



## | INTERVIEW

## TOWARDS A 21ST CENTURY APPROACH TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY

A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR RICHARD TEARE



Why is it that in the 21st century the place where a person is born still determines their life chance? The purpose of the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL) is to facilitate self-directed lifelong learning and as one response, Richard's recent book *Lifelong action learning: A journey of discovery and celebration at work and in the community* (2018) outlines how a systematic approach can be provided to those who are traditionally excluded - the low paid, the marginalised and the millions of people who are living in poverty.

In this interview for Transform, Richard Teare, co-founder and President of the Global University for Lifelong Learning talks about GULL's non-profit network movement that aims to facilitate self-help and its role in a research project that aims to develop an inclusive framework for self-directed lifelong learning led by a group of South African public universities.

## Q: Why did you establish GULL?

**A:** During the years when I worked in universities I rarely reflected on the fact that they were privileged places and that many of our students came from families where one or more parents had been to university. Naturally then, they encourage their children to follow this route for better career prospects after graduation. I began thinking more deeply about the concept of inclusion during the late 1990s when I first saw for myself the myriad difficulties faced by a high proportion of the world's population in developing countries and in particular, the limited educational provision available to them. The experience gained as a professor at four UK universities gave me the confidence to set-up the Global University for Lifelong Learning – a very different kind of institution that draws on local and traditional knowledge to encourage community participants to find solutions to their own problems.

## Q: Why does GULL focus on self-help?

**A:** As the poorest say that they can only dream about further and higher education because they lack qualifications, money and often educational infrastructure, a different approach was needed. This

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### PHOTO

The photograph taken in August 2014, is of Richard with members of a bamboo music band in a remote part of Bougainville, an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea. The men played all the tunes on different lengths of bamboo while the women performed fan dances.

began to take shape during a visit to the UK in 2004 by the newly appointed Governor-General of Papua New Guinea (PNG), Sir Paulias Matane. He had grown up in a remote subsistence community in East New Britain Province, PNG. As both his parents died when he was a young boy, he was raised by his elderly grandparents and at the age of 16, he was able to attend school for the first time. He later became a teacher, headmaster, schools inspector and then national superintendent of teacher education. After that, he served his country as a permanent secretary, an ambassador and a high commissioner (among other roles). Given his disadvantaged background, Paulias had realised early in life that he'd need to be focused, disciplined and self-directed, he became an inspirational lifelong learner and on 26 May 2004, he was elected as the Eighth Governor-General of PNG. His story is relevant to GULL's work because we try to mirror his journey from poverty by encouraging GULL participants to discover and use their human potential to the fullest – first to help themselves and their families and second, to help others. This is encapsulated in GULL's motto: 'Enabling YOU to make a difference in OUR world'.

## Q: How does GULL facilitate self-help?

**A:** To provide hope and opportunity we needed to create a credible system that would incentivise the excluded to begin a journey that would help them to discover their unique gifts and talents, develop them and make practical, tangible changes in their own lives and in the communities in which they live. Over several years

of discussions with Sir Paulias, we concluded that this approach could not be 'accredited' in the conventional way and so he and Sir Michael Somare, PNG's founding Prime Minister and the serving Prime Minister at the time, signed a 'statement of recognition' offered in perpetuity for GULL's professional awards – all of which require verification that pathway-specific outcomes have been attained prior to certification. Next, we sought to establish a decentralised network as a deliberate strategy to facilitate national and local ownership at the lowest possible cost. We wanted to build the network on traditional know-how and knowledge so that anyone could participate. GULL's approach is based on what we call action learning pathways. This reflects the idea that learning should be an active lifelong journey centred on the unique needs and aspirations of its participants.

It is now more than 11 years since the official launch of GULL on Friday 5 October, 2007, in the State Function Room, National Parliament House, Port Moresby, PNG. One of our guests that day from the World Bank made a memorable comment on the significance of our initiative. In his speech he said: *'We people from the third world – I'm a Kenyan – often feel like we are sinking into a swamp – we lift our hands in the air and hope that someone will come along and pull us out. GULL is different – it is like a low hanging branch – you reach up and pull yourself out'*. I quite often share this explanation because it is simple and clear and by implication, the world needs much greater provision for self-help. If the networks were in place to support this, people everywhere could contribute what they can afford (avoiding entitlement and

dependency) and begin a journey towards becoming more confident about what they are able to do and more skilled in equipping themselves and responding to life's challenges. If it were easy, it would be happening already - but a shift is needed. Personally, I think that there is still too much emphasis on training and not enough on equipping people to find their own solutions. This transition requires a system, structure and process – the very things that GULL has been refining over the years by working with social entrepreneurs, NGOs and other agencies in many communities around the world.

**Q:** Do you have an example that illustrates the value of self-help?

**A:** Yes, there are many – some of which are documented on the GULL website - a good example of the power of self-directed action learning is illustrated by a project facilitated by the international NGO World Vision with GULL in Burundi. Nationally, Burundi struggles with high child mortality due to Malaria and malnutrition. In an effort to tackle malnutrition, a World Vision facilitator working in a rural area with eight community volunteers had the idea of starting a soya milk production facility. The opportunity to participate and become a GULL student was met with much enthusiasm by community volunteers and several months on, she was working with 105 community volunteers. During a review visit to the soya milk production facility 10 months or so after scaling-up the project, community members told us that as an outcome of



their GULL project, they had eradicated child malnutrition in their commune – a claim that was independently verified by World Vision. They had secured this outcome by organising the distribution of soya milk to vulnerable children over a wide geographical area spanning 29 hills and valleys. They decided initially to distribute soya milk free of charge to the parents of sick children and when the problem of malnutrition had been addressed, the milk would then be sold to parents to prevent re-occurrence and to ensure that their project would be self-funding and sustainable. If families

did not have the funds to buy the soya milk, the community's benevolent fund covered the cost and a community team began working with the family until they were able to generate enough income to pay for the soya milk from their own resources. The soya milk production facility is now producing a cash surplus for the community and they have used their profits to increase the production capacity. After securing these valuable and tangible outcomes, the soya milk production team had earned their GULL professional certificates and many hundreds of people came to witness the certification ceremony



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our efforts to respond to this challenge, I wondered whether it would be possible to work with universities on a new agenda for inclusion. This is with a view to shaping a 21st century paradigm for lifelong learning that embraces both traditional notions of academic excellence and community-led holistic development. How would it be if universities were able to facilitate practical and valuable development in and amongst marginalised communities – alongside the excellent work that they are renowned for on the campus? As the GULL system is designed for the former purpose and does not compete with academic programmes, it can be customized to meet specific needs without affecting its recognised status. Further, as a non-profit initiative, it can be operationalised at low cost by universities interested in working with GULL.

**Q:** Has GULL's self-help approach been used in Australia?

**A:** Yes. In 2010, Griffith University's coordinator of community partnerships began to make use of GULL's approach to engage with and enable Samoan community leaders to experience action learning for themselves. As a means of sustaining change, project teams embedded a system for action learning using the GULL model of community engagement based on equality and inclusivity. Our primary objective was to widen access to educational opportunities for Samoan families, whose children were reported to be under-achieving at school and under-represented in higher education. This successful pilot led to the introduction of a university-sponsored program (initially for Samoan families)

that sought to widen the community's participation in higher education. In one of the periodic reviews, a community leader said: *'I'm sure that action learning is the way forward for the community – it liberates people, in the sense that at the outset, participants might have relatively low self-esteem and as they journey with this, they can move forwards and strengthen their self-image and self-worth. I also think that action learning offers the prospect of liberation from poverty because it facilitates a change in mindset. It is my belief that unless and until people are liberated from what holds them back, they will not develop and progress and I have discovered that the GULL action learning process does this'.*

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Dr Richard Teare can be contacted via the GULL website – [www.gullonline.org](http://www.gullonline.org) – Contact Us.

## REFERENCE

Teare, R. (2018) *Lifelong action learning: A journey of discovery and celebration at work and in the community*. Retrieved from Amazon.com. Also available from Amazon.com.au (Australia); Kindle e-book AUS\$3.99; Paperback AUS\$12.65.

in a football stadium – the only venue large enough for so many curious and excited observers!

**Q:** Does GULL work with academic institutions?

**A:** Yes and I am hoping that the network of universities using GULL for community engagement and service learning will increase in the next year or so. Earlier, I outlined GULL's mission to those without access to conventional forms of further and higher education and as I reflect on the highs and lows of