

University engagement ... more than a front window

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Abstract:

Across Australian universities, the concept of university engagement currently has a number of connotations which leads to a level of misunderstanding.

A reasonable parallel can be drawn between university 'engagement' activities and those aligned with 'sustainability' and indeed sometimes their paths cross. Both are issues of increasing public interest and are of significance across the business and wider community. Currency and popularity however comes with some level of risk. Both terms are difficult to define and have a range of possible meanings that gives rise to diverse interpretations – with that is the potential for misunderstandings and sometimes misuse. Although it appears that many are 'interested and involved', that involvement is sometimes superficial and lacking in real understanding, long term strategy and tangible deliverables.

The current literature recognises how 'engagement' needs to have an integrated internal and external focus for true success. The internal focus provides an avenue for practical application of outputs and expression of teaching and learning and research outcomes that will both be meaningful to stakeholders and rewarding to the academics involved. On the other hand, the external focus allows the position of the university to be relevant to its geographic and wider sphere of influence and to develop partnerships that are resilient and productive over time.

An understanding of these concepts and the links between them must first start with the identification of what universities are about in the contemporary environment. Some of these have remained unchanged since the first universities were established in sometime between the late 11th and 12th centuries; others now exist in much more contemporary constructs. Those traditional roles still remain vital and critically important to society in the storage and advancement of knowledge, in providing thought leadership, opinion, research breakthroughs and innovation, and practical problem-solving.

In the evolution of universities, its structure and organisation have advanced to what is now close to unique. Discipline areas (such as arts, law, medicine and theology) have endured to form as pillars to Faculties. Faculties, led by a professoriate, have developed and create a dynamic and robust relationship with the university as a whole. Issues often emanate because professors, or academics for that matter, primary loyalty remains to their respective disciplines, followed by their students and lastly to the organisation as a whole.

Historically, those universities existed within a fairly stable and accepted political, social and economic environment – that is no longer the case for any organisation particularly universities. These institutions must now reposition themselves in a way that does not erode their fundamental tenet but also secure and grow their influence and market. This represents a difficult task especially for those less established organisations.

Fortunately, changing demography, student and industry demands can be informed and facilitated by advances in information, communication and technology. The formation of networks and strategic alliances can provide new opportunities for all institutions. To ensure an organisation's sustainability however one must remain relevant.

Darwin's theories were largely based on the concept that states that success comes from the ability to best adapt to changing circumstances. That principle is as germane to contemporary universities as it is to Darwin's theories.

But how is that to be achieved? How can a stoic organisation, such as university, adapt so quickly to such changing circumstances? That is the role 'engagement' initiatives within and external to the institution can provide. Most universities now recognise the critical role of engagement (in one form or another) which is overtly stated in their mission statements and strategic and operational planning.

Some universities recognise that 'engagement' must be substantially more than just a statement of intent or the recognition of one-off successes or what might be seen as 'front window' initiatives. While these are of course important, it is the long term sustainability and recognition by stakeholders that institutions must run much deeper than to maintain its relevance and 'value-add'.

Research would suggest that the form engagement takes varies greatly from university to university as no one-size fits all. A large and established university would have its identity and leading edge research that draws collaboration to it. Smaller, newer or regional universities would not have those benefits and need to work at creating their own networks to address problems and opportunities for their respective stakeholders.

In both cases university engagement relies on long term and evolving strategic partnerships – be they with government, other researchers and educators, the private sector, and/or the wider community. Without those in place and supported within the most senior levels of the university, engagement activities of universities will remain 'one-off' and reliant on one or two individuals to carry them forward. That approach will never be sustainable over time. With those strategic alliances a host of individual activities be it teaching and learning or research can be established and flourished.

With the above in place, the challenge is now to involve the university community and institutionalise 'engagement'. On the face of it this would be difficult. Staff are often committed to existing projects and workloads and the establishment of new initiatives can regularly meet resistance. The solution proposed here is one of integration.

For a truly 'engaged' organisation, engagement should never be seen as separate but rather integrated. For teaching and learning they must produce graduates that are job-ready because of their regular interface with industry. For research they must find partners and funding for the university has actually listened to the problems and opportunities facing various stakeholders and working with them in partnership to address them.

Based on this approach, this paper attempts to develop a contemporary definition of engagement and to explore how a matrix of university activities can be developed between teaching and research and engagement. This approach will embed the concept of engagement and avoid past approaches that considered engagement as an activity of lesser importance.

Key words: engagement, strategic partnership, integration