catalytic support to enable them to proceed.

### **Next steps**

Across the globe, universities are employing new organizational arrangements to join in collaborative ventures such as those described above. In general, they reflect several key features:

- Strong support from senior leadership of the institution;
- A coherent policy and strategy framework;
- Compelling opportunities for faculty to participate;
- Transparent and accessible points of entry for regional partners;
- Clear deliverables pursued within appropriate time horizons.

I hold that the constituent elements for VIU to undertake such an intentional approach are largely in place. Hence, we do not need to construct new apparatus or infrastructure, but rather need to creatively “reconnect to the dots” so as to focus the critical resources on regional situations that require our assistance. Working from this frame of reference I would offer the following recommendations. I have attached a diagram of possible “Policy Framework” that would buttress and be enabled by this suggested approach.

1. Foundations - As noted above, and outlined in the attached diagram, pursuing such an engaged approach to regional development requires certain fundamentals to be in place, notably an institutional mission and values, and senior administration support which underpin the venture. I assess that these fundamentals are in place, evidenced in the current mission, values and service plan of the institution, and reflected in the statements of our President and the work our Vice President Academic to develop a regional engagement strategy for the institution. Moreover, this commitment is consistently manifest in the past and present practice of many faculty and staff across the institution.
2. Policy – while we do not presently have an “Engagement” Policy, work is currently underway to develop both a broad enabling policy on this subject, and a more focused expression on our intent related to regional engagements and the operations necessary to support them. However, while policy as a broad expression of institutional intent should drive operations, we are currently faced with a situation in our region where there is an urgency to pursue tangible initiatives with regional partners that will effect more immediate change. Hence, I would argue for us to proceed on both a short term and longer term basis, which would both focus operations on immediate needs, and commit us to formulating of a coherent policy regime to support this work in the future.
3. Operations – Adjustments in our operations would include the following:
  - Rename the “Centre for Continuing Studies” the “Centre for Regional Partnership Development”. This change would provide a clear and tangible signal to the region

and its constituents of our intent to take a more proactive role in collaborating on ventures to benefit the region. It would provide a means of expediting action related to actions associated with our regional engagement strategy. Finally, it would identify an obvious “portal” or doorway into the institution for those unfamiliar with the school, or who do not have pre-existing contacts.

- In the near term, we would focus attention on economic development. Current economic circumstances make this an obvious direction. However, the approach needs to be understood in the context of a virtuous circle, where economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions are interdependent. Moreover, as circumstances change, we may choose to shift the priority for development on to other aspects of regional health and well being.
- The foregoing would not require dramatic change in the work of the existing CCS. The mission and purpose of the CCS explicitly expresses intent to contribute to the economic health and well being of the region and its communities. Much of the work undertaken by CCS personnel already evidences considerable work with regional partners on ventures that are associated with economic development, particularly in the form of customized training and development. For example, projects are presently underway with Aboriginal organization, municipalities and Chambers of Commerce on projected related to local economic development. Finally, the CCS offers a structure with offices situated in multiple locations across the region, providing a pre-existing distributed community-based structure. Thus, this change would not require a radical departure from current practice, but rather a sharpening of focus, and the realignment of resources to enable the type of deeper collaboration required to pursue sustainable regional economic development.
- I would broadly characterize the work associated with this regional development role as reflecting that of “community animateurs”. This is a concept used globally to describe a role that activates and draws together community members to address particular challenges or issues. These animateurs not only collaborate for the greater good, but act as catalysts to stimulate attention to and action on particular economic and social issues.
- In practical terms, we would require an individual (or several part-time individuals) working across our regional operations who would engage with a broad constellation of stakeholders, including civic and provincial governments, the private sector and other regional organizations such as the Vancouver Island Economic Development Association, the Vancouver Island Economic alliance and the Mid-Island Science, Technology and Innovation Council. Activities could include:
  - Acting as a portal for external partners to connect with resources within the institution;
  - Creating resources to support departments pursuing particular regional development initiatives (e.g. checklists. MOU templates).
  - Participating in broad initiatives that support economic development, such as workforce development strategies and their implementation;

- Brokering and coordinating specific institutional resources, such as human resource development, applied research or consultancy to address particular issues or opportunities;
  - Analyzing the plans of key regional partners and identifying opportunities for convergence of activity; and,
  - Initiating economic ventures in which VIU could be a direct partner.
- Within the institution, we would not need to replicate existing structures or programs, nor shift existing reporting relationships. Rather, this initiative assumes that there are considerable resources resident within our Faculties, and that there are pre-existing Centres and Institutes that are currently engaged in productive relationships with external partners. Thus, this regional development function would act as a key boundary spanner, facilitating new network connections between external parties and institutional members to devise innovations to address specific issues.
  - Incremental financial resources for this initiative would be minimal. As noted above, the infrastructure of the CCS already exists to support the activity, and the functions it provides is already addressing elements of this regional development initiative. Further, the work to be done is not about creating new bureaucracy and structures, and but rather to find new and innovative ways to broker and apply our available resources in conjunction with regional partners to derive solutions to complex and nuanced challenges. The most likely financial arrangement would be to create an investment fund that would provide sufficient space and time for the animateur(s) to pursue more complicated projects for which cost recovery and/or ROI might not occur within a single fiscal year.
  - Assessment of performance would include three levels:
    - Level 1 = quality and effectiveness of institutional arrangements for encouraging engagement (e.g. policies, tools, number of contacts, projects in development phases, systems for tracking activities).
    - Level 2 = quality and quantity of transactions related to the strategy (e.g. number of projects commenced; increases in the number of faculty or students involved in regional projects).
    - Level 3 = impact of the activity (e.g. employment created, taxes generated, financial return to the institution).

## **Conclusion**

The proposed changes present us with a constellation of potential wins. This move would have considerable positive political and public relations benefit. It would provide traction and rapid deployment on our regional engagement strategy, and would signal to government and other external stakeholders that we are building on rather than relinquishing our role as a key regional resource. Finally, this move would help to position us as an institution with a set of values, enacted through tangible programs, which would attract students and faculty more interested in educational process that value the type of interdependence implicit in this change.

