

Towards the Engaged University Accord

This month Engagement Australia will host its international conference themed *The Engaged University Accord*. With the promised Universities Accord on the horizon, the Australian Higher Education sector has the opportunity to build a new future based on the foundations of shared purpose and understanding with government, industry and the Australian public. What is the reimagined central role of engagement with business, government and communities in the lead up to, and implementation of the Universities Accord; and how do we seize this opportunity to ensure that the new University Accord that will be designed for public purpose marks a sustainable turning point for our cherished sector?

Any sustainable turning point is likely to emerge from the ashes of the past. A decade of fractured relationships between community, universities and government will require more than just a valid attempt to prop up an old and tired funding model. Rather, a new engaged university accord is envisaged that offers the opportunity to rebuild shared understandings of how to manage the pressures that have built up over the last ten years, and how to negotiate a transition to a different higher education sector over the next decade.

The Australian Federal Education Minister The Honourable Jason Clare has shared his ambitions for such an Accord, stating

“I want the outcome of this Accord to define Australian higher education as one of the most accessible, equitable, integrated, quality systems in the world,”

(Australian Federal Education Minister, the Honourable Jason Clare, addressing University Chancellors Council, 13th October 2022).

Clearly, access, equity and social justice will be central to the new identity of Australian Higher Education over the next decade and beyond. Whilst the Dawkins reforms of the early 1990s democratised the higher education sector and increased the number of graduates from 20 per cent then to 50 per cent of school leavers now, the new Accord offers the prospect for Australia to join other Western democracies and move towards universal access to higher education (more than 50% participation) with a clear focus on public purpose.

The challenges of reconstructing such a future for Australian universities in the 21st century, the problematic nature of community engagement, developing local regional and city-wide provision simultaneously, achieving social justice through educational interventions and the role played by cultural knowledge for individuals are all issues currently under consideration, with no obvious consensus emerging. The ‘anchor’ function of the engaged university with its emphasis on multi-tasking and operating in many ‘markets’ can be contrasted with the primary role of the university as a public educator. The fact that we are living in the digital world cannot be ignored; neither can the cognitive concerns of learning skills in an age of information and surveillance capitalism which offers great challenges to the core values of liberal western democracy.

The value position which is emerging is transparent: in the developing 21st century we need universities which exist for a social purpose, where learning can transform lives in a world of uncertainty and instability. Our current education system requires a university curriculum where programs of study, methods of learning and teaching, critical thinking and analysis, methods of assessment and frameworks of dialogue and critique are designed for specific sets of social purposes to meet the challenge of change which modernity inevitably brings. This challenge is ever more urgent and contested as we consider how we might push back against what many commentators have called the ‘gathering tides of global turbulence’ - not just the pandemic, but globalization, climate change and accelerations in technology that are re-shaping and replacing the workplace, geopolitics, democracies around the world, and our communities everywhere.

Chris Brinks in his recent book ‘The Soul of a University: why excellence is not enough’ has posed the question “What is a University Good For?”. It is quite different from the question “What is a University Good at?” For example a University might be excellent at research however that is quite different from being good for communities, good for social solidarity, good for democracy and good for social justice and fairness.

The framework (below) represents an attempt to focus upon the question of what the university is ‘good for’ exploring how a new engaged university accord could contribute to social and economic welfare. Such a framework could address such services as health care, carbon clearance, food production and distribution, urban farming and social housing projects and places where there is a mosaic of incomes which vary according to location, housing type and community orientation. This approach assumes that a university and its communities could support projects at volume which could benefit the engaged stakeholders.

A possible engaged university accord framework for being good for something, might look something like this:

An Engaged University Accord framework for being good for something
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge must have a social purpose. It must also focus on critical social teaching and those who are yet to speak
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The community of learners and the places they inhabit are major strengths for the curriculum. Universities are foundational to local and regional economies; they can invest and directly support a zone of the economy focussed on productive enterprises and social capital
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A critical literacy is surely needed for those facing a precarious economic future. A truly democratic participation would be 95%; the 50% rate currently is pathetic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no dispensing with the disciplines, but creativity is a key to progressive education. Where is the critical curriculum which investigates our social lives? When

<p>does creative art, music and literature interact with science to define and expand our future possibilities?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The borders we have erected around faith, ethnicity, race, social class and culture must be recognised and crossed. How can we be vigilant for tolerance whilst expressing a distinctive vision through education?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ecological precariousness of our planet must now be the object of our critical awareness. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could/should be central to all HE curriculum planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ecological crisis is accompanied by a crisis of digital life which is accelerating at exponential speeds. Our lives in the public spaces of the internet are commodities. Information explodes into availability and all emotional and social life can be commercially exploited through an addictive technology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A curriculum has always to be chosen, it cannot evolve spontaneously: whose curriculum is chosen and in whose interests is it selected?

The Honourable Verity Firth has written about the importance for Australian universities engaging with the 'wicked issues' facing our society. The current generation of graduates face a future of precarious work, low public investment in social services, a devalued and privatised degree factory system which forces huge debts on many, a housing market out of the reach of many ordinary people and the persistence of poverty and social exclusion on a truly disturbing scale.

Add to this list climate change, world poverty and degradation, war, social dislocation on an unimaginable scale and environmental destruction are the great evils of the time. They are the existential issues which will make or break our way of life and they impact the whole globe and all who live on it. Our handling of these things will determine the future of our planet and species. Every individual has a stake in this matter and it transcends the burning issues of the day such as inequality, race, ethnicity, faith and injustice. Whilst we cannot and should not invite people to consider deep suffering and deprivation as a learning opportunity, these serious issues should be at the very heart of our learning and be the basis of a critical literacy relevant to all learners. These matters are surely relevant to the question of – what are universities good for? And how can an engaged university accord reimagine the role of universities with the idea of public purpose at its heart.

The question is how can the engaged university accord respond to the need for learning and education which addresses these issues? How can we affirm the rooted settlements where people live, work and have placeable identities as a living part of a multi-faceted yet anchored university? How can university knowledge become infused with other forms of knowing, including indigenous knowledge? The cultural and social role of the university will need to change if the social determinants of university life are to be translated into the lived contingencies of people's experience. Universities are in the knowledge business but they are also in the identity business, and though no easy resolution of who belongs to what is

possible they must surely engage with the problem of living with and acknowledging difference.

More participation and a negotiated curriculum with our students and stakeholders as partners and co-creators of knowledge and curricular that focus on the key issues of our time would provide us and them with better tools to fashion our future. It would perhaps help learners to develop a critical commentary on public life and reality because the systems of mass communication we have currently leave many of them immobilised, unable to understand the causes of their confusion and alienation and unable to act on them. For young people in particular this is important since they are the future and they have the most to gain or lose.

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References

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