

## Evaluating and Demonstrating Impact in Engagement – why does it matter?

Evaluating and demonstrating impact is important, and not just because increasingly it is an expectation and requirement of Government funding to Universities.

Evaluation reflects a commitment to delivery: rigorous evaluation of outcomes against goals ensures that progress and achievements are understood and lessons learnt. It is not enough to aspire to making a difference, we must be clear eyed and critical about the extent to which we are delivering on those aspirations.

*Demonstrating* a rigorous approach to evaluation is equally important, particularly in relation to work which is conducted in partnership with community, Government or industry. Involving partners in evaluation and sharing the results is a way of building trust and two-way learning, and ensuring that evaluation is relevant to those who have a stake in the outcomes.

Broader publication of the results of evaluation – even when it raises issues that are at odds with the public story a university may wish to tell – demonstrates trust in transparency. Acting on the outcomes of that evaluation also speaks to accountability.

All of this may seem self-evident, but the critical importance of transparency and accountability right now lies in the social contract between universities and the broader Australian community, which is under pressure. In a recent paper examining the future of Australian higher education in the immediate wake of Covid-19, Professor Ian Anderson and former senior bureaucrat Robert Griew noted that many of the leaders they spoke to commented on how easy it was for the former Government to dismiss universities without political cost, and how disrespectful comments about universities as ‘fat’ or ‘lazy’ continue to reverberate.<sup>1</sup> This is despite the clear evidence that universities contributed significantly to Australia’s management and recovery from the Covid19 pandemic and, moreover, did not receive the Federal Government support provided to other industries.

To what might we attribute such dissonance? The authors conclude that these attitudes are, ‘to an extent, a symptom of the underlying isolations of universities, not just from government but also from business and civil society, indeed from Australian communities.’ While we might contest the proposition, it is hard to disagree with the authors’ statement that the ‘high ground’ of disdain for such commentary is a lonely place’, or with their suggestion that the answers must lie in engaging with the issues and building trust with our stakeholders’<sup>2</sup> Evaluating and communicating the impact of our work, and ensuring we engage stakeholders in that process, is clearly part of that engagement. So, too, is building trust through transparency and demonstrating accountability.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Anderson and Robert Griew: *The Future of the University Sector post Covid 19* April 2022, pp. 5-8

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p. 8.

None of this is lost on global rankings agencies, which have their ears to the ground on what aspects of universities' work could and should be publicly evaluated. The THES impact rankings, with a methodology based on assessing universities' contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, has gathered considerable currency since it was introduced in 2017. In the last week of October 2022, QS published its answer to this ranking, the Sustainability 2023 Index, which uses publicly available data to assess universities' environmental and social impact. Unlike the THES rankings, universities get ranked whether they choose to or not. And as competition between rankings agency is, if anything, intensifying, we are likely to see more potential measures of global engagement emerging in the near future.<sup>3</sup>

So Australian universities face some choices. Do they throw their lot in with global rankings, despite contentious methodologies which can change quickly and in ways that are not completely transparent? Do they opt for more localised instruments, such as the Carnegie Classification of Engaged Universities Australia or the ARC Impact Measures, all of which can also be translated for a global audience? Or do they develop their own institutional framework for assessing impact, relevant to mission and focus?

None of these options are mutually exclusive of course, and these questions are secondary to the ones that really matter. These include the relationship of evaluation to institutional mission and focus – the 'what are we good for?' question, and its relevance to what we are measuring. We should also ask ourselves how the work we do in evaluating and reporting performance will drive actions. Is it meaningful data which will support us in strengthening our relevance and impact, or is it simply PR? And how do we avoid the constricting effect of a narrow reliance on quantitative measures while ensuring we remain evidence-based in our approach to evaluation?

What we measure, matters. Running through all these questions is a growing consensus that university engagement needs to be evaluated meaningfully, and the results of that evaluation effectively communicated, if it is to have standing within our organisations and for our stakeholders and partners. And whatever approach we adopt will need to be flexible enough to reflect the vision and perspective of those stakeholders, as well as the changing challenges in our external environment. As such, it will play a critical role in future success.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, World University News is partnering with Globethics to invite universities' participation in a new ranking measuring the impact of ethical university management on issues such as environmental sustainability and diversity and inclusion. (Email from World University News, June 2022).