

Australian universities can now be accredited for community service

VERITY FIRTH

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For the first time Australian universities have the opportunity to earn accreditation for commitment to public service for the community.

On Friday July 8, applications for the Carnegie Community Engagement Elective Classification open for universities in Australia. For the first time, Australian universities will get the opportunity to earn accreditation for their extraordinary commitments to public purpose in service to their communities, outside of what is captured in academic rankings.

Unlike other countries, the establishment of a process to support and encourage universities to collaborate with communities does not come from government, but from the universities themselves.

Universities in Australia have long played a role as ‘anchor institutions’ in their communities. This is particularly so for universities in rural and regional areas,

where the university is often a big part of the local economy, as large-scale employers and as creators and consumers of local products and services.

But the concept applies to urban universities as well. Universities such as Western Sydney University were established primarily as local universities, embedded in their community, delivering educational access and knowledge exchange to the region they serve.

Even universities as urban as UTS, where I work, have a strong commitment to place and the local inner-city communities that sit on our doorstep. As government and private sector investment pours in to the new Tech Central precinct surrounding Sydney's Central Station, UTS sees its role as an anchor institution dedicated to creating a tech precinct that is both socially and economically inclusive. This means investment in access pathways for students from all backgrounds, and ensuring that the prosperity created by the new precinct is shared with local communities, through mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships.

The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, which has its origins in the US, is considered the 'gold standard' for the assessment and recognition of community engagement in higher education. It is used extensively in the US, where over 500 American higher education institutions are accredited under the scheme.



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In 2018, eighteen Australian universities participated in a pilot process to test the Carnegie model. Those of us leading the pilot were driven by a frustration at the narrow definition of university engagement employed by successive Australian governments. Whereas other countries, such as the UK, have historically had third stream funding programs to “reward institutions that successfully disseminate the results of their research and scholarship in partnership with communities,” Australian governments have tended to narrowly define university engagement as predominantly engagement with industry. The consequence is that there has been little understanding of the true

breadth and depth of Australian universities' community engaged activities and the public benefit this engagement brings.

Across Australia universities and communities are partnering to achieve real and long-lasting social benefit and change. The Logan campus of Griffith University in Queensland hosts Logan Together, a long term, whole-of-community, collective impact project that focuses on early childhood development in Logan. Collaborating with both state and federal governments, there are over 100 organisations and over 1,000 people currently active in the Logan Together movement.

The University of South Australia has established the Pain Revolution Program to address the significant social inequity regional and rural communities experience in accessing the best treatments for the management of persistent and chronic pain. The Pain Revolution Program is a large collaboration of researchers, clinicians, people with lived experience, peak bodies and industry partners.

The Contemporary Indigenous Knowledge and Governance Team at Charles Darwin University as part of their 'GroundUp' research approach, work in urban and remote Aboriginal communities with government and non-government organisations to develop research and service delivery approaches suitable to diverse participants.

The common thread weaving through all these examples is that of partnership. Mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships between universities, communities and public and private sector organisations to address critical societal issues and contribute to the public good. These partnerships go to the heart of what it means to be a university committed to public benefit and social impact.

The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification provides the Australian higher education system with a framework to capture these stories of best practice so that the sector can share insights and learn from each other. The accreditation process allows participating universities to examine their own institutional commitment to community engaged research, teaching and learning, and pinpoint where they need to improve.

Most importantly the Australian adoption of the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification offers a national, data-driven overview of the public benefit of the higher education sector in relation to community engagement.

The launch could not have come at a better time. In opposition, the Labor Party announced it will pursue an Australian Universities Accord to “deliver accessibility, affordability, quality, certainty, sustainability and prosperity to the higher education sector and the country.”

The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification is perfectly placed to help inform the making of this Accord, providing evidence as to the true public purpose value of universities in our country, and encouraging the Albanese Labor Government to support universities in realising their public purpose.

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