Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance

Position Paper

Universities and Community Engagement

www.aucea.net.au

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Purpose
This statement aims to inform governments, members of the higher education community and their external partners and members of the broader community about AUCEA's position on community engagement. The statement does not seek to constrain definitions of engagement, but rather to acknowledge the full range of engagement activities pursued by Australian universities.

Engaged universities are essential for Australia's economic and social future. While universities interact with their communities in a range of ways, university-community engagement specifically implies collaborative relationships leading to productive partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes.

A university's communities can include many groups such as businesses, industries, professional associations, schools, governments, alumni, indigenous and ethnic communities as well as groups of local citizens.

Engagement Initiatives
Universities' engagement initiatives span the full range of university endeavour.

Engaged research
For universities, engagement is a scholarly activity. It involves the community as genuine partners and applies universities' research capacity to address community problems and aspirations. This approach to research may result in knowledge transfer and exchange, the commercialisation of intellectual property, the establishment of spin off companies and joint venture activity between universities and community partners.

Just as importantly, engaged research promises significant social and environmental benefits, many of which are economically quantifiable. Through engaged research activity, universities can contribute to improvements in community and educational outcomes and to economic growth.

Typically, engaged research brings more than one discipline to bear on a problem. Therefore, this often requires engaged research activities to be transdisciplinary (using the many disciplines in the context of application), opportunity-driven and demand-driven.

Engaged teaching, learning and the student experience
Teaching and learning are traditional core activities of universities. Engaged teaching and learning address 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 promise many benefits for students and for their communities. Students' experiences of university are shaped by factors other 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.

Social Responsiveness
Universities seek to respond to real need within their communities, through provision of intellectual leadership in areas of community interest and concern, offering university resources and facilities for community use and working with communities for mutually productive outcomes.

Benefits engagement brings to communities
Communities gain a wide range of benefits through their productive interactions with universities. These include enhanced human and social capital development, accelerated economic growth, improved professional and intellectual infrastructure in communities, progress towards sustainability and research outcomes that can benefit the social, economic, environmental and cultural dimensions of society. The development of a knowing and active citizenry can deliver greater corporate and community responsibility. This can drive social cohesion and social change, generate informed debate on issues of significance to communities and it can improve their quality of life.
Knowledge transfer and exchange can yield direct commercial benefits for private sector organisations including spin-off companies set up through such partnerships. Collaboration can also produce direct and quantifiable economic benefits through, for example, regional economic growth or improved economic returns from tourism. 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 and increased rates of volunteerism. Other engagement activities produce outcomes that have less obvious economic returns but nevertheless produce important environmental, social and cultural benefits. For example communities are able, through engagement, to access universities’ physical resources and their specialist intellectual capacities.

Communities can also benefit directly from engaged teaching and learning. For example, service learning involves undergraduates undertaking public good activities in the community as part of their program of study. Whilst the community clearly benefits as a result of their activity, students involved in this type of engaged learning develop important skills in project management, team work and communication.

**Benefits engagement brings to universities**

Universities also benefit from effective engagement with their communities. Their students’ learning outcomes will be enhanced through curricula that are relevant to community issues and priorities. The development of increased opportunities for student experiential learning and internships will benefit students and universities by ensuring both are alive to contemporary issues and needs. Engagement can provide the basis for improved research productivity as partnerships open up new research opportunities and new funding sources, permitting the appointment of new staff or the acquisition of infrastructure. A university’s reputation can be significantly improved through effective engagement.

Engagement is therefore a core activity of a university and should not be considered a separate undertaking. Community engagement should be a key component in a university’s staff promotion and performance review programs and feature in the annual Institutional Assessment Framework Information Collection.

Nationally, the wide range of engagement activities coupled with the variety of communities with which universities engage means that community engagement is an effective way of increasing diversity within the university sector.

**Measuring engagement**

AUCEA encourages 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.

**Supporting engagement**

- AUCEA encourages communities to investigate possible engagement with universities to address issues of priority to them.
- AUCEA encourages universities to define and enact engagement in a manner that is meaningful to their particular mission.
- 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 competitively based and 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. It is critical that this 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.

**Committee of Management**

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