



Australian Universities Community
Engagement Alliance

Position Paper
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Universities and Community Engagement

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Purpose

This statement seeks to advance national understanding of community engagement as a core responsibility of higher education. Engaged universities are essential for Australia's economic and social future. Beyond traditional views of universities as places where teaching and research occur, Australia's higher education sector must be recognised as a valuable intellectual resource that directly and intentionally contributes to national issues and priorities. While universities have always interacted with their communities in a range of ways, community engagement specifically encourages knowledge-driven partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes for university and community. By its very nature, engagement is influenced by the alignment of university strengths and community contexts; thus, engagement is a positive force for enhancing the diversity of Australia's higher education institutions while increasing overall research productivity and student learning outcomes. Community engagement is transforming and expanding higher education capacity around the world by directing the energy of teaching and research activities toward the critical issues and conditions that shape our future, locally and globally. Now recognised as a strategic imperative in many nations, Australia needs a national policy to support community engagement across its higher education sector.

Community Engagement Initiatives

Community engagement is a specific method for academic research and teaching that necessarily involves external communities (business, industry, schools, governments, non-governmental organisations, associations, indigenous and ethnic communities, and the general public) in collaborative activities that address community needs and opportunities while also enriching the teaching, learning and research objectives of the university. Community engagement is a form of academic endeavour where external sources of expertise and wisdom are seen as essential to advancing knowledge and understanding. Community engagement is not a separate or distinct activity within a university but is a shared enterprise between universities and their community partners that involves an exchange of knowledge and expertise that produces mutual benefit. Engaged research, teaching and learning produce knowledge outcomes and products that are valuable assets for both academia and the public interest. This expands the role of higher education from a passive producer of knowledge to an active participant in collaborative discovery activities that have diverse and immediate benefits to a variety of stakeholders.

Engaged research

For universities, engagement is a scholarly activity. Engaged research recognises the community as knowledge-rich partners; the university's research capacity becomes more accessible as a resource to address community problems or aspirations. This approach to research may result in knowledge transfer and exchange in several forms that are important to academic as well as economic and social improvement including the commercialisation of intellectual property, the establishment or improvement of businesses or non-governmental organisations, the design of new and effective interventions or public policies, or other joint venture activity between universities and community partners.

Just as importantly, engaged research promises significant social, cultural, and environmental benefits, many of which are economically quantifiable. Through engaged research activity universities can contribute to improvements in community conditions, educational attainment, health and well-being, social inclusion and social capital, cultural understanding, cultural expression, and economic growth.

These gains occur because of the approach and strategies involved in engaged research. Methodologies such as community-based research or participatory action research involve external partners and voices in shaping research questions and studies in ways that recognise community knowledge, expertise, and objectives. Through such collaborations, these well-established methods of engaged research advance academic knowledge and research performance while also enhancing community capacity and quality of life.

Typically, engaged research brings more than one discipline to bear on a problem. Therefore, engaged research activities are often transdisciplinary (using the many disciplines in the context of application), opportunity-driven and demand-driven (Gibbons et al, 1994). Engagement often leads to intra- and inter-institutional collaboration, thus enhancing the overall capacity of higher education to contribute to community, state, and national objectives.

Engaged teaching, learning and the student experience

Teaching and learning are traditional core activities of universities. Engaged teaching and learning addresses community labour market needs while also helping students to become knowledgeable and active citizens of their region, their nation and the globalised world. Research has shown that engaged teaching strategies enhance student retention, career selection, academic performance, and the development of social and civic responsibility. These positive

effects arise from student opportunities to learn outside the classroom where they experience knowledge through direct action which confers benefits such as self-esteem, confidence, communications skills, and motivation.

Student learning as part of an engaged teaching program will ensure graduate employability while also communicating leading edge knowledge to the government, business, industry, school and community-based settings that host students. Work integrated learning, internships, academic service-learning, international experiences and other forms of experiential learning provide opportunities for students to develop a sense of commitment to their career, certainly, but also a commitment to lifelong learning and the betterment of their communities. Because of the positive impacts on student learning and development, engaged teaching strategies are important and enriching activities that universities seek to provide, within the resource constraints created by current funding models driven by lecture-dominated instruction. Engaged teaching and learning depends on external partnership relationships and the greater benefits in learning are derived from a greater investment in experiential and active learning models.

Public Service and Outreach

In addition to community engaged teaching and research, as described above, universities continue to provide important services to the public as a collateral benefit of a university's presence in a community. Different from engagement which is an approach to academic research and teaching that is based on knowledge-driven partnerships between universities and their communities, public service and outreach activities are general programs that universities make available to the public usually without partnership, knowledge exchange, or expectation of mutual benefit. Examples of public service and outreach include public lecture series, media interviews and articles, cultural events and performances, exhibits or museums open to the public, or websites that provide public information on various topics.

Engagement Strengthens Communities

Communities gain a wide range of benefits through their productive interactions with universities. Engagement means that communities are not mere laboratories for universities, but they are co-creators and interpreters of knowledge through collaborative research and learning activities. In this way communities are recognised for their intellectual assets and empowered to contribute to knowledge generation that directly increases community capacity for action and problem-solving. Engagement makes the knowledge resources of universities accessible to communities in ways that can benefit social, economic, environmental and cultural capacity and conditions. This enhancement of a knowing and active citizenry can create a greater sense of corporate and community responsibility and thus, the common good. This can drive social cohesion and social change, raise overall levels of educational attainment, and generate informed debate on issues of significance to quality of life.

Australia has long benefitted from knowledge transfer and exchange that yields direct commercial benefits for private sector organisations including spin-off companies set up through external research partnerships. Engagement expands this capacity by growing new knowledge partnerships that produce direct and quantifiable economic benefits through the discovery of innovative interventions, programs, policies, and practices that improve outcomes related to health, safety, education, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, and civic engagement. Engagement can also produce benefits that have indirect, but nevertheless, measurable economic outcomes. For example, engagement that addresses social disadvantage could lead to improved societal health, less dependency on remedial education and welfare, reduced criminality and violence, and increased rates of volunteerism. Community engagement that focuses on innovation and entrepreneurship can expand economic stability and social capital. For example, engaged learning and research activities can enhance the survival rate of small businesses and increase capacity for business and social entrepreneurship in response to community needs and opportunities. Community involvement in the learning experiences of university students exposes communities to innovative ideas and strategies, builds community capacity, and raises the level of community commitment to personal learning and education. For example, wherever university students are involved in tutoring or mentoring activities with children and youth, the academic performance and educational goals of all the participating students will be improved.

Engagement Strengthens Universities

Universities benefit from effective engagement with their communities. Student learning outcomes are enhanced through learning experiences make knowledge relevant to community issues and priorities. Students learn abstract theories and concepts through application and collaboration, thus making learning more accessible to different types of learners. As Australia's demographics continue to diversify, engaged learning will encourage more students to continue further studies and increase the overall level of educational attainment in the nation.

Similarly, engagement can provide the basis for improved research productivity as external knowledge partnerships open up new research opportunities and new funding sources. Engagement broadens the concept of knowledge transfer to reveal that knowledge generation has many possible applications of value to society in addition to commercialisation.

Engagement is therefore a core activity of a university's research and teaching agenda, and should not be considered a separate undertaking. Community engagement should be a key component in a university's staff recruitment, induction, promotion, and performance review policies.

Nationally, community engagement is proving to be an effective way of increasing diversity within the higher education sector because the nature of engagement requires that each university be responsive to the contextual characteristics and issues of its communities (local, state, national, international) in keeping with its particular research strengths and student learning objectives.

Measuring Engagement

Many AUCEA member universities have developed key performance indicators to monitor the impact of engagement on students, institutional productivity, and community capacity and conditions. AUCEA is working on a framework of national and international benchmarks for community engagement. We also seek the inclusion of engagement as a part of institutional profile assessments by government and as part of the AUQA assessment regime.

Supporting Engagement

- AUCEA encourages the federal and state governments to recognise higher education institutions as strategic resources for addressing local and national priorities and issues in partnership with communities. As a new approach to traditional research and teaching activities, community engagement is involving higher education in the critical issues of Australia.
- AUCEA encourages communities to investigate possible engagement with universities to create partnerships around issues of priority to them.
- AUCEA encourages universities to define and enact engagement in a manner that is reflective of their particular mission and academic strengths to ensure responsiveness to community conditions and to enhance diversity in the university sector.
- AUCEA encourages government to enact policies that create incentives for interinstitutional collaboration on critical national priorities.
- AUCEA encourages government to continue the dialogue with universities on supporting and appropriately resourcing universities to undertake engagement activity.
- AUCEA endorses the view that funding be applied where there are identifiable gaps in the provision of resources, that such an allocation should be provided as a component of an institution's block grant based on its commitment to and performance in community engagement. AUCEA encourages an allocation to projects, also on a competitive basis; however it is critical that this competitive model not dominate the funding stream. If all or the majority of engagement funds were to be project-based then support would be too episodic to permit investment into structures that would sustain community engagement in the long-term.

AUCEA is committed to furthering the understanding, development, promotion and resourcing of effective engagement and knowledge exchange between universities and their communities.

About AUCEA

AUCEA is an alliance of Australian universities committed to university-community engagement in order to promote the social, environmental and economic and cultural development of communities. AUCEA promotes direct and mutually beneficial interaction between universities and communities that is essential for the development and application of knowledge and the shaping of our future citizens.

With the vision *'to be the leading inclusive national forum for the discussion and development of university-community engagement, encouraging collaboration, innovation, the exchange of knowledge and the scholarship of engagement'*, AUCEA has undertaken a national leadership role to:

- raise awareness and disseminate best practice in university-community engagement;
- facilitate collaborative research in university-community engagement between AUCEA members and their communities;
- promote the integration of engagement into curriculum and the student experience;
- promote the recognition of the scholarship of engagement as a valid pedagogy;
- collaboratively develop resources that support university-community engagement.

AUCEA enables Australian Universities to both share and create knowledge about community engagement. Ultimately the process which is developing trust between universities will create an effective centre for dialogue and research into university community engagement and place the scholarship of engagement on the national agenda.

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