

| ARTICLE

# BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, TRANSFORMING INSTITUTIONS: THE UNIVERSITY MULTI-FAITH CENTRE AS A VEHICLE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Multi-Faith Centres across the Australian university landscape are typically seen as providing a service for staff and students who desire to relate with the divine or spiritual through reflection, prayer, meditation, or counselling with a chaplain, for example at the University of Canberra (Canberra) or

Monash University (University 2014). However, in responding to the challenge for all units of Griffith University to contribute to achieving the objectives of its 2015 Engagement Plan, the Griffith University Multi-Faith Centre (MFC) has grown to become an innovative vehicle for community-university engagement.

This paper outlines the process of transformation of the MFC from a services-focused facility to a leading connection between Griffith University and numerous communities across Queensland and internationally. This will be done by detailing four important steps in the process, presenting three principles to guide the process and demonstrating through examples how each principle was operationalised.

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been developed from work that was initially presented at the 4th University-Community Engagement Conference Nov 1-3, 2015.

Two innovations were key to the success of this project. The first was a re-visioning of how the physical and conceptual space of the MFC could be used as a vehicle for community-university engagement. The second innovation was the creation of the Centre for Interfaith & Cultural Dialogue. The three principles guiding this transformation were neutrality, partnership, and relevance. The paper concludes with an example of how these principles were applied during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### History of the Griffith University Multi-Faith Centre

The Griffith University Multi-Faith Centre is located on the Nathan Campus, one of five Griffith University campuses across southeast Queensland, Australia. At the time of its establishment over 18 years ago, the MFC was heralded as a significant innovation in the Australian university context, as it was “the first purpose-built facility of its kind in Australia” (2002:23) dedicated to “catering for the diverse religious needs” (Blundell 2004: 301) of those on a public university campus.

The MFC opened its doors officially on May 23, 2002. The process leading up to this event began roughly 10 years previously with a suggestion by the Vice Chancellor, Professor L. Roy Webb (Blundell 2004), but the project languished for several years until catalysed by a generous donation in 1998 from Venerable Master Chin Kung of the Pure Land Learning College Buddhist order.

From the start, the MFC was conceived as more than just a passive space that one could use as one saw fit; it “aim[ed] to encourage interfaith collaboration and

to work towards peace and harmony” (2002:23) between religious communities. The MFC’s vision was to:

*...encourage engagement, education and research in Multi-Faith dialogue and studies in religion and provide a venue where people from different religious and cultural backgrounds can practise their religious faith and find common ground to work together for a better world. (Toh 2002)*

This led to four operating principles articulated in the Charter of Values (Toh 2002):

- Recognition of the reality of religious pluralism, and the multi-faith and multi-cultural nature of Australian society;
- Respect for the rights of participants to their own religious traditions and practices;
- Promotion of dialogue between people of different religions, faiths and philosophies; and
- Working co-operatively towards a fair and just society - locally, nationally and globally.

While the MFC’s vision included bringing people of different faiths together, it had not framed its work in terms of the broader university strategic plan nor as a contributor to university engagement. The disconnect arising from this external focus became increasingly apparent, beginning in October 2009 when the MFC moved into the newly created Deputy-Vice Chancellor (Engagement) portfolio. Here, the university was faced with the challenge of how to incorporate and fund a centre that had been externally focused and self-sufficient for several years. A number of

propositions were trialled over two years before settling upon one that allowed the MFC to operate more sustainably from July 2011 onwards.

Once the direction of the MFC was solidified, it became possible to integrate its role into university engagement efforts. This process was accelerated in February 2014 with the appointment of Professor Martin Betts to the DVC(E) role and his call for the university’s first Engagement Plan. It became necessary to critically re-evaluate the work of the MFC to align it with the forthcoming 2015 Griffith University Engagement Plan.

### Griffith University Engagement Plan 2015-18

*The Griffith University Engagement Plan fitted within the broader Griffith University Strategic Plan.*

*The plan is linked to the overarching goals of the Strategic Plan 2013-2017, and integrates existing and new activities that promote what Griffith values: our interdisciplinary approach to scholarship; our commitment to diversity, sustainability and accessibility; and our strong engagement with the Asia-Pacific. (Betts 2015:1)*

In the Engagement Plan, engagement has two characteristics: it is integrated into research and teaching and it is a scholarly pursuit in and of itself. This plan articulated five principal areas of engagement: Industry, Community, Schools, Alumni and Donors. While the MFC had not viewed its work through an engagement lens prior to the 2009 move, the area that most clearly described the majority of the activities at the MFC was Community Engagement.

In 2015, community engagement at Griffith University could be characterised in the following way:

- partnerships;
- respond to community needs; and
- opening up campuses.

As stated above, Griffith University has five physical campuses across southeast Queensland. In four of these five locations (Gold Coast, Logan, Nathan and Mt. Gravatt) Griffith has a very prominent location and community leadership role. *Partnerships* was a way of framing the university relationship with community as more a collaboration than a dominant voice leading local projects or decision-making. It included, even necessitated, an openness to working with partners small and large and being receptive to projects and discussions initiated by them. One example of this was the Griffith University Community Liaison group that ran for several years co-chaired by Prof Sarah Todd, Pro-Vice Chancellor (International) and Alan Druery, chair of the Neighbourhood Action Group. This group included local homeowners, police, government representatives, and Griffith University students and staff (2014).

One of the reasons for framing community engagement in terms of partnerships was to acknowledge the increasingly important contribution the university could make in the local community, not just as a significant employer and an economic driver, but as a resource to *respond to community needs*, recognising that these needs differed in each of the locations of Griffith campuses. Some of the more challenging issues in the Nathan community were the housing (2013) and

safety of international students (2014). Seeing that international students as a group clearly linked both the university and the local community interests, common ground was easily identified.

A third characteristic of community engagement in the Engagement Plan was to *open up each campus* to local community. Not only was the university seeking to be an equal, active partner in local communities, but there was also a push to be more welcoming to local community members and helping foster in them a sense of ownership of the university as part of their community. Therefore, certain university activities, such as Harmony Week celebrations, were designed to speak to their broader interests, rather than a narrow university audience (2014).

Viewed through the community engagement lens, it became clear that the MFC would have to transform its focus and systems to better partner with community, respond to community needs and welcome community members onto Griffith University campuses.

### **Transformation for engagement**

Strategic transformation of the MFC into an explicit vehicle of University engagement played out in four stages. It began with a *stocktake* that necessitated a *broadened remit*, which then called for a *reconceptualisation* of MFC principles that were then *institutionalised* in the Centre for Interfaith & Cultural Dialogue.

#### **Stage 1: stocktake**

##### Resources

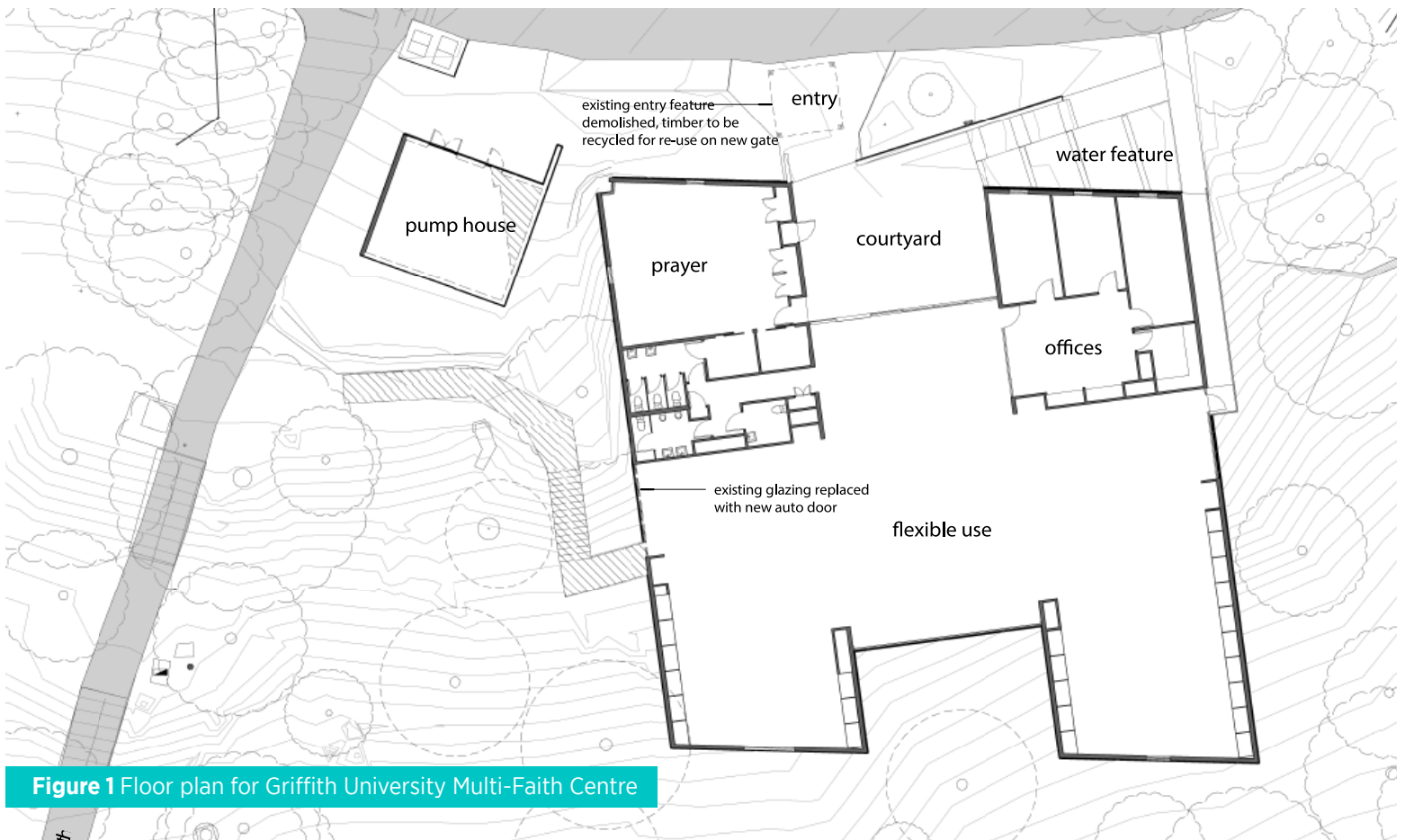
The transformation process began with

a simple stocktake exercise, similar to a SWOT analysis, looking at the resources that could be called upon, the challenges to transformation and the opportunities that would facilitate the process. The first set of resources for transformation came through the university. As the MFC was already providing a service to Griffith staff and students, there was a commitment to provide ongoing financial support for two full-time staff and maintenance of the centre facilities. Having this financial foundation in place made the inevitably rocky transformation process a much more viable undertaking.

A second university resource was the actual centre facilities comprising an entire building of flexible use set on the edge of campus in Toohy Forest (see figure 1). Engagement, by definition, means people coming together, therefore having a beautiful, flexible space in a natural setting was an ideal resource for bringing people together.

A third, less tangible, but equally important university resource was the university's respected name. Being a prominent contributor to local community over an extended period meant that many local groups and organisations were interested in partnering with Griffith units.

There were also community resources on which to draw for the transformation process. The first was a set of solid relationships stemming from the work of the previous years. While some important collaborators moved on during the transition period from the first director and the move into the DVC's portfolio, many still maintained contact with the MFC. One such collaboration was with the Queensland Forum for Muslims, Jews and



**Figure 1** Floor plan for Griffith University Multi-Faith Centre

Christians, which had been holding their monthly forum and annual One G-d, Many Voices Abrahamic Faiths Concert since 2004 (Tutin 2019). Another consistent thread of support ran through the Advisory Group that had been with the MFC since its inception, comprised of religious leaders, media personalities and government representatives. Their contributions to the successful transformation through advice and connections cannot be overstated.

A second community resource was the surprising goodwill on the part of many community members. The idea of transforming the MFC into a centre of

engagement tapped into an unexpectedly strong interest in the community for such an entity. We began to find an increasing number of willing partners on a wide range of activities such as domestic violence, environmental care, social cohesion, right-wing nationalism and natural disaster response.

Challenges

One of the challenges, of course, in any significant transformation process is to overcome the historical inertia of the institution and set it on another trajectory. In the case of the MFC, three

specific historical artefacts increased the complexity of the transformation process. The first of these was mentioned above in that, prior to 2009, the MFC was not tightly connected to the university structure or strategic plan. This created an ambiguous relationship, at best, with other units and departments at the university, as it had no clear identity nor were there obvious allies to facilitate change. For example, perhaps the most obvious relationship would have been with the university chaplaincy, as is the case in other universities (University 2014). The MFC was originally intended to house

the university chaplaincy office, but this association ended in the early stages of the centre's development (Blundell 2004).

Another historical factor to overcome in the transformation process was a lengthy period of quiescence after the 2009 transition into the DVC's portfolio, which disrupted relationships with partners and community groups. The transition came at the time of, or in response to, the departure of two very important figures in the MFC's history. The director who had served for approximately seven years moved to a university overseas and the principal funder of the MFC's work for years decided to fund other initiatives.

A third historical artefact that significantly challenged the transformation of the MFC into a vehicle for university engagement was its specific focus on interfaith dialogue for peace. At the time of its establishment, the MFC's focus on interfaith dialogue was an innovative contribution, however much changed in Australian society during the nine years leading up to the transformation. One change that impacted the work of the MFC was a veritable explosion of interfaith dialogue practice around the country (Michael 2012) (Halafoff 2013), accompanied by a broad perception of the limits of interfaith dialogue (Schottmann 2013) (Howell 2012). One limit of pure or focused interfaith dialogue is that it is a relatively small contributor to peace, because the societal challenges in Australia that involved religious communities or traditions were rarely between religious communities. More often these tensions seemed to be related to differences between religious and secular institutions, interpretations and governance approaches, which interfaith

dialogue was not equipped to address. In short, a focus on interfaith dialogue was not a "growth opportunity" in Australia.

A second limit of interfaith dialogue was the perception of it being a superficial exercise (Halafoff 2013). While the practice of interfaith dialogue grew quickly, it often remained at high level discussions (Hall 2010), where religious leaders focus solely on the similarities of their respective faiths, or it was co-opted by public leaders to become photo opportunities or interfaith ceremonies without much exchange or learning. While each of these activities is significant, none connect with grassroots, lived experiences of the average citizen and, therefore, do not impact lives in a meaningful, recognisable way (Yoffie 2011). This also leads to interfaith dialogue being disconnected from other issues in society, such as racism (Ho 2006).

A final change in social context that had arisen over the years since the MFC opened was the increase in peace studies programs in Queensland. In 2011, far from being the leading light for peace in Queensland, the MFC was playing on a crowded field. For example, the University of Queensland had established the Rotary World Peace Fellows program and the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, while the not-for-profit Peace and Conflict Studies Institute Australia had also begun operations in Brisbane.

Given the changes in society and the crowded field of peace studies, a centre that focused predominantly on interfaith dialogue for peace would not be the most effective vehicle for university engagement.

### Opportunities

Taking into consideration these resources and challenges, a number of opportunities for engagement became clear. One opportunity was the timing of the change. Wedding a stronger tie to the university resources than had existed previously to a recognised community need provided powerful potential impact for the MFC and the university.

A second opportunity for engagement this transformation revealed was tied to the unique conceptual position such a transformation would produce. If, as stated above, the primary points of tension around faith and religious practice in Australia were between religious and secular perspectives and structures, then a centre embedded in a public university and with a history of working with and deep access to religious communities is uniquely positioned to bridge secular-religious differences. It becomes a potential, trusted partner that could make significant contributions to social wellbeing.

A third opportunity for the MFC to strengthen university engagement was found in the increasing international relevance for interfaith dialogue projects and research. Accompanying the enormous growth of interfaith dialogue in Australia mentioned above, was a concomitant increase in international activities in this space. For example, Halafoff (2013) highlights how governments, NGOs, multilateral organisations and international religious groups from around the world were engaging with and supporting interfaith dialogue initiatives.

### **Stage 2: broaden perspective**

It became clear through the course of

the stocktake that the MFC's future as a vehicle for university engagement was dependent upon adopting a broader scope of engagement and a broader vision of impact. These would necessitate being able to engage within and across the university units, as well as domestic and international communities.

Eventually, a new vision statement was articulated built on the original four operating principles articulated in the Charter of Values (Toh 2002):

Imagine a world where community conflicts are resolved through dialogue, instead of violence; where all religious and cultural traditions are threads in a social fabric woven with respect and understanding. This is the work of the MFC

(Adams 2015).

By emphasising the process of dialogue with the goals of respect and understanding between communities, perspectives and structures, the work of the MFC was able to comfortably encompass a broader range of issues and partners and drive engagement with a strong social benefit.

### Stage 3: reconceptualisation

A broader vision for a long-established centre like the MFC required a

reconceptualisation of its operations. Much of the work in this area had already been done with the 2015 Engagement Plan and, therefore, did not need to be developed. What was needed was to articulate how to apply the principles of the plan in the context of the MFC. This led to a prioritisation of two of the plan's characteristics of community engagement and the introduction of a third.

#### Partnership

The first characteristic of engagement from the 2015 plan was partnership. As stated above, this meant framing the university relationship with community as a collaboration with an openness to working with small and large groups and being receptive to projects and discussions initiated by them. One example of how this would play out in the MFC context is in co-sponsoring events or gatherings with community groups. This would give them a very nice venue and access to expensive resources, such as printing and staff time. In addition, co-sponsoring with Griffith University raises the profile of the event and opens access to a broader network. In return, the university connects with timely and topical issues, brings more community members onto its campus and strengthens its reputation as a community leader across southeast Queensland.

#### Respond to community needs

Partnering strengthens the MFC's capacity to respond to community needs. In the case of the MFC, this second characteristic was defined as addressing issues relevant to the broader society. Over the years this has led to a range of engagement activities with community, government, business and media partners on a plethora of issues,

such as combating violent extremism, responding to climate change, addressing racism and nationalism, reducing domestic violence, strengthening religious freedom, shaping media messaging, and understanding the situations of migrants



*This is not to say that neutrality is always possible or even desired in every conflict or difference. For example, our operating principles openly acknowledge that we support “the reality of religious pluralism, and the multi-faith and multi-cultural nature of Australian society” (Toh 2002)*

and refugees. Each of these points of engagement speak directly to and enhance the university's reputation in social justice and community benefit.

#### Neutrality

The third characteristic of the MFC's community engagement approach is

neutrality. Neutrality is not found in the 2015 Engagement Plan, but is key to the type of engagement the MFC's vision entails. Because the vision is to facilitate dialogue between communities, perspectives and structures, sometimes in settings of conflict, the MFC had to be seen as equally attractive to all sides. This is not to say that neutrality is always possible or even desired in every conflict or difference. For example, our operating principles openly acknowledge that we support "the reality of religious pluralism, and the multi-faith and multi-cultural nature of Australian society" (Toh 2002). Furthermore, since the MFC is a vehicle for Griffith University engagement, it represents the university and, therefore, cannot be completely neutral or impartial at times or on certain issues that are in the

university's specific interests. However, it does require that the MFC not take sides, while speaking to and demonstrating legitimate understanding of the interests of both sides.

#### **Stage 4: institutionalising change**

The fourth and final stage in the transformation of the MFC into a vehicle for university engagement was to institutionalise the changes called for by the previous three stages. This necessitated two modifications. One modification was to rename the Multi-Faith Centre to represent the broadened remit of the work, while keeping the MFC's history as a resource or foundation on which to build future engagement. The name we chose was the Centre for Interfaith & Cultural Dialogue (ICD). The

second modification was to develop a strategic plan for the ICD that guides the operationalising of the engagement characteristics for the work of the ICD.

#### **COVID-19 and the ICD**

A strategic plan facilitates two important aspects of a university centre's work. First and foremost, it provides the structure on which a program of activities and objectives can be planned. Second, a good strategic plan strengthens the ability to recognise and respond to opportunities as they arise. This responsiveness to opportunity was very important when the COVID-19 pandemic struck Queensland. At a time when much of the university was inward focused, seeking to staunch the loss of revenue and resultant staff cuts, the ICD was able to maintain an external



engagement focus and generate income through consulting contracts and donor support.

In March 2020, as government agencies across Australia began to develop plans to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus 2019, as ICD director I wrote an opinion piece for the ABC's Religion & Ethics site titled "Why Faith Communities are Key Partners in Planning for a Coronavirus Outbreak" (Adams 2020). The argument was that the unique role religious groups play in our society make them potentially powerful partners in pandemic response planning. The Queensland Government, through the Department of Racing, Local Government and Multicultural Affairs (DRLGMA), picked up on this piece and asked if the ICD could produce a report on the impact of COVID-19 on faith communities throughout the state.

To produce the report, we decided to partner with faith communities across the state to get their insight, experience and lessons learned. We also sought their articulation of their community needs. Ultimately, the centre's accepted role as a neutral facilitator allowed us to work with a group of more than 20 faith communities in addition to health officials, federal and state government departments and community service providers (Adams 2020) and convene an online community forum to produce a dozen recommendations and 15 key findings that were submitted to the State Government by the end of April.

This report was just the start of the work to build relationships, strengthen understanding and facilitate communication between faith

communities, and between them and government and health leaders. In June, the DRLGMA returned with a consultancy request to produce a plan or set of guidelines to assist the reopening of places of worship. We reconvened roughly the same group brought together for the earlier report to develop within one week "Reopening Places of Worship: Industry COVID Safe Plan for Places of Worship in Queensland" (Adams 2020).

Guided by the engagement principles of partnership, responsiveness to community needs, and neutrality, the ICD has built strong relationships with our faith community partners while producing the two reports discussed above. These relationships continue to bear fruit. For example, the ICD is now collaborating with the DRLGMA on a photodocumentary of faith experiences during the COVID-19 lockdowns with a focus on resilience and hope. At the time of writing, this project is attracting the interest of media and multiple donors across Australia. Such an intimate exploration of personal and religious life during a trying time would have been much more difficult, if not impossible, without having the trust and respect of these communities.

### Conclusion

Multi-faith centres on Australia public university campuses typically provide important services to staff and students, including opportunities for reflection, prayer, meditation, or counselling with a chaplain. In addition, with strategic planning and action, multi-faith centres can also be transformed into vehicles for university engagement.

This paper presents a case study of the

Multi-Faith Centre at Griffith University and the process of transformation undertaken to define its unique contribution to the university's 2015 Engagement Plan. A four-stage process of transformation is detailed, including a stocktake of the resources for, challenges to and opportunities arising from such an endeavour; a broadening of the remit of the MFC; a reconceptualisation of engagement characteristics in the context of the MFC; and the two principal modifications needed to institutionalise the transformation.

In narrating the distinctive transformative journey from the Multi-Faith Centre to the Centre for Interfaith & Cultural Dialogue, the purpose of this case study is not to say that a set of unique circumstances and fortuitous timing allowed the transformation to take place. Instead, it underlines the importance of working to understand the lay of the engagement terrain to better inform the strategic decisions that will shape the best vehicle for rich and rewarding community-university engagement. This point is highlighted by the successful relationships and projects developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Queensland.

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