

# Response to the discussion paper: An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding

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From the Australian University Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA)

## Introduction

Whilst Australian University Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) appreciates that the proposed indicator suite is an attempt to assemble a simple suite of easily measured outcomes, the alliance is concerned that the use of proxies to understand and evaluate the outcomes from a complex set of variables may not produce the best outcomes. In particular AUCEA contends that essential measures of engagement are absent from the suite and that this absence will be significant for the development of quality and the continuous improvement agenda in learning and teaching.

Extending the reach, quality and performance of higher education will require university community engagement. We know that tertiary study is important for both the individual and the community “because higher education confers significant personal benefit on individuals in terms of personal development, social standing, career possibilities and lifetime earnings. But it is also important for national and community development in producing a more equitable, cohesive and economically successful society. For the individuals and the nation, Australia must do all it can to ensure all those who can benefit from higher education are able to do so.” (Universities Australia: 2008). It is only in partnership with our communities that the benefits of higher education can be realised. Thus measures of the effectiveness of these partnerships and community impact of learning and teaching and research are very important.

It is also noted that whilst first year undergraduate students provide a sample of commencing students, if the suite aspires to test the participation agenda, some consideration should be given to the articulation rate of pathway students since many non-traditional entrants are able to successfully embark upon higher education studies through preparation, bridging and enabling courses.

A number of universities are developing individual methods of data capture including the Tracking and Improvement System (UWS), the in-house Deakin system and the use of proprietary systems like Raisers Edge. AUSSE, mentioned earlier, AUQA measures and the Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) Work Related Learning begin perhaps to address the need. Many AUCEA University members like UniSA for example also have clear community engagement Key Performance Indicators and measures to monitor their performance.

This work has developed alongside discussion focused on indicators and benchmarks since AUCEA was first conceived as a national alliance in 2002. In 2005 the AUCEA identified a need to encourage the development of national and international benchmarks for engagement activity, the inclusion of engagement as a part of institutional profile assessments by government and as part of the AUQA assessment regime. The early work in establishing the Research Quality Framework provided the impetus for seeking to understand impact and increasingly, universities, like many institutions, were driven by the need for accountability and an evidence base. Now the focus must be on an evidence base that will support Higher Education Compacts, the role of Higher Education Institutions in the social inclusion agenda and allow for measuring performance (Langworthy, 2009).

The Discussion Paper asserts that the context for the proposed indicator framework is the Government's desire to extend the reach and enhance the quality and performance of Australia's Higher Education system through a range of measures including the introduction of higher education performance funding for teaching and learning. The objective of this performance funding "is to ensure that universities are contributing in negotiated ways to the national attainment and participation ambitions and enhancing the quality of their teaching and learning by working towards institution-level performance targets". The paper also outlines principles underpinning the choice of indicators not unlike the principles developed for the AUCEA Community Engagement Framework and Benchmarking Pilot Project, three of the most important being "be relevant and measure what they purport to measure"; "inform and encourage policy and practice at both the national and institutional level without having a perverse influence on behaviour"; and "accommodate and to the extent possible, facilitate institutional diversity".

AUCEA would contend that the proposed measures do not meet those underpinning principles in regard to community engagement. Further, because it is what we measure that matters in practice (as opposed to measuring what matters), these measures could also be counter-productive to the development and valuing of good engagement. The AUCEA Benchmarking Pilot Project, which involved 14 Australian Universities, demonstrated that data were not captured in any systematic way within universities and that because there was no reporting requirement, there are no data across the sector relating to community engagement.

## **Community engagement and learning and teaching**

The first AUCEA Community Engagement position paper (2006) described engaged teaching, learning and the student experience:

“Teaching and learning are traditional core business of universities. Engaged teaching and learning speaks to community labour market needs as well as the need for students themselves to become knowledgeable and active citizens of their region, their nation and the globalised world.

Student learning as part of an engaged teaching program will ensure graduate employability and also exposes industry and the professions to leading edge developments. Work integrated learning, internships, international experiences and exposure to curricula that are informed by real world problems and solutions promises many benefits for students and for their communities. Students’ experiences of university are shaped by factors others than their study program. Many universities offer extra- or co-curricular activities that provide opportunities for students to develop personally as well as professionally. These are important and enriching activities that universities seek to sponsor within their resource constraints.”

It is noted that the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, the AUSSE survey, provides data on students’ involvement with key learning processes including active learning and work integrated learning; perceptions of institutional supports; proxy learning and development outcomes; and intrinsic involvement with study. This survey is demonstrating the connection between engaged teaching and learning and student satisfaction (AUSSE 2008).

## **Measuring Community Engagement**

Since 2005, the year of Engaging Communities for the Australian University Quality Forum, methodologies measuring and managing engagement have been developed in individual institutions and discussed at Australian fora (Scott and Jackson 2005, Garlick and Langworthy 2006, for example). Dr Antony Stella’s thematic analysis of community engagement in Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) Audit Reports (2007) revealed a growing visibility and strength in Australian universities, noting 36 exemplars in the AUQA Good Practice Database and 90 pertinent Commendations, Affirmations and Recommendations, with the commendations outweighing the recommendations. Stella also noted that tracking and measuring community engagement needed further attention.

AUCEA recognizes that measuring community engagement is not an easy task. A scan of international approaches (for example: Charles & Benneworth, 2002; Gelmon et al., 2001; Kellogg Commission, 1999; Ramaley, 2005; Ramaley, 2006) demonstrate three broad types of assessment that are undertaken by universities in assessing their community, or in some cases regional engagement. They are either a guided self-evaluation assessment with expert peer review and iterative

agreement; a metric assessment based on an agreed schedule of measures; or a combination of both. Often the focus is on the process of engagement rather than the outcomes of engagement because of the necessarily longitudinal nature of many of these outcomes. If, for example, it is hypothesised that university community engagement will produce more engaged citizens, when and how will universities and communities measure this outcome? In an age of accountability and short political timelines it is easy to be seduced by the easily measured. But are these measures an indication of what really matters and is the process enabling universities to improve and progress?

### **Community Engagement Benchmarking Framework**

The AUCEA Benchmarking Pilot Project (2006-2008) developed and tested a community engagement framework and indicators.

The framework had a dual purpose. It firstly aimed to provide universities with a basic capacity to make ongoing comparisons with other universities throughout Australia and, through this, the adoption of 'good practice' where relevant to their circumstances, while at the same time retaining institutional confidentiality and individuality. Secondly, the framework aimed to provide the core elements for each university to tailor a more comprehensive local benchmarking process that will best fit their particular mission and community context. In both situations it is expected that the quantitative and qualitative assessments undertaken by the university will be by way of mutual partnership with their communities.

The benchmarking framework comprises goals, strategies and measures that are commonly associated with high quality and effective engagement. In this regard it is concerned with the quality of partnership relationships between university and community; the responsiveness of university governance management and administrative processes; questions of university accessibility; and the way that research, teaching and learning supports staff student and community involvement.

As an outcome of the benchmarking, pilot measures have been recommended which include partner satisfaction (including partner perception of student learning, access to the university regional community and partnership benefits) and quantitative measures of community engaged research and of engaged experiential learning. An additional five institutional self-assessment measures are proposed: community engagement as a criterion in staff review tenure and progression; student awareness, involvement and rewards; community engagement budget/investment; staff reward and recognition; and community partner incentives.

## Conclusion

AUCEA has led discussion and research into measures of community engagement and has both the willingness and ability to further develop these measures with the relevant authority. Such development can build on work occurring across the sector albeit through an individual rather than co-ordinated, national approach. The Alliance acknowledges that measurement is difficult but also asserts that it is crucial to quality sector development and increased participation. The inclusion of a more appropriate measure(s) of engagement in the proposed indicator framework will not only recognise the role of university community partnership in extending the reach, quality and performance of higher education but will be a driver of improved outcomes.

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