
Article

Engagement Australia Position Stand on Community-Engaged Universities: Enhancing Civic Impact through Engaged Partnerships

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There is little doubt that Australia is currently undergoing substantial social and economic change, an 'in-between time' (Saul, 2018) of considerable disruption. New ways and means of working, issues of environmental, economic, and social sustainability along with rapidly advancing technological

change exact evolving and dynamic challenges and opportunities for our Nation. These challenges and opportunities extend to the higher education sector, a sector whose teaching, research, and outreach can serve as a key 'engine room' of societal progress (Dewar, 2022).

The need for sector-wide reform has been recognised by the Australian government with the development of a Universities Accord, as well as formal reviews into the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and Research Engagement and Impact (REI) Assessments. It has become clear that a re-focusing and re-calibration of the structure, purpose, and priorities of the sector are needed, to best meet Australia's present and future challenges. The Universities Accord is courageously re-imagining universities for the future over the next 30 years and recognises the need to elicit civic impact beyond the production of graduates and research (Australian Government, 2023;

Nyland, 2023). Engagement Australia applauds the explorations of the Accord given our mission to,

“Champion the unique role universities have within society to address contemporary domestic and global challenges through teaching, learning, research and partnerships with community, industry, and government”
– Engagement Australia Website

As Engagement Australia (EA) reflects on the 20 years since our establishment and looks towards the future, we offer this position stand on what we consider is key to advancing impactful community-engaged partnerships in the Australian higher education sector.

This position stand is informed by the cumulative knowledge and experiences that have been shared within EA events and publications over its 20-year journey. Additionally, it is grounded in the deep learnings and theoretical underpinnings of the Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification system (Firth & Gusheh, 2022). Long the benchmark standard of community-engaged US institutions, the ‘Australian’ version of the Classification now supports the development of community engagement in the sector, with the first official round of classifications occurring in 2023.

We see our role in the sector as informing and leading best practice

in engagement and the role of this position statement is to galvanise our commitment to best practice leadership for the sector. We anticipate further position stands will be cyclical and at times topical, however, in the interim, this initial position stand will serve the foundation of our ongoing support of the sector.

Defining University-Community Engagement in an Australian Context

The Australian university sector has a rich history of engagement with community, industry, the not-for-profit sector, and government that extends over many decades. Our 40+ Universities work in every State and Territory, often across borders (domestic and international) and touch upon most if not all communities and industries. The connection of universities to the communities they serve varies by context, though extends well beyond the provision of education.

The ‘definition’ and ‘purpose’ of university engagement in Australia has evolved considerably over the last 30 years. In the 1990s, the primary engagement role of Australian universities related to the commercialisation of academic intellectual property, the use of university skills and assets to solve industry problems, and the central role





of universities in providing a talent stream to key Australian sectors: the doctors and lawyers, engineers, public servants, humanities graduates, and creative artists required for growth and development of our society and economy. Community engagement was barely articulated as a role for universities and was poorly defined.

community figures; undertook research projects drawing upon the skills of its Members; prepared submissions to Government enquiries; and ran the BHERT Engagement Awards for 22 years. For most of its life BHERT was one of the pre-eminent voices in the development of university engagement best practise in Australia.

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“Our purpose is to champion the unique role universities have within society to address contemporary domestic and global challenges through teaching, learning, research and partnerships with community, industry, and government”

Engagement Australia Website

Like a number of other countries (e.g., UK, Canada, South Africa), the formalisation of Australian University engagement began with industry and in our context the establishment of Business-Higher Education ‘roundtables’ (BHERT) in the early 1990s. Established as a private sector association in 1990, through its 30-year history, (1990-2019) BHERT conducted roundtables with Government Ministers, industry CEOs, Vice-Chancellors, and leading

in the 2000s engagement capabilities in both Australian universities and in industry were maturing and a broader definition of engagement that extended beyond industry partnership was gaining momentum. The concept of a ‘civic University’ gained currency: a university that is an integral part of a specific community (town, city, or region). The term ‘community engagement’ with a meaning that was broader than industry engagement began to be more readily

discussed and in 2003 the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) was established by Western Sydney University's then Vice Chancellor, Professor Jan Reid, and with unanimous support from the Association of Vice Chancellor's Committee (AVCC), AUCEA was formed and quickly became recognised as the peak body for engaged universities in Australia. In 2011, a name change to Engagement Australia (EA) represented a willingness to consider a broader conceptualisation of engagement (beyond traditional notions of community that did not include government and industry). Engagement Australia continued to grow as a university-supported peak body providing a much-needed mechanism through which to showcase and develop a breadth of engagement practice and civic engagement. In recognition of this evolving maturity and the considerable mission overlap between BHERT and EA, the Board of BHERT agreed to close BHERT, and to pass its advocacy role – and its long-running Awards mechanism – to Engagement Australia.

As a model, Engagement Australia was better suited to support the breadth of university engagement in Australia, with an annual conference, a journal (Transform), commitment to professional development and a developing relationship with the international Carnegie network. The

growth of Engagement Australia over the last 5 years has vindicated its role as the leading voice on engagement in Australia.

Reflecting on the range, the reach and the depth of EA's capability building with universities to improve their institution's engaged research and teaching practice over the last twenty years, it is striking just how far we have come in defining and shaping a concept of engagement. Yet, in the early years it is fair to say it was a struggle for the university sector to arrive at a commonly accepted definition of 'engagement' - or for that matter 'community' - given the differences in mission.

As we navigated the challenge of finding a common definition, and the diversity in university engagement across the sector, the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification gained strength in the USA. Since its inception in 2006, it has been the leading framework for institutional assessment and recognition of community engagement in US higher education. The framework allows universities to demonstrate their commitment to the communities they serve, supports the sharing of good practice, and encourages continuous improvement through periodic re-classification.

At the heart of the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification is the definition of Community Engagement. Importantly the Carnegie Foundation provides a clear yet comprehensive definition of community engagement (Australian definition provided):

"The collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial creation and exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership (of knowledge and resources) between higher education institutions and the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good." (Engagement Australia, 2022)

For the Australian sector, an important addition with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples was made:

"All Australian higher education institutions are committed to the advancement and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait



Islander peoples and reconciliation of First Nation peoples with the wider Australian community. This commitment is foundational to Community Engagement in the Australian context.” (Engagement Australia, 2022)

Engagement Australia has adopted the Carnegie definition of community engagement to guide our support of the sector and to provide a clear single definition to guide our work. Our position is that this definition should be adopted by Australian higher education institutions to support a unified and inclusive understanding of community engagement, one that drives best practice and standards that compare with higher education internationally. This provides a consistency in definition long needed by the sector.

Position 1: Engagement Australia recommends sector-wide adoption of the Carnegie definition of community engagement

The Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification

A total of 361 institutions in the US are currently classified as Carnegie Community Engaged Campuses, with classification regarded as a mark of distinction and best practice. The

American Council of Education (ACE) acts as the administrative and research host institution for the classification. In 2016, the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification began its process of internationalisation with pilot programs in Ireland and Canada.

In the period from 2018 to 2020, ten Australian universities collaborated to pilot the US-based Carnegie Community Engagement Classification for its appropriateness in Australia. This included, in partnership with the Carnegie foundation, contextualising the classification to Australian practice through adapting, piloting, and refining the application form and associated concepts. The ten pilot universities were supported by a further seven ‘observer’ universities who provided feedback on the process and outcomes of the pilot. Key aspects of the ‘Australianisation’ of Carnegie included adjusting nomenclature in the application form to match the Australian context, making explicit the need for institutional commitment to the advancement and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and providing greater focus on community engaged research as a key goal of an engaged university. Subsequently, the Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification was launched in 2022 with the first round of classifications given in 2023.

The Australian Carnegie Classification is led and administered by the Network for Community Engagement and Carnegie Classification Australia under the auspices of Engagement Australia and is supported by a thriving community of practice. The community of practice supports capacity building for impactful university-community partnerships and also for universities seeking to institutionalise community engagement, enhance their evaluation of community-engaged practices, and seek Carnegie classification.

Participating universities benefit greatly from the institutional self-study of their commitment to community engagement and the detailed feedback received by Carnegie (Firth & Gusheh, 2022). The Carnegie definition has been shaped by decades of research into deep, reciprocal, and impactful community engagement and sets the foundation for high standards with respect to the processes, outcomes and impacts of university-community engagement. The classification brings a level of rigour in assessment not previously seen in the sector.

Through the process of developing their application, institutions will consider the breadth and depth of their current practice as well as the strategies, tools, resourcing, and metrics that enable them to design, deliver and monitor

their impact. Community engagement transforms the way an institution enacts its core missions of knowledge creation and dissemination by requiring institutions to rethink how research and teaching and learning can happen with community collaborators. As such, Carnegie encourages a shift from knowledge sharing and knowledge exchange to knowledge co-creation with community (Johnson & Saltmarsh, 2020). Through such co-creation via reciprocal partnerships, university can transform their academic practices and culture and achieve mutually beneficial educational, social, and civic outcomes *with* community (Johnson & Saltmarsh, 2020).

Carnegie's institutional self-study, reflection, and continual improvement cycle accompanied with strong philosophical and structural underpinnings supported by the extant literature on community engagement support the rigour and growth-mindset needed for Australian institutions to advance their community engagement. Further still, the focus on system-wide evaluation of outcomes and impacts for university and community highlight the importance of achieving mutually beneficial and broader social impact (such evaluation is likely to be a topic of a future position stand). This is to optimise the societal benefit and demonstrate the broader impact

implicated by the the Higher Education Standards Framework and the Universities Accord.

Position 2: Engagement Australia recommends Australian institutions engage with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification as a means to support continual reflection on and improvement in engaged practices that enhance civic outcomes.

Engaged Partnerships

Throughout history universities have been vehicles of social and technological innovation and change, though despite their role developing new understandings and perspectives, their scope was often shaped more through government priority and market demand than by a desire to support the communities they served. For many years universities were the system responsible for educating the country's future professionals, where approaches to research and learning were internal activities that occasionally engaged outside the boundaries of academia, and where social responsibility extended to changing public discourse.

In this respect, the inclusion of social responsibility in the mission of a university is not new. However, its more recent emergence as a third pillar in the mission of universities was spurred by

the inclusion of "strong civic leadership, engagement with local and regional communities, and a commitment to social responsibility" within the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF, Criterion 13; Australian Government, 2021). Since the late 90s we have witnessed the emergence of entrepreneurship programs and stronger connection with industry on research. More recently, despite the myriad of uncertainties and risks that surround us, there is a growing recognition of our role in community and commitment to public good

The Australian Universities Accord Interim report identified the need for civic institutions that have an unconditional commitment to social responsibility. We see significant examples of this type of activity across the sector. Institutions like Southern Cross University who opened their campus to shelter residents in the Northern New South Wales floods, Griffith University who provides dental care in remote Western Queensland, the University of Melbourne who supported vaccine development during the pandemic and the University of South Australia who is working to reduce youth homelessness. The challenges and opportunities of the present moment demand active involvement of universities in community.





However, not all engagement is created equal. The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification challenges our institutions to think beyond superficial, one-way engagement to consider the intentional design of activities that are undertaken with community members in reciprocal partnership. At its heart, best practice engagement builds the capacity of all individuals, groups, and organisations involved, to understand and collaboratively address issues of public concern and pursue public good.

Under the framework, community engagement is only possible when relationships are grounded in the qualities of reciprocity, mutual respect, shared authority, and co-creation of goals and outcomes (Johnson and Saltmarsh, 2020). Such relationships are by their very nature trans-disciplinary (knowledge transcending the disciplines and the higher education institution), asset-based (where the strengths, skills, and knowledges of those in the community are validated and legitimised) and transformational (Engagement Australia, 2022).

Reciprocal partnerships, as defined by Carnegie are characterised by collaborative community and higher education institutions definitions of:

1. problems, opportunities, and goals;
2. strategies and solutions; and
3. measures of success.

In this way, community engagement requires the recognition, respect, and valuing of the knowledge, perspectives, and resources of community partners (Johnson and Saltmarsh, 2020). This kind of deep partnership takes time, trust, a commitment to following through and an investment in people and initiatives. Importantly this work requires an intentional strategy and clear understanding of an organisation's core values and mission. So much of the engagement activity at Australian universities goes unseen and unrecognised by the wider university. Relationships are often managed at an individual level and as a result, are fragile and at risk if a staff member leaves. A focus on reciprocity, encourages the conversation about mutual benefit and intentional design with community, with clear outcomes in mind. While many partnerships span multiple years and emerge significantly over time, a commitment to reciprocity ensures that the partnership, outcomes, initiatives, and approaches evolve with the partnership.

Engagement Australia champions the importance of reciprocal partnerships in civic engagement. It platforms the best practice of partnerships with community, industry and government and argues for a higher education ecosystem that enables and values community engagement through

institutional accountability. This work is important in a world that is characterised as being in a state of metamorphosis (Beck, 2016). The state of disruption that we are witnessing sees old certainties falling away, with something quite new taking its place. Collectively, we are re-evaluating societal priorities and values. The broader societal role of the university, one that goes beyond the traditional academic functions is needed now more than ever. As such, Engagement Australia recommends Australian universities enhance their broader social role through the development of reciprocal partnerships with community.

Position 3: Engagement Australia recommends that Australian institutions pursue engaged partnerships with community that are reciprocal and mutually beneficial as defined by the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. University-community engagement partnerships should be characterised by collaborative definitions of:

1. **Problems, opportunities, and goals**
2. **Strategies and solutions; and**
3. **Measures of success**

This requires recognition, respect, and value of the knowledge, perspectives, and resources of community partners



as collaborators (Engagement Australia, 2022, p.4). As such these partnerships are typified by “co-creation of knowledge, learning, goals, and outcomes” (Johnson & Saltmarsh, 2022, p.112) between partners, as opposed to one-way knowledge transfer from university to community.

Furthering institutionalisation

The requirement for universities to demonstrate ‘strong civic leadership, engagement with local and regional communities, and a commitment to social responsibility’ (HESF, Criterion 13; Australian Government, 2021) has driven a maturing of engagement practice, however unlike the learning and teaching, research and governance standards, there have been no accountability mechanisms in place to track the performance of universities in meeting this statutory requirement. This has resulted in a lack of enabling mechanisms to carry out and report against this work.

Engagement Australia argues that the best way to measure an institution’s commitment to, and meeting of, Criterion 13 is through the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. The classification broadly considers how “Institutionalised” (Furco, 2010, p. 388) community engagement is within a

higher education institution. That is, how intertwined community engagement is with institutional identity and culture, commitments, priorities, practices, and evaluation mechanisms (Driscoll, 2009; Hutson et al, 2019).

Specifically, institutionalisation means that community engagement is*,

- » Clearly defined by the institution
- » Explicitly and genuinely a part of the institution’s identity and culture
- » Prioritised in the strategic planning of the institution
- » Infused into the teaching, research, and outreach activities of the institution
- » Supported by workload, incentive, and reward structures
- » Appropriately resourced by the institution
- » Evidenced by the depth and breadth of reciprocal partnerships with community leading to mutually beneficial outcomes and impact
- » Supported by system-wide evaluation practices that both substantiate mutually beneficial outcomes and impact and influence the nature of ongoing partnerships

* For a more detailed understanding of indices of institutionalisation, review

the full Carnegie application form on the Engagement Australia website (Engagement Australia, 2022)

As discussed by Hutson et al., (2019, p.6), sustained institutionalisation of community engagement “is the successful and full integration of community engagement into the structural framework of the institution as evidenced by full campus and community support, understanding, implementation, and leadership”. Through such institutionalisation, community engagement can become a key means of Australian universities partnering for the civic outcomes implicated in the HESF. It is Engagement Australia’s position that the institutionalisation of community engagement should be a focus of Australian universities seeking to enhance their core functions and civic outcomes in support the social good.

Position statement 4: Engagement Australia supports pursuing the institutionalisation of community engagement in Australian universities as the most effective and enduring means to enable best-practice and mutually impactful university-community engagement at scale.

Knowledge sharing and networking

There is a wealth of outstanding community engagement practice embedded across Australian higher education. The challenge for our sector has always been one of dissemination. Barriers such as distance, competitive advantage, staff workload and the perception of leadership's willingness to share institutional information are real and take intentional effort to overcome. With the dissolution of the Office of Learning and Teaching and removal of the Australian Grants and Fellowship programs that prioritised dissemination, we are often left to conference presentations, papers or higher education media or awards programs to highlight the good practice happening across our sector.

Engagement by nature is a team sport, yet so many engagement professionals work in pockets of isolation and struggle to get reach across their organisations. Indeed, it is common to find outstanding practice taking place in areas you were not aware of until an article is published, or it hits social media. For Australian higher education to truly impact the communities we serve and contribute to lasting social good, we must make space and time to bring staff together, showcase

practice and importantly intentionally train for best practice approaches. Deep reciprocity requires practices that address power imbalances and enable knowledge exchange particularly when working in diverse, cross-cultural settings marked by disadvantage (Cyril et al., 2015). Importantly, this opportunity for connection must extend beyond those identified as engagement professionals to build capability broad and deep within the institution.

Finally, we need to value and reward cross institutional partnerships. There are some outstanding examples of this across the country including the VIC Indigenous Engineering Winter School (VIEWS) Program in Victoria that is raising the aspiration of Indigenous high school student for STEM and 'Imagined Futures', an equity focused consortium led by UNSW, UTS and Macquarie University that delivers a literacy focused program for years 7-9 students in partner high schools.

The Carnegie Network Community of Practice has provided a much-needed vehicle to share good practice and support staff across our institutions to connect and share lessons learnt. With regular professional development sessions and communications that are sent to more than 1500 subscribers, the Network supports institutions to explore, develop and expand their

practice. So far, in 2023 over 900 people from the COP have registered for one or more Carnegie related event. In an increasingly resource constrained sector, we no longer have the luxury of reinventing the wheel. Collaboration is now the key to success and something that we need to drive as a sector between our institutions and across our partnership networks. It is Engagement Australia's position that engagement in communities of practice and knowledge sharing between institutions is critical for enhancing engagement practices and civic impact.

Position 5: Engagement Australia recommends that in the pursuit of best-practice community engagement, Australian universities engage in communities of practice and knowledge sharing between institutions. Beyond competition, knowledge sharing and networking can enhance practices and the cumulative civic impact of the sector.

Conclusion

As the sector embarks on significant reform via the Universities Accord there is a profound opportunity for Australian universities to enhance their teaching, research, and civic impact through engaged partnerships that are reciprocal and transformational. As put forward in this position



stand, the Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification provides appropriate theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, in addition to a classification process that enables institutions to reflect upon and seek to advance their community engagement. Such advancement is achieved through the institutionalisation of community engagement into the mission, culture, and practices of our universities. This institutionalisation should be supported by thriving cross-institutional communities of practice and knowledge sharing. It is hoped that this position stand is useful in supporting the understanding of EA's purpose in addition to our views on university-community engagement in the Australian higher education sector. This position stand sets the foundation for future positions on specific concepts related to best-practice community engagement. Figure 1 provides the summary of positions for ease of reference.

Summary of Positions

1

Position 1

Engagement Australia recommends sector-wide adoption of the Carnegie definition of community engagement

2

Position 2

Engagement Australia recommends Australian institutions engage with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification as a means to support continual reflection on and improvement in engaged practices that enhance civic outcomes.

3

Position 3

Engagement Australia recommends that Australian institutions pursue engaged partnerships with community that are reciprocal and mutually beneficial as defined by the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. University-community engagement partnerships should be characterised by collaborative definitions of:

1. Problems, opportunities, and goals
2. Strategies and Solutions; and
3. Measures of success

This requires recognition, respect, and value of the knowledge, perspectives, and resources of community partners as collaborators (Engagement Australia, 2022, p.4). As such these partnerships are typified by "co-creation of knowledge, learning, goals, and outcomes" (Johnson & Saltmarsh, 2022, p.112) between partners, as opposed to one-way knowledge transfer from university to community.

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Summary of Positions CONT.

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Position 4:

Engagement Australia supports pursuing the institutionalisation of community engagement in Australian universities as the most effective and enduring means to enable best-practice and mutually impactful university-community engagement at scale. Specifically, institutionalisation means that community engagement is*,

- » Clearly defined by the institution
- » Explicitly and genuinely a part of the institution's identity and culture
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- » Infused into the teaching, research, and outreach activities of the institution
- » Supported by workload, incentive, and reward structures
- » Appropriately resourced by the institution
- » Evidenced by the depth and breadth of reciprocal partnerships with community leading to mutually beneficial outcomes and impact
- » Supported by system-wide evaluation practices that both substantiate mutually beneficial outcomes and impact and influence the nature of ongoing partnerships

* For a more detailed understanding of indices of institutionalisation, review the full Carnegie application form on the Engagement Australia website.

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Position 5: Engagement Australia recommends that in the pursuit of best-practice community engagement, Australian universities engage in communities of practice and knowledge sharing between institutions. Beyond competition, knowledge sharing and networking can enhance practices and the cumulative civic impact of the sector.

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