

Executive Viewpoint

Verity Firth, Chair, Engagement Australia



As I settle into the role of Chair of Engagement Australia, I'd like to thank my predecessor, Professor Jim Nyland for his leadership over many years. Jim has been a committed advocate for advancing university engagement with all sectors including community, government and industry.

As Editor of Transform for 6 years, he has been critical in developing and championing research-informed approaches to university engagement

practice. The journal would not be what it is today without Jim's intellectual leadership.

When the Australian Universities Accord final report was tabled in February this year, there was much to applaud. The Accord recognised that there are long term structural issues with the way university research and teaching is funded in this country and recommended an independent expert body, the Australian Tertiary Education Commission be created to help solve this problem. New funding models have been proposed – 'Managed Growth Target' and 'Needs Based'. If designed and implemented well, these new approaches could help drive the delivery the government's ambitious target of 80% of the working age population holding a tertiary qualification by 2050.

This growth in student participation will largely be driven by increasing the number of low SES students accessing and succeeding at university. More than ever public policy makers will need to understand (and support) the connection between university-community engagement, diverse cohorts accessing tertiary education, and the building of a sense of agency and belonging that enables students to succeed.

The Accord Report recognised the critical role played by universities as anchor institutions in the communities they serve. The report found:

"Tertiary education providers have deep connections to their communities that go well beyond education and research. They create jobs, partner with local businesses and schools, undertake

locally relevant research, attract investment and provide resources, facilities and leadership that improve lives in the communities that host them. This community engagement represents a major and largely unsung contribution to the nation."

Whilst consultation papers have been released on the ATEC, Managed Growth and Needs Based Funding, nothing has yet emerged from the government in relation to the broader role universities play in their communities and society more broadly. Engagement Australia will continue to build the evidence base to support broader investment in university-community partnerships and I look forward to the newly created Australian Tertiary Education Commission investigating how government can better support university engagement at a systems-level in the future.

The proposed introduction of international student caps is creating nervousness at Australian universities, many of whom have relied on international student revenue to fill the gap created by the prolonged underfunding of research and teaching in this country.

As the sector navigates the challenges to the way universities are funded, I urge those of you who are committed

to university engagement to remain vigilant.

At times of economic challenges for university budgets, engagement can be considered dispensable, seen as an add on to the core functions of teaching and research. However, given the complex problems faced by communities locally and globally, it is critical we retain our commitment to deep community engagement throughout this time.

Engagement Australia knows that university engagement is not an add-on - it's essential to ensuring university research speaks to the real-world problems we face today, and to ensuring our teaching is empowering our students with the skills they need for the workplaces of tomorrow.

At Engagement Australia we adopt the Carnegie Foundation's definition of 'community engagement':

"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."

The Carnegie definition allows us to recognise engagement as the method



by which universities can harness the richness of their research and teaching for public benefit.

This method (partnering for mutually beneficial outcomes) is applicable to all university relationships whether they be with the local community, government or industry. Engagement practice is an expertise, it can be taught and supported within institutions so that our researchers understand

engaged research methodologies and our students benefit from the real-world experiences that emerge from engaged teaching and learning.

At Engagement Australia we:

- » **Advocate for the important public purpose role of engaged universities with government and other stakeholders;**
- » **Celebrate and reward great examples of engaged research and teaching through our annual Engagement Australia Awards;**
- » **Build the evidence base for best practice engaged research and teaching through Transform, our academic and industry journal pertaining to university engagement;**
- » **Help Australian universities undertake a self-study of their institution's community engagement practices and seek continual improvement and recognition through the gold standard Carnegie Community Engagement Classification;**
- » **Develop engagement capability and knowledge sharing through workshops, symposiums and training coordinated through Engagement Australia's Carnegie Community Engagement Network; and**

- » **Connect Australian universities to global researchers and practitioners through our relationships with the US Carnegie Community Engagement Classification at the American Council on Education; the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities and the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility, and Democracy.**

In 2025 Engagement Australia will focus on demonstrating the power of universities to deliver real world solutions to society's trickiest problems. We will do this by supporting excellence in engaged scholarship and practice across our institutions, celebrating our successes and advocating to government about the public benefit of a truly engaged university sector.

There is a lot to be done and time is of the essence.

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