



| VIEWPOINT

WHAT ARE UNIVERSITIES GOOD FOR?

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It's hard to think of another moment when universities' performance has been so heavily scrutinised and measured, at the same time as their value is increasingly questioned.

Governments, eager to assert accountability for public funds, are collecting and publishing more data than ever. The same data is recycled by rankings agencies, which have built a global industry premised on establishing typologies of institutional greatness and ranking universities against them.

But this data does not mean much to those commentators who characterise universities as elitist, inward looking and irrelevant. Some of these criticisms may be justified, but they also reflect declining trust in public institutions across western democracies, where evidence-based arguments can run a poor second to appeals to emotion and identity (witness Brexit and the rise of populist leaders). There is genuine scepticism about the value universities deliver, and data around the amount of research we do or the number of people we educate or indeed the combined economic impact of our work simply doesn't cut through.

These challenges in our authorising environment are causing university leaders everywhere to think anew about how we create and demonstrate value. As Jeffrey Bleich, former US Ambassador to Australia, said in a speech to Universities Australia in 2017, universities themselves have an important role to play in addressing the complex problems and rising societal inequality that is eroding trust in our institutions.¹ We can do this through engaging with the concerns of communities and individuals, and collaborating to tackle the challenges, global and local, that are changing the nature of work and fuelling insecurity. However, the concept of engagement (or service, as it is described at King's College London) is open to many definitions, and outputs are difficult to measure. Consequently, the value of engagement is not always recognised inside our own institutions as mission critical.

This issue was much discussed at the Global University Engagement Summit, held in Melbourne Australia in 2017. Afterwards, three universities – King's College London, University of Chicago and University of Melbourne – came together to ask the question: could we support change within the university sector and start to tell a new story about university value if measures of engagement were included in global rankings?

Rankings are a double-edged sword. They are critiqued for methodological flaws and volatility, yet they are indisputably influential in shaping reputation and institutional behaviours. Reading the zeitgeist, some rankings agencies have already started to develop measures based on possible measures of engagement

impact (for example, the THES rankings of universities based on assessing their contribution to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals). So it seemed timely to develop a simple set of measures that were university led and tested, and focused on outcomes rather than process.

We started with an agreed definition of



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engagement as *“a holistic approach to working collaboratively with partners and communities, to create mutually-beneficial outcomes for each other and the benefit of society.”* The concept of mutual benefit is particularly important in our conceptualisation of engagement: it is not enough for collaboration to enrich teaching and research, or for universities to deliver outcomes that they think will benefit others. Genuine engagement rests on listening as well as speaking, learning from each other, and understanding where our complementary expertise and common ground lies.

Working on the premise that we should measure what we value, we discussed the positive change we would like to see from an increased focus on engagement measures. These include stronger leadership and investment in university engagement, valuing of each others' contribution by universities and communities, better communication and impact of research, curriculum enriched by engagement, and reward and recognition of staff and students.

Working with a number of partner universities, we have developed a relatively short suite of measures which hopefully could have relevance across the globe. The measures selected are clearly a proxy for the sort of activities that we are looking to recognise and incentivise through their measurement, but cover a broad remit – ranging from research impact to green energy, from curriculum content to procurement practices. The indicators are currently being piloted and the results will be published in the autumn.

The underpinning assumption is that publicly reporting engagement performance will drive these behaviour changes, and contribute to a better understanding of the work universities do with their communities and partners. The work is in itself seeding valuable conversations between universities, all of whom are thinking about these issues in different contexts and applying different approaches.

¹ Jeffrey Bleich, Keynote Address, Universities Australia Conference March 2017, accessed <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/higher-education-conference-keynote-address-ambassador-ret-jeff-bleich/>

We recognise that not everything that can be measured has value, and that not everything that is valuable can be measured. We know too that not everyone will agree with our pragmatic approach to engaging with global league tables. But while quantitative measures frame discussion of universities' value and resourcing decisions, it is important that we engage with them, and question not only what we are measuring but why.

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