



A Case Study of Community Engagement with Tangible Outcomes

The University of Western Sydney vision statement is “Bringing knowledge to life in Greater Western Sydney through community and business engagement with our learning and our research.” In late 2013, the University lived up to its vision aspirations by reaching out to its community when they were in a time of disruption and distress. The university has 2 teaching campuses at the foot of the Blue Mountains and has long considered Mountains residents to be part of the UWS Community.

Between 17 and 24 October 2013, fires raged through the Blue Mountains’ townships of Winmalee, Springwood, Yellow Rock and Falconbridge and threatened the townships of Valley Heights and Warimoo, in the end destroying over 200 homes in Winmalee, Springwood and Yellow Rock. There was also a major fire front threatening Lithgow, Mt Victoria, Bell and Mount Tomah which moved down towards Kurrajong and its surrounds. A total of 10 homes were lost in these areas. The Blue Mountains community was devastated by the toll the fires took and the effect on its residents. Fortunately, no human lives were lost.

The unpredictability and intensity of the fire caused by weather conditions resulted in the closure of all State and independent schools in the Blue Mountains on the days of highest risk. The NSW Higher School Certificate examinations were in full swing when the schools were closed and HSC candidates either had to travel long distances to sit exams at other high schools, or missed exams all together.

The disruption to HSC exams caused additional distress to families already significantly stressed by the fires. Everyone in the community wanted to help, but there was very little help that would be useful. However, the then UWS Vice-Chancellor, Professor Janice Reid knew there was something she could do that would genuine help these students and relieve a small part of the stress on them and their families.

In the days following the fires, Professor Reid, announced the Blue Mountains Stay On Track initiative. This initiative guaranteed places at UWS in degrees or pathways courses for HSC candidates impacted by the closure of their school during the exams, and also offered scholarships to those students who lost their homes in the fires.

The promotion and implementation of the initiative was pulled together in a few days by a dedicated team of staff at UWS. The goals were to offer all interested HSC candidates the opportunity to participate in and succeed at tertiary study and to minimise the administrative burden on the impacted students to prove their eligibility.

The presentation will:

- Explore the University’s commitment to its region and its community

- explore the development, launch and implementation of the Blue Mountains Stay On Track initiative
- comment on the value of established relationships
- report on the outcomes of the initiative