Embedding public engagement in higher education: issues and challenges

This short discussion paper opens up several different 'angles' for discussing the role of public engagement in higher education.

It is intended to provide some starting points for discussion at the Engagement Roundtable at Engage 2012. It explores:

- Why public engagement matters: the strategic context for public engagement.
- Framing public engagement: building shared understanding
- Embedding public engagement: key challenges
- Focal points for change
- Re-framing public engagement in the 'age of austerity'

1. Why public engagement matters: the strategic context for public engagement.

There are many different ways of framing the strategic significance of public engagement for higher education. We offer two perspectives to prompt discussion.

The first is prompted by a recent UUK project, 'Futures for Higher Education'. The project scanned and analysed the future trends which were likely to impact on the sector. The report concluded:

> 'UK HE currently faces a number of possible futures. The most positive of these would see the increasing integration of institutional interest with the wider public good, placing universities at the heart of economic and social advancement…'

Two critical challenges were identified to help navigate this new world:
- Do we know / offer what a fast-changing society needs from universities?
- Does quality assurance keep up with new complexity / multiplicity?

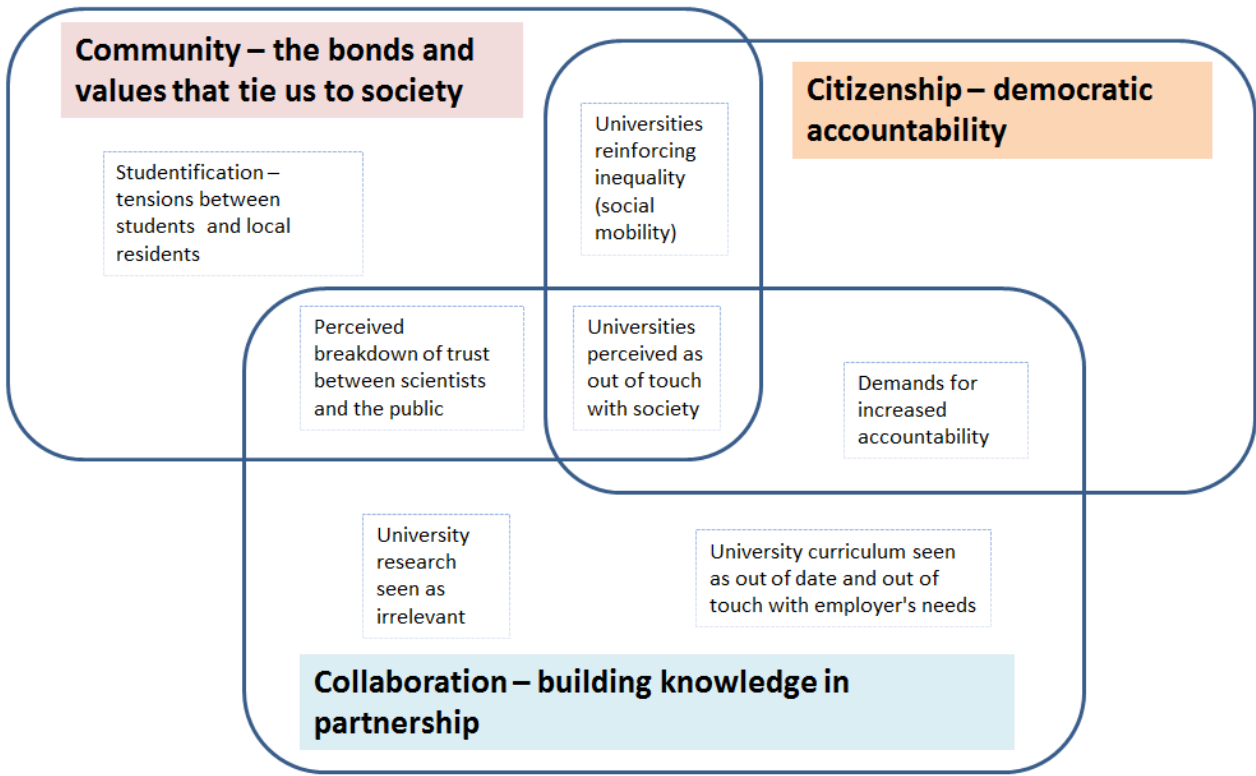The report concluded by identifying an over-arching strategic challenge:
- Ensuring that universities continue to remain fully engaged in society at all levels, understanding its needs and developments.

The conclusion that universities need to be 'fully engaged in society at all levels' is perhaps an obvious one, but there are profound challenges in achieving this.
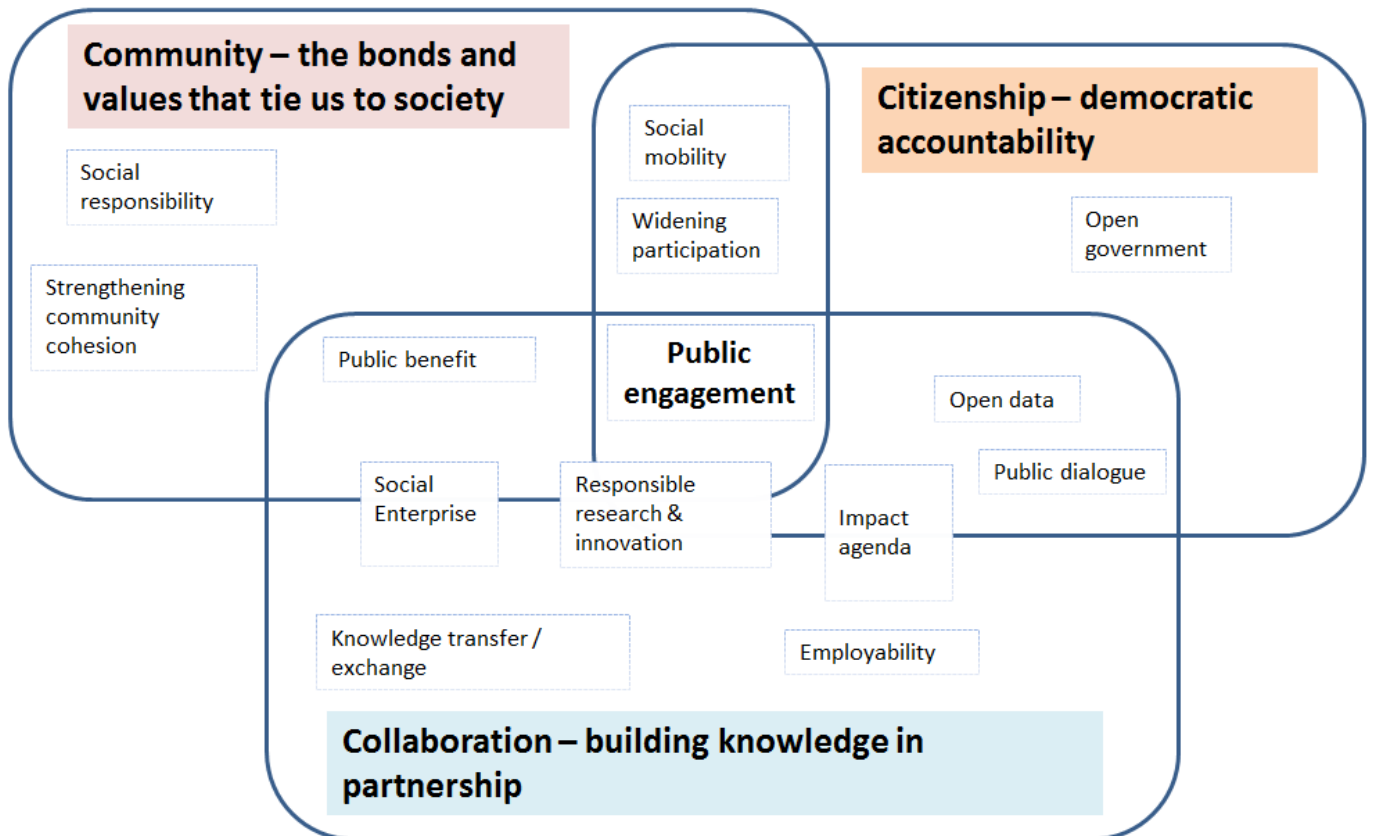
Our conversations with HE staff, funders and policy makers, and reviews of current policy and practice have led us to identify three domains in which the pressures for engagement are particularly intense:

- The first concerns '**community'**: negotiating the bonds and values that tie us to wider society.
- The second, '**citizenship'** – how we enact democratic accountability.
- The third, '**collaboration'**: our ability to work constructively and creatively in partnership with wider society to build and share knowledge, and to apply it.

These domains overlap, of course, but are a useful way of making sense of the host of external pressures which universities need to respond to if they are to be 'fully engaged'. We've mapped these pressures in the diagram below, and how they cluster:

Community – the bonds and values that tie us to society

Studentification – tensions between students and local residents

Universities reinforcing inequality (social mobility)

Citizenship – democratic accountability

Perceived breakdown of trust between scientists and the public

Universities perceived as out of touch with society

Demands for increased accountability

University research seen as irrelevant

University curriculum seen as out of date and out of touch with employer's needs

Collaboration – building knowledge in partnership

These external pressures reflect the complex dynamics of engagement: clustering around accountability, relevance and responsibility. They have triggered a host of policy interventions: either to address negative patterns or to seize opportunities. These are mapped in the diagram below. We have suggested that 'public engagement' currently sits at the intersection of these different pressures.

Community – the bonds and values that tie us to society

Social responsibility

Strengthening community cohesion

Social mobility

Widening participation

Citizenship – democratic accountability

Open government

Public benefit

Public engagement

Open data

Social Enterprise

Responsible research & innovation

Public dialogue

Impact agenda

Knowledge transfer / exchange

Employability

Collaboration – building knowledge in partnership

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2. Framing public engagement: building shared understanding

The NCCPE ran an action research project[1] that reported in 2010, seeking to better understand the challenges of embedding public engagement in higher education.
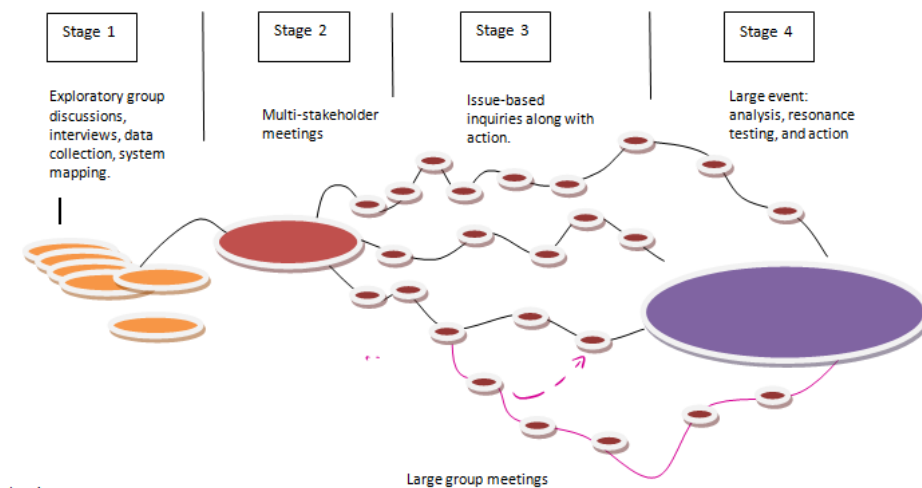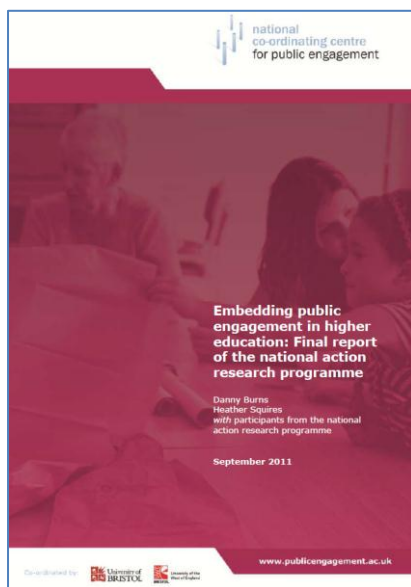
Six different groups were set up to explore the challenges from different perspectives:

THE SIX GROUPS

Heads of departments
How can we balance the competing demands on staff time to ensure that Public Engagement is embedded in the university?
Beacons for Public Engagement project staff
How can an intensive investment in PE projects translate into sustainable PE across the universities?
Vice-chancellors and other senior management
What are the strategic drivers which affect PE and what strategic changes need to be made in order to ensure sustainable public engagement?
Human resources
How do work practices, performance management systems, appraisal, recruitment and promotions system etc need to be changed to support public engagement?
Experienced public engagement academics
What can we learn from our public engagement work about how best to embed public engagement in higher education?
The sixth strand *of the programme involved insights streamed in from other universities and other initiatives. This included a workshop of student volunteers, and a whole organisation learning process initiated within The University of the West of England.*

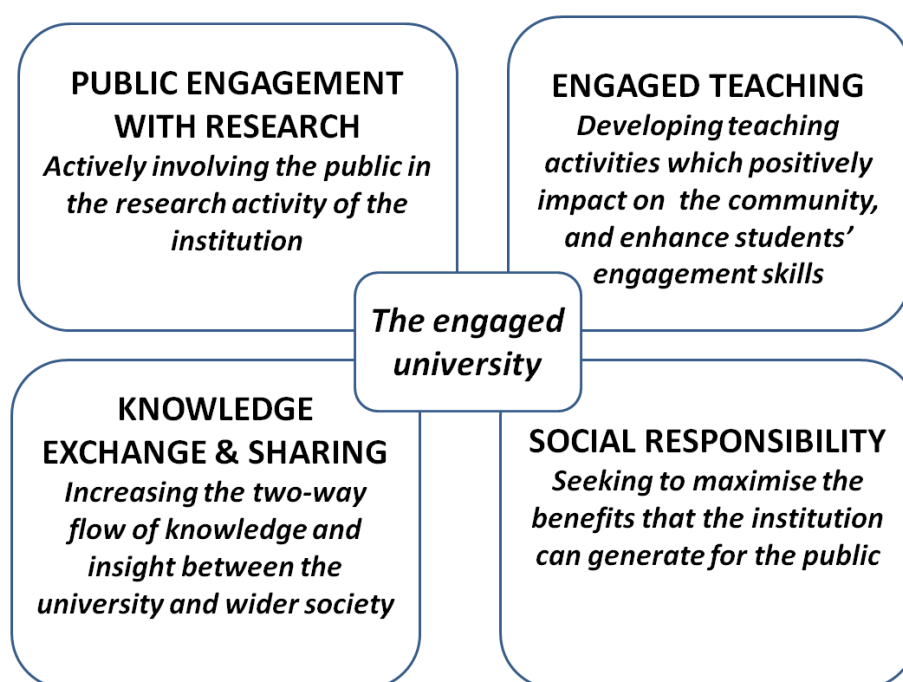---

[1] The full report can be accessed here:
https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Action%20research%20report_0.pdf

A first challenge that emerged was trying to secure a shared understanding of engagement between the different participants. Three useful 'frameworks' emerged from these conversations to help structure purposeful conversations about engagement.

The first 'frame' captured a spectrum of views about the purposes of engagement: from communicating better to lay and non-specialist audiences, to co-constructed research and teaching.

ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION	KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER	KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE	KNOWLEDGE CO-GENERATION
Knowledge is both produced and consumed by academics. Wider stakeholders have little access to academic knowledge.	Universities make their research more accessible.	Universities recognise that others also have valuable knowledge and work in partnership.	Universities and publics co generate knowledge, including the setting of research questions, research design, data collection, analysis and practice.
Many parts of society have limited access to education and teaching which is based on knowledge generated by the academy.	Degree courses are made available to a wider number of people.	Teachers acknowledge that their students and the places where they live and work are also a source of knowledge and wisdom.	Research and curriculum is developed in collaboration with multiple stakeholders. (businesses, community groups, marginal groups etc)

A second framework attempted to visualise how universities were choosing to embed engagement within their core activities of research, teaching, knowledge exchange and social responsibility. It was agreed that Public engagement needs to be seen in the context of the question "What is a university in the 21st Century for?" To embed public engagement means to make it an explicit part of the identity and values of a university. This does not mean all universities will articulate this in the same way, but clarity of purpose will enable universities to identify what sorts of PE activities they want to prioritise and to support them effectively:

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RESEARCH
Actively involving the public in the research activity of the institution

ENGAGED TEACHING
Developing teaching activities which positively impact on the community, and enhance students' engagement skills

The engaged university

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE & SHARING
Increasing the two-way flow of knowledge and insight between the university and wider society

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
Seeking to maximise the benefits that the institution can generate for the public

Finally, there was much debate about the different 'audiences' or 'stakeholders' for engagement, and a desire to think holistically about these: many people felt that the different categories of 'community', 'public', 'civic' and 'business' engagement should be viewed as porous or overlapping: and that it was more helpful to consider these engagements in the round.
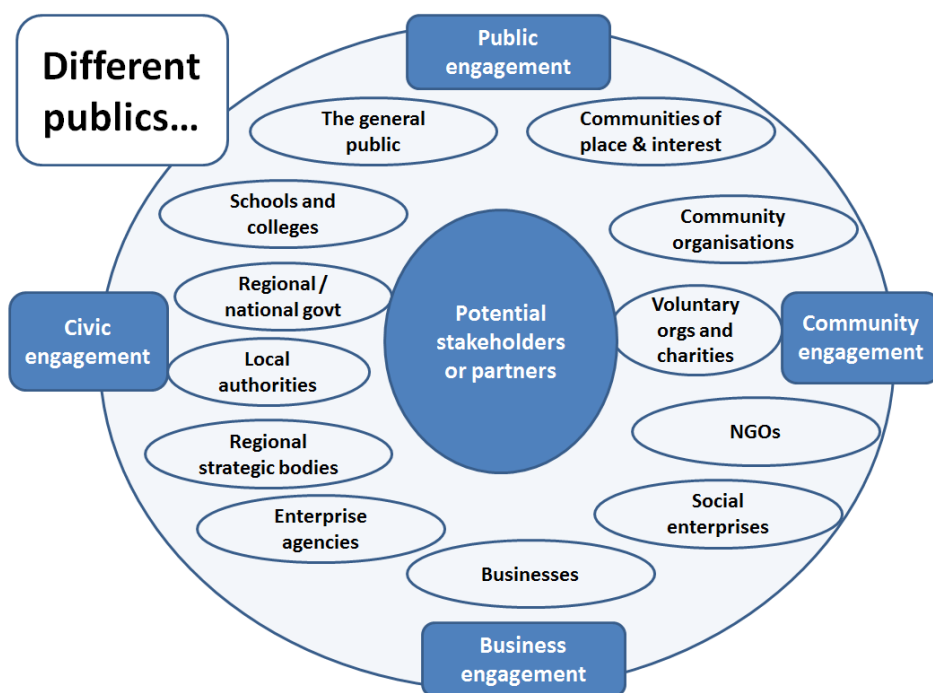
3. Embedding public engagement: key challenges

The final report of the Action Research project identified seven recommendations, which were felt to be particularly important in focussing how universities should approach the challenge of embedding support for public engagement:

i.   While some "third stream" activities will need to be pursued independently of research and teaching, for most universities a focus on integrating public engagement into research and teaching is likely to be the most effective approach.

ii.   Public engagement is likely to have the greatest impact if it is focused at the level of the group (department, research & development team, and or curriculum development leaders).

iii.   As research centres become rationalised into larger units, and whole university identities become more uniform, urgent attention needs to be paid to how niche units and their associated brand identities might be supported.

iv.   Pro-Vice Chancellors responsible for research and teaching need to have the integration of public engagement into research and teaching as an explicit part of their brief.

v.   We recommend that universities build a central support function for public engagement. It is critical that this is not seen as the place where public engagement happens, but rather as a resource for

those that are carrying it out. Key functions should include: training; development of networking opportunities; use of space; marketing and communications; and so on.

vi.   Expectations around public engagement in research and teaching need to be made clear to staff when they are recruited. This means building it into job descriptions and making it clear at job interviews and induction.

vii. Universities should pay greater attention to their accessibility. This means making universities more welcoming and friendly places, and thinking strategically about where the university might take its work beyond its buildings and campuses.

4. Focal points for change

Building on the Action Research project, and consolidating the learning from the six Beacons for Public Engagement, the NCCPE has developed a toolkit to support universities to manage change.
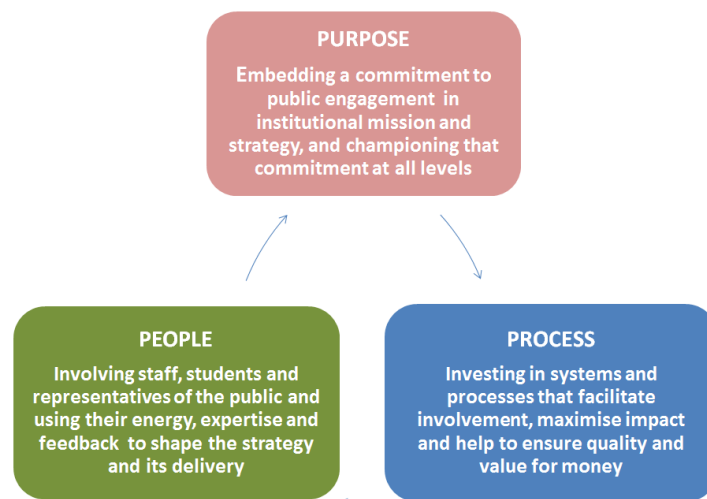
Central to this is 'The Engaged University Manifesto', which invites universities to commit at the highest level to supporting engagement:

THE ENGAGED UNIVERSITY
A manifesto for public engagement

A MANIFESTO FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- We believe that universities and research institutes have a major responsibility to contribute to society through their public engagement, and that they have much to gain in return.
- We are committed to sharing our knowledge, resources and skills with the public, and to listening to and learning from the expertise and insight of the different communities with which we engage.
- We are committed to developing our approach to managing, supporting and delivering public engagement for the benefit of staff, students and the public, and to sharing what we learn about effective practice.

Underpinning the Manifesto are a set of prompts to focus universities on the key challenges in embedding engagement, clustered under three broad headings:

PURPOSE
Embedding a commitment to public engagement in institutional mission and strategy, and championing that commitment at all levels

PEOPLE
Involving staff, students and representatives of the public and using their energy, expertise and feedback to shape the strategy and its delivery

PROCESS
Investing in systems and processes that facilitate involvement, maximise impact and help to ensure quality and value for money

The grid below describes the key challenges under each of these broad headings. Our website contains much more detail and guidance about each and a self-assessment tool to help universities assess their own current activity and to identify where they want to invest in change.

purpose	**MISSION**	Create a shared understanding of the purpose, value, meaning and role of public engagement to staff and students and embed this in your strategy and mission.
	LEADERSHIP	Support champions across the organisation who embrace public engagement
	COMMUNICATION	Communicate consistent, clear messages to validate, support and celebrate it, and ensure open and two-way communication with members of the public and community organisations.
process	**RECOGNITION**	Recognise and reward staff involvement within recruitment, promotion, workload plans and performance reviews, and celebrate success with awards or prizes.
	SUPPORT	Co-ordinate the delivery of public engagement to maximise efficiency, target support, improve quality, foster innovation, join up thinking and monitor involvement and impact.
	LEARNING	Provide opportunities for learning and reflection and provide support for continuing professional development and training
people	**STAFF**	Ensure that all staff – in academic and support roles – have opportunities to get involved in informal and formal ways.
	STUDENTS	Proactively include and involve students in shaping the mission and in the delivery of the strategy, and maximise opportunities for their involvement.
	PUBLIC	Invest in people, processes and infrastructure to support and nurture the involvement of individuals and organisations external to the HEI

5. Re-framing public engagement in the 'age of austerity'

The NCCPE recently hosted a roundtable event to explore the role of public engagement, the impact of the current economic crisis, and the links between engagement, social enterprise and social innovation.

The event identified the following 'false dichotomies' which delegates agreed were holding back creative thinking about how engagement could contribute to the future health of the sector:

i. One of these is the determination by many to think about 'economic' and 'social' impact as two separate domains, rather than to think of them as an integrated whole.

ii. Another is a tendency to categorise research as 'pure' or 'applied' and to see the two as distinct, and in competition for resources. The recent CIHE report 'Enhancing Impact: the value of public sector R&D' challenged the usefulness of this distinction and identified the hybrid activity 'user-inspired basic research' (or 'strategic research') which bridges the two, with researchers pursing deep questions grounded by their close engagement with the real world.

iii. A third is the opposition between 'academic' and 'practical' knowledge, which has limited the creativity with which debates about employability have been conducted: all too often descending into overly mechanical accounts of the skills needed by employers and complaints that universities fail to teach them. Re-framing employability around notions of 'engaged learning' or 'useful

knowledge' opens up exciting possibilities for creating vibrant 'real-world learning' for students, rooted in scholarly and disciplinary traditions.

In considering how engagement might be 'refreshed' to take account of this shifting context, the following prompts were identified as useful ways of re-framing the debate – identifying the critical qualities which universities should be aspiring to in their engagement activities:

- Socially entrepreneurial – driven by a desire to build value in society through rich interaction with it

- Anchored in place – both local, regional, national and global: thinking about how these interactions scale up at each of these levels

- Inter-connected – part of a complex innovation eco-system and in which they work intelligently to maximise the 'added value' they can bring – not to create value from scratch, but in partnership

- Demand-sensitive (if not demand-led) – sensitive to the needs and demands of wider society, and focussed not only on meeting these demands but also in helping society see the 'bigger picture' and to challenge assumptions about priorities

- Useful – in the rush to develop measures of impact and to calculate the economic returns of HE we can forget the human stories: the training of exceptional professionals – teachers, nurses, doctors – and the transformative power of learning to change lives

- Diverse – a core value of the HE system should be its commitment to diversity, on many levels: from its openness to talent of all ages and backgrounds; to its championing of equality; its respect for different forms of expertise; and its respect for its own diversity in terms of the varied expertise within different types of university.

About the NCCPE

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) was set up in 2008 as part of the 'Beacons for Public Engagement' project. It is funded by RCUK, HEFCE and the Wellcome Trust, and is a partnership between the University of the West of England and the University of Bristol.

Our vision is of a higher education sector making a vital, strategic and valued contribution to 21st-century society through its public engagement activity. We focus on:

- supporting universities to bring about strategic change that embeds public engagement
- identifying, developing and disseminating evidence-informed practice
- brokering and encouraging the sharing of effective practice
- informing, influencing and interpreting policy

The NCCPE defines public engagement as follows:

'Public engagement describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public.

Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit.'

http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/