

Editorial

Engagement: The Next Twenty Years are Crucial!



Professor Jim Nyland – Editor

Reflecting on the range, the reach and the depth of contributions to this Issue of Transform themed *Engagement: the next twenty years are crucial!* it is striking just how far we have come in defining and shaping the concept of engagement.

Established in 2003 by Western Sydney University's then Vice Chancellor, Professor Jan Reid, and with unanimous support from the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee, Engagement Australia (EA) was formed and quickly became recognised as the peak body for engaged universities in Australia.

The nation needed to invest in the public realm and services, in order to build a more resilient economy and society, and higher education was to be at the heart of this challenge. As we look to the next twenty-year horizon HE leaders continue to wrestle with the conundrum: 'Can the promises made in the past about the need for a more equal and socially just society through a more engaged education process be redeemed in the future?' This crucial question persists as we look to reset, renew and rejuvenate our cherished sector through the Accord process.

The much-anticipated policy settings that are set to emerge from the current Review will also pose another crucial question, namely: '*Will our education system be good enough to create universities that are agents of change for their future communities?*'

Vice-Chancellor and Presidents Professor Barney Glover (WSU) and Professor Zlatko Skrbis (ACU) consider the opportunities presented by the Accord in advancing the notion of 'social good' in their respective university communities. The idea of 'community' for many is intertwined with 'place' and Natalie Day in her authoritative international piece, *Civic Connections: How UK Universities are Pivoting to more Place-Based approaches and the Implications for Australia*, argues that places and communities are vital to the future of learning. She invites us to re-imagine the community of learners and reflect its significance within a renewed curriculum.

There is always a question of pedagogy where learning is concerned and yet we continue to ignore the positive impact of diverse cultures, students' own concerns

with language and identity and the power of affective learning. The role of places and spaces is of great emotional significance and shows the potential that a treasured environment may have on personal and social understanding. The opportunity to include this rich but often ignored resource for a more critical understanding and a new approach to the curriculum must feature in our future place-based strategies to learning. We need to extract the experience of people in specific communities at certain times in the history of their communities, and through social interaction in the classroom and beyond it, create new learning involving objective knowledge and thought and feeling. What these geographical locations tell us is that passion for the place is a marvelous resource and that we need to harness this so it becomes in turn a passion for learning. The implication is clear – we need to re-define the subject matter of what we learn and teach and the ways in which people in communities can become central to learning.

There is a third crucial question which goes to the heart of what universities are good for: *'Will our education system be up to the task of producing really*

of omission. Climate change, world poverty and degradation, war and 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.

What is needed is something that resembles a critical community-based learning culture which investigates and supports the communities in which educators actually live and work. What is implied here is in fact learning beyond the classroom where the problems and challenges facing communities become the source and inspiration for learning.

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useful knowledge of the wicked issues of the day?’ The really useful knowledge of one generation can serve as a guide to later generations but it must be re-constructed always in the light of current challenges. The failure to recognise and address the wicked issues of the day is more serious than just the sin





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Jen Azordegan's case study in this Issue highlights the importance of critical community based learning whilst Selina Tually and Clare Rowley focus on a partnership approach to addressing homelessness. Sowbhagya Michael, Grace Fava, and Jen Spanenberg show how an innovative model for Community-Engaged Medical Education can transform learning.

As Engagement Australia reflects on the twenty years since our establishment and looks towards the future, we offer a new Position Stand on what we consider to be key to advancing impactful community-engaged partnerships in the Australian higher education sector. My thanks to Dr. Matthew Pink, Professor Jessica Vanderlelie, Dr. Peter Binks, Professor Alpha Possamai-Inesedy and The Hon. Professor Verity Firth for joining me in crafting this important Position Stand for EA which charts an exciting future ahead for this important area of university business that we all cherish. It foreshadows the need for more participation and a negotiated curriculum which focusses on the key issues of the time plus a decelerated learning and teaching (a pedagogy for dialogue) which would provide us with better tools to fashion our future. It highlights the need to 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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