How engagement enriches an institution’s research, teaching and learning: fact sheet

Interaction with the public can demonstrably improve the quality of work undertaken in HEIs. Not only do the public challenge, enrich and broaden academic thinking, but projects that have been defined and researched in partnership with the public invariably result in greater impact and relevance. Engagement can also enrich the curriculum in numerous ways.

Evidence:


From 2004, nanotechnology was recognised as an area of science and technology that had enormous potential for the future, but that also raised ethical issues of risk and uncertainty. The Nanodialogues project opened up dialogue between researchers, regulators, policy makers, private companies and public participants.

Increased public understanding of the nature and value of such complex and technically difficult research was a clear benefit from the dialogues. The process also provided specific data that was valuable in improving the planning and governance of future research, to allow further progress to be made. The project’s evaluators concluded that:

"This engagement has shown that, given adequate resources and access to expertise, publics can not only take on difficult issues, but work with them in ways which provide meaningful contributions to governance."

"The conclusions put forward by the panel offer much more than specific regulatory measures concerning the use of nanotechnology and land remediation ... This level of contextual understanding has allowed the 'people's inquiry' to offer a much more honest picture of the regulatory dilemmas facing government and society than a more limited discussion might have." (p.31 – 32)

Related to this point, there is a body of knowledge that suggests that the collaboration of a broader set of views can act as a validation process for decisions (for example, involving the public in research has been called ‘extended peer review’) (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1991).

This paper reviews literature related to calls for universities to engage with their communities, attributes which students engaged in public engagement might develop, and pedagogies which inform such engagement. They found that ‘research clearly indicates that learning and teaching which is engaged within communities provides a range of opportunities of building graduate attributes in areas of citizenship, employability, resilience, problem-solving and self-motivation’.

In evaluating this literature they drew a number of conclusions, including:

1. ‘Empowering pedagogies of experiential reflective learning and teaching in higher education can be advanced through community engagement.

2. As well as employability skills co-generative learning activities enable students to develop a range of qualities and capabilities which will equip them to contribute as citizens in uncertain futures.

3. There is a need to build up the data available to give a clearer picture of the extent and the types of community engagement and their impacts on both the university and the community.

4. Further work needs to be undertaken in developing quality indicators of student-community activity and impact, for all participants.’

Other quotes and testimony:

‘We developed an engagement process over seven months, first setting up groups of participants including three panels of residents from the community.... The benefit to our research came from harnessing this local knowledge to generate a distinctive research agenda for urban sustainability. Issues have emerged on crime, safety and community cohesion which we had not expected.’

Professor Malcolm Eames, Research Chair with the Low Carbon Institute, based at the Welsh School of Architecture

I think there is something about community work that is very exciting. There is something about the community work I engage in that makes the academic work make sense – and vice versa. The community work is, for me, like ‘fuel’ for the academic work. If I didn’t do the grassroots engagement with the community groups my academic work would sort of wither, I would struggle to be motivated if I had no meaning or application to my research.’ Alice Fox, Senior lecturer, University of Brighton (quoted in ‘Academic Experiences: working in community university partnerships’, CUPP 2010)
‘Engagement with our publics is vital to modern researchers - it informs us about society and its hopes and fears for the work we do, and challenges us to improve the quality and impact of our research. To articulate the reasons why we do research and be reminded of the expectations that society has for us is both directly refreshing and beneficial - and for many is a very enjoyable, stimulating and rewarding experience.’ **Professor Guy Orpen, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research), University of Bristol**

‘The ‘public’ are not just a homogeneous group of people; they are everyone from the primary school child who in ten years time may either be your PhD student or a merchant banker, to your elderly aunt who is wondering what her taxes are spent on......Collectively they are more experienced, cleverer, more creative and more perceptive than you can hope to be. Individually they can be challenging, fun, grateful for your time and generous with their own. They are the people who ultimately will live with the consequences of your discoveries, good or bad, and they want to know what you think.’ **Dr Clare Davy, Research Scientist, Virology, MRC: National Institute for Medical Research**

‘Interchange  [ ] provides students with the opportunity to develop their research skills, apply theory and understanding of social policies to real life situations, enhance their experience of working in third sector organisations, and use their social science knowledge for public benefit. Although this module is very demanding for academics, it’s also extremely rewarding because we see students flourish. By the end of the module the students have usually become very purposeful about their future and grown in confidence and have proved to themselves, their client organisation and the University that they are very credible researchers.’ **Dr. Louise Hardwick, Lecturer in Sociology and Social Policy, University of Liverpool**