

# Invited Article

## Engagement - a Strategic Imperative for Universities

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*This paper outlines two key premises. The first is that engagement sits at the heart of all university activity and enables and enriches it across all three pillars of teaching, research and service. Engagement is presented as being an integral and embedded part of all university activity that directly impacts on all other components and functions – engagement it is not ‘what we do’ it is the ‘how we do everything’. The second key premise of this paper is that engagement must be led as a strategic initiative in the university to be successful and sustainable. The paper will consider how engagement is conceptualised, the various definitions of engagement and why it is important, offer preconditions for success, suggest ways of building a culture and practice of engagement, and outline ways to institutionalise engagement in the university.*

The role of universities is changing. The notion that teaching and research, as the two pillars of the traditional university, is rapidly being replaced by a recognition that there are three pillars namely teaching, research and service, and all are fundamental components of the modern university. Universities are now also required to move beyond the ‘ivory tower’ and acknowledge that they “...face high expectations from the societies of which they are part. They will be judged, and learn to judge themselves, by the variety and vitality of their interactions with society” (Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2001, p. i).

This is particularly relevant in a time where prolific attention is being given to the way universities are engaging with and being an active participant in their broader communities. This had led to the growth in concepts such as university community engagement, service learning, community service, knowledge exchange, knowledge transfer, and the Third Mission. More broadly, the higher education sector is recognised as an intellectual resource that contributes to national and international progress by pursuing and encouraging the formation of knowledge driven relationships and partnerships that are mutually beneficial, reciprocal and sustainable. Furthermore, the evolving and competitive nature of our higher education institutions recognises the need to be able to effectively and rapidly respond to critical social, cultural, economic, environmental and political needs with new knowledge and learning opportunities.

The key premise of this paper is that engagement sits at the heart of ‘all’ university



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activity and enables and enriches it in a myriad of ways across all three pillars. We cannot, and should not, consider 'engagement' to be a mere 'rebadging' of the service component of universities work and neither should it be looked upon as activity and/or entity separate to the work of students and staff. Engagement really is an integral and embedded part of teaching, research and service and if pursued in this way, will directly impact on all other components of the university. As such, and to be successful, engagement, as a core activity of universities, must be considered as a key component of how business is done – including staff recruitment, induction, development processes, promotion and performance review policies and practices (including key performance indicators). If articulated in this way, it will spur an institutional culture where engagement is seen and embraced as an essential and embedded element of all university activities across all procedures, processes and structures. This approach is similar to Goddard (2009), who argues that "Engagement has to be an institution wide-commitment, not confined to individual academics or projects. It has to embrace teaching as well as research, students as well as academics, and the full range of support services (p.4).

An institutional culture that embraces engagement as a core responsibility of higher education supports Boyer's notion of the scholarship of engagement, which "...means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems, to our children, to our schools, to our teachers and to our cities..." (Boyer, 1996, p.21). In later years, Holland (2006, p. 1) recognised that Boyer "gave us a new way to view scholarly work – not simply as a collection of separate research, teaching and service silos, but as an interactive pursuit of discovery, teaching, application and integration". An understanding of engaged research, engaged teaching and engaged service will now be discussed further.

Engaged research recognises communities as knowledge rich partners in the co-production of knowledge. Engagement enhances scholarship and research. Howard (2007) asserts that engaged scholarship, including research, involves the community, benefits the community and advances the researcher's scholarship. Holland (2006) writes about the "increasing use of engaged research as a means of applying scholarship to local problems and opportunities..." (p.1) leading to a major shift in research. A review of the international literature,

according to Holland (2006) shows that engaged research is a key aspect of the transformation of faculty. Nyden writes that by "taking part in this collaborative approach, researchers are expanding the 'culture of questioning' to include both community-based knowledge and university-based knowledge" (2006, p.14) however, acknowledges that "this form of research still faces challenges as it struggles for acceptance and recognition within the academy" (2006, p. 21). Further engaged research improves research by broadening academic thinking and creating results with greater impact and relevance and expands innovative practices by allowing researchers to test ideas in a real world setting.

Boyer's (1991) scholarship of discovery, or the pursuit of inquiry and investigation in search of knowledge, along with the scholarship of integration (making connections and advancing knowledge through synthesis) and application (how knowledge can be applied to social issues) can be used to define and describe engaged research, although Boyer would challenge us to see these as interrelated dimensions of scholarship (including teaching and service).

Engaged teaching encourages staff and students to become active citizens and respond to local and global issues and challenges. It contributes to students' graduate employability and skills for lifelong learning. Students have access to 'real world' learning and are able to combine theory and practice. Engagement prepares educated and engaged citizens. Boyer (1991) refers to this pillar as the 'scholarship of teaching' and includes transforming and extending knowledge, as well as, transmitting knowledge. Engaged teaching also supports a curriculum that improves student development as scholars, research, leaders and engaged citizens. Further it enriches the learning experiences for students and generates unforeseen circumstances that stimulate creativity and innovation.

Engaged service provides opportunities for universities to open their doors to the community and offer a range of services and use of facilities without expectations or restraints. Engagement increases public awareness of education, scientific and artistic developments and endeavours and promotes critical enquiry and public debate within communities. Universities become more engaged and "students and faculty, often side by side, are filling in the moat of academic isolation and streaming out the gates to

become active players in the life of their communities (Hollister, n.d) and redefining the relationship between universities and the communities around them. This is important as according to Boyer (1991), the scholarship of engagement connects all dimensions of scholarship to the understanding and solving of social, civic and ethical problems. This may be the reason why, according to Hollister (n.d) that “brick by brick around the world, the engaged university is supplanting the ivory tower”. Further engaged service improves relationships between universities and their communities and helps universities demonstrate accountability in an era replete with calls for greater scrutiny and demands for return on investment.

Paradoxically, this is happening in a time when higher education institutions are facing challenges related to relevance, constraints and cost (Burns, Fitzgerald, Furco, Sonka and Swanson, 2011) and increasing demands to remain competitive in rising global markets and economic pressures. The question of how universities can adequately respond to these challenges, while at the same time embrace engagement that is embedded in core activities, receives much discussion within the university and in the wider higher education and policy community. It may be that the solution to these challenges is right in front of us, and indeed that engagement and service, will provide the way forward to a sustainable higher education system for all.

What also needs to be highlighted is the issue that the domain of university community engagement is complex and contested and that in the literature, concepts like ‘community’ and ‘engagement’ are multifariously defined (O’Connor, McEwen, Owen, Lynch and Hill, 2011). This therefore, reinforced the need for many ‘lenses’ for interpreting engagement and its many forms.

The second key premise of this paper is that engagement must be led as a strategic initiative in the university to be successful and sustainable. The paper will consider how engagement is conceptualised, the various definitions of engagement and why it is important, offer preconditions for success, suggest ways of building a culture and practice of engagement, and outline ways to institutionalise engagement in the university.

### Conceptualising engagement

The hallmark of engagement in higher education, according to Holland and Ramaley, is “...the development of partnerships that

ensure a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge between the university and the community” (2008, p. 33). Such partnerships contribute a significant component to teaching and research that is defined by its focus on reciprocal, mutually-beneficial knowledge-driven relationships between higher education institutions and their community partners.

The increasing focus on how knowledge is exchanged has encouraged many universities to consider their relationship, and engagement with, local communities. More than ever, universities are developing strategies for engaging with business, industry, government and community. Activities are directed toward issues that shape our future both locally and globally and recognise the role that universities can play in the exchange of knowledge.

An important characteristic of engagement, and how knowledge is exchanged, is the opportunity to share information and promote exemplary practices and initiatives that have resulted from engaged research, education and service. This is knowledge that can be shared freely and on a global scale, contributing to the drive to become more competitive knowledge based economies, fuelled by readily accessible information (anyplace, anytime, anywhere) and the growth of convergent technologies.

Being part of a knowledge based economy means that we are also responsible for responding to global challenges. Engagement and collaboration with our communities improves our chances of finding solutions to global challenges including environmental, health and wellbeing, population growth, poverty, homelessness, disengaged youth, the elderly, economic crises, gender inequity, agriculture, and many more. If we adopt Butin and Seider’s (2012) notion of the ‘engaged campus’ and the idea of a rich civic and community life for all, then the notion of universities engaging with their communities presents a real and timely opportunity to overcome these challenges and provide worthy solutions.

This leads us to the realisation that university engagement is not new. The notion that higher education institutions and practitioners can and should, through engagement with the broader society, create relationships and partnerships through knowledge exchange initiatives that benefit society has been well stated by a range of reports, authors and institutions since the late 1950s. Decades later, the focus on engagement intensified when the

scholarship of engagement, termed by Ernest Boyer in 1996, exemplified the role of universities in advancing intellectual and civic progress by engaging with local communities and demonstrating a commitment to a social contract between society and higher education. As institutions of higher education across the globe respond to this call, a transformation has, and still is, occurring.

Institutions are increasingly focusing their strategic direction on how they engage with their communities. In turn, there is great demand from society to be able to see and understand how institutions are working with these partners and achieving mutually beneficial outcomes. By facilitating opportunities for engaged research, universities are developing high-level knowledge and skills and a culture of innovation. Engaged education, through teaching and learning, is improving the student experience by providing authentic ways of combining theory and practice (work integrated learning and service learning) that enhance employability. Through service (volunteering and outreach), we are preparing students for citizenship, and providing them with opportunities to develop social responsibility and civic identity, alongside staff.

The peril we may face however, as Butin suggested in his introductory chapter in *The Engaged Campus*, is that “the community engagement movement...has reached an engagement ceiling” (p. 1). Butin continues to say that it is time to develop a new blueprint for the next generation of the engaged campus. There is much more to be done in the effort to develop a new intellectual movement in our institutions in terms of the way we engage with communities.

Many institutions are challenged by a lack of support for a collective, sector-wide approach that promotes holistic thinking and collective action required to address the issue at hand, due to a lack of consistency around the engagement and collaboration agendas of our universities. If we, as a united front, believe that engagement, collaboration and the resultant partnerships critical to enabling knowledge exchange more broadly for the collective attention in the sector, and is placed on the national agenda, we are well on our way to agreeing on a sector-wide approach.

This way, we will better understand the:

- Diversity and individuality of our community partners, as well as their specific requirements;
- Skills that staff across the sectors require to be

- successful in engagement and collaboration;
- Incentive and reward systems required to motivate staff and;
- Diversity of activities undertaken across the research, education and service components of universities that benefit or could benefit from a strategic national approach.

Leading engagement as a strategic initiative in the university is one way to begin a broader sector wide, institutional process.

### What is engagement and why is it so important?

University Community Engagement (UCE) is a broad term used to describe the many dimensions of interactions between academia and wider society.

In the United States of America, the Carnegie Foundation describe UCE as:

Collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.

The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement in the United Kingdom describe UCE as the:

Many ways in which higher education institutions and their staff and students can connect and share their work with the public. Done well, it generates mutual benefit, with all parties learning from each other through sharing knowledge, expertise and skills. In the process, it can build trust, understanding and collaboration, and increase the sector's relevance to, and impact on, civil society.

In South Africa, The University of the Free State describe UCE as an:

Integral and core part of higher education in South Africa. Our role as set out in the White Paper is that “we are called on to demonstrate social responsibility and make available expertise and infrastructure for community service programs in the commitment towards common good”.

UCE in Australia, according to Engagement Australia:

Encompasses academic or scholarly activity, and other activities that specifically link a university with local, regional, national and/or international communities; with its various communities such as business, industry, cultural or social groupings. UCE provides mutual benefit to the university and the community and incorporates an integrated or interdisciplinary approach that is realised through engaged learning and teaching, engaged research and engaged community service.

And with the 2014 launch of Engagement Thailand, UCE in Thailand is described as:

Academic cooperation between universities and society in all aspects of the university mission based on four principles: partnership, mutual benefit, scholarship and assessment of social impact.

Essentially, UCE definitions from around the world share common themes including collaboration, reciprocity with mutually beneficial outcomes and public good intent – all rounded with high quality scholarship. Today, we tend to adopt the general term engagement however, within higher education, engagement is also referred to as knowledge transfer, knowledge exchange, engaged scholarship, integrative applied research and Third mission.

What is evident is an ever evolving field of endeavour for all modern day organisations including Higher Education providers to embed engagement into core business activities. This includes a quest to connect with, and be relevant to, internal and external stakeholder requirements. To succeed, such relationships must be mutually beneficial for all parties and reciprocal in nature. This will assist in the exchange of knowledge in the greater search of collaborative approaches to the solution of real-world problems and opportunities.

### Why is UCE important?

The idea that universities can no longer afford to be ‘ivory towers’ was presented at the very beginning of this paper and provided a platform from which to launch the key premise that engagement must be led as a strategic initiative in the university to be successful and sustainable. This is not a new concept. Universities have long held an obligation to the public good and there are increasing demands on universities prompting a focus on being more collaborative and responsive to the needs of society. Universities are also dedicated to the enterprise of knowledge – creating, exchanging and applying knowledge to enhance society more broadly. What is needed is a perfect fit.

The critical role of knowledge in society was captured eloquently by the World Bank in their Entering the 21st Century World Development Report of 1999/2000. For countries in the vanguard of the world economy, the balance between knowledge and resources has shifted so far towards the former that knowledge has become perhaps the most important factor determining the standard of living – more than land, than tools, than labour. Today’s most technologically advanced economies are truly knowledge-based.

In their 2012 paper on the Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education, Fitzgerald et al described engagement as the umbrella that covers every good practice in teaching, research and service. It advances opportunities for internationalising the university through shared research, scholarship and service; it advances opportunities for interdisciplinary research and teaching.

### UCE globally

A number of reports have mapped the changing role of universities and their contribution to economic prosperity, social development and national innovation (see for example Brewer, 2013, McKelvey and Holmen, 2009). The competitive business of higher education and the demands for a more collaboration and relevance is proving challenging for some senior managers. Some of these global pressures include national policy, social change, globalised student flows, funding and other issues (including funding streams, knowledge exchange programs and policy support).

These challenges exist in engagement and collaboration activities

across the globe. Reasons for these challenges include lack of knowledge of potential partners, collaboration mechanisms and funding opportunities, differences in language, lack of definition, research cultures, financial and budgetary constraints, intellectual property issues and time scales. The key to facing these challenges and the key premise of this paper is to work together to institutionalise engagement and become engaged universities.

### Institutionalising engagement

According to Austin and Beck (2011) for higher education to fully incorporate community engagement into all aspects of institutional mission, it must openly address issues related to:

- Faculty roles and responsibilities
- Student learning environments
- Institutional benchmarks and outcome measures
- Institution specific definitions of engagement
- Rewards for exemplars of engaged teaching and learning, research and service
- Community involvement in community engagement

This paper presents five key core values critical for institutionalising engagement.

The first core value, integrity, allows relationships to flourish because it implies that parties are conscientious, equitable, are genuine and act with sincerity, virtue and responsibility.

The second, trust, is dependent on integrity and will come about when there is shared belief that mutual experiences are true and trustworthy. It implies confidence in the relationship built on assurances, certainty, interdependence, expectation, hope and reliance.

The third core value, open communication and transparency, allows the giving and exchanging of information and ideas and is dependent upon contact, connection, conversation and interchange.

Engagement is built on integrity, trust and effective communication leads to reciprocity, the fourth core value. Reciprocity leads to the development of two-way, mutually beneficial relationships that serve to benefit and advance the parties involved.

And lastly, leadership assures the involvement of all levels

of management and staff in integrating engagement into the university's mission and strategic plans and the work of campuses, faculties and divisions. A common definition of leadership is the art of motivating people to act towards achieving a common goal. Good leaders inspire and guide others to meet and exceed goals. Leadership in an organisational role involves establishing a clear vision, sharing that vision with others so that they will follow willingly, proving the resources to realise that vision and managing the conflicting interests of all stakeholders. Leadership and participation are closely connected. Leadership requires a strong participation based just like participation requires structure, direction and strong leadership (Serrano and Reichard, 2011). Embedding engagement throughout the university requires the support of the strong focused leadership at all organisational levels – essential to facilitate the participation of staff, students and stakeholders.

This paper also offers preconditions for success in institutionalising engagement. They are:

- Effective leadership, together with a shared, clearly articulated engagement strategy, are essential to successful implementation and ongoing maintenance of engagement
- Community based work must be valued as a meaningful educational experience and a legitimate mode of scholarly endeavour, as well as, a recognised component of professional and academic staff activity
- Engagement and community partnerships require infrastructure to succeed, identifying opportunities, and facilitating relationships, providing logistical and technical support, and assessing the results
- Assessment of the benefits and impacts must consider both the institutional point-of-view and the perspectives of community
- Institutions must be willing to invest in the professional development and orientation activities for staff and students to develop the necessary skills to participate
- Building culture and a practice of engagement
- Engagement should be the foundation of the university's vision and the strategic plan and fully supported by the university council and executives.
- Capacity building through the professional development of staff, students and community to enhance their

capacity to forge productive and valuable partnerships and to action the opportunities that these relationships provide

- Embed engagement workshops, rewards and recognition programs, academic promotion processes.
- Tracking and measuring activities, benchmarking and key performance indicators, web based resources

If we return to the first key premises of this paper, that engagement sits at the heart of “all” university activity and enables and enriches it in a myriad of ways across all three pillars of teaching, research and service, and that we cannot, and should not, consider engagement to be a ‘rebadging’ of the service

component of universities work – it is hoped that the core values, combined with the preconditions for success, offer some guidance on how to institutionalise engagement as a strategic initiative.

Engagement is an integral and embedded part of teaching, research and service and if pursued in this way, will directly impact on all other components of the university. If articulated in this way, it will spur an institutional culture where engagement is seen and embraced as an essential and embedded element of all university activities across all procedures, processes and structures – highlight the second key premise of this paper, that engagement must be led as a strategic initiative in the university to be successful and sustainable.

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