Chapter IV

University/Community Partnerships: Capstone Projects that Make a Difference

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The University of Leeds is the largest campus-based university in the United Kingdom in terms of student numbers. The School of Computing has, in recent years, sought to share its academic and technical advantages with schools in economically deprived inner-city areas. This chapter describes some of the projects which have been initiated and managed by the School of Computing. We discuss how these have benefited both the schools and our participating undergraduate students. The chapter concludes with a discussion on some of the difficulties encountered and those factors that, from our experience, help to achieve success.

INTRODUCTION

As cited above, the University of Leeds is the largest campus-based university in the United Kingdom in terms of student numbers. It is based in the economically deprived inner city, and many of our near-neighbor schools demonstrate the problems often associated with inner-city schools. The School of Computing has, in recent years, sought to share its academic and technical advantages with these schools to their benefit, and that of our graduating students. It is the aim of this chapter to explain how we have worked with these schools and at the same time benefited a section of our own students.

BACKGROUND

The Town

Leeds is among the largest industrial urbanized areas (population one million) in the UK. It came to prominence during the nineteenth century as a northern industrial city, and its original university, the current University of Leeds, was founded approximately 100 years ago. During the twentieth century, it suffered the economic readjustments seen in many other places, and the current economy is “post-industrial,” with a heavy reliance on the finance industry. The population has, naturally, been slower to adjust than industrial management, and there are major pockets of deprivation and under-privilege amidst the resurgence.

A second university, Leeds Metropolitan University, was founded in the ’70s originally as Leeds Polytechnic. The two universities have a combined student population of over 50,000, which is very large indeed for the UK. There is thus a large undergraduate population in an environment of economic disadvantage; additionally, both universities have very central sites juxtaposed with areas of significant deprivation (as measured by government metrics). Areas in the immediate neighborhood of the University of Leeds are in the bottom 0.5% of the UK deprivation indices (Department of the Environment, 1999). These include the number of single parents, lack of car ownership, unemployment, etc.

The city thus exhibits instabilities, with economic health for some, mixed with a vicious circle of unemployment and under-achievement for others. This is a familiar urban picture in the western world, but it is exacerbated by the presence of very large institutions of privilege and ambition in the precise areas that are suffering most.

The University

The University of Leeds, which lies in the centre of this area, is the largest single-site university in the United Kingdom, with over 25,000 students. It is research based, graduating Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD students in a full range of disciplines. Traditionally, these students are recruited from among the more affluent middle classes who will travel to study; there is as a result an image of the university that it is not “for” the people who live next to it – this can be the cause of understandable tension. In recognition of this, there are several university-wide schemes underway to foster among the students the idea of giving something back to the community among which they have lived for the duration of their studies; most of these schemes represent voluntary, extra-curricula work for the students and are connected to local schools.
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