Building an Engaged Future for UK Higher Education

Summary Report from the Engaged Futures Consultation

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Introduction: Thinking for the Future

The UK higher education sector has changed dramatically over the last decade. More than ever, universities have to think and plan for the future in the face of uncertainty over longer term public funding; expanding markets and increased competition for students and research income; rapidly changing approaches to knowledge and innovation; and the opportunity and threat of new technology to place-based learning and research.

It has thus been an exciting time to embark on a consultation about the future of higher education and the role of public engagement in shaping that future, as universities shift their horizons to rethink their social purpose, core activities, and *modus operandi* in the face of a rapidly changing global, national and local economic context.

Over the last decade, public engagement has been gaining momentum. Universities no longer want to be seen as or behave as ‘ivory-towers’. Universities of the twenty-first century are outward looking institutions, which actively seek interaction, debate and collaboration, to help shape and contribute to a thriving economy, society and democracy. A key question for the consultation was therefore to understand, if these trends continue, where might this take an Engaged University of the future? And what do the public and organisations keen to partner with universities want from an Engaged University?

Background to the Report

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) is an organisation committed to supporting and embedding high quality public engagement in universities throughout the UK. In February 2013, the NCCPE launched a consultation to explore the future of the Engaged University in 2025. The consultation sought to stimulate debate, create new visions for the future and explore how universities might need to change to bring these visions to life. The process drew upon the opinions of a wide-range of stakeholders within and outside the Higher Education sector and sought to reveal and understand the contexts and trends shaping the Higher Education sector and engagement practices, and people’s aspirations for the future.

The consultation asked stakeholders:

- What might an Engaged University of the future be like?
- What are the key changes / forces of change that may affect its engagement models?
- How can we build upon existing practices within and outside the Higher Education (HE) sector to strengthen our partnerships with other organisations and affect change?
- What can we do to ensure that universities remain relevant and engaged with society?
- How has discussion about engagement changed over the last few years, and how might this change in the light of challenges we currently face within the HE sector and society as a whole?

This summary report synthesises key findings from consultation based on empirical research (12 workshops and 30 in-depth interviews) with representatives from over 40 UK higher education institutions (HEIs), 9 major funding bodies, and over 60 partner organisations. The full report is available for those interested in finding out more¹.

The Engaged Futures team

The Engaged Futures team was made up of Daniel Start (independent facilitator), Caroline Wilson (independent researcher), Sophie Duncan and Paul Manners (NCCPE). Helen Featherstone (University of Exeter), Mary Schwartz, Emma Agusita and Abigail Tweed (NCCPE Associates) also contributed to the work through hosting workshops and/or conducting interviews.

¹ www.publicengagement.ac.uk/work-with-us/current-projects/engaged-futures
1. Executive Summary

Based on our empirical research, we have identified several challenges, shaping the context for university public engagement:

- There is much debate over the future of higher education in the UK. However, public engagement is rarely an explicit focus for discussion, despite strong support for engagement activities from funders, university staff and the public.

- The Witty Review (2013) and subsequent policy interventions have encouraged and incentivised ‘knowledge transfer’ to businesses. However, the third mission of universities (beyond teaching and research) is currently being defined almost exclusively in economic terms with the emphasis squarely on universities’ roles as wealth creators. Policy discussions about the third mission of universities do not balance their social and economic role.

- There are significant opportunities to raise the policy profile of engagement activities beyond ‘knowledge transfer’ to business: to reflect the innovative and exciting ways in which universities are collaborating with the public, students, museums, local authorities, local and national charities, think tanks and artists, across all fields of the economy and society.

- Our empirical work shows universities from across the UK have embraced Public Engagement as a vehicle to address current challenges, which include: to achieve excellence and impact in research and teaching; respond to greater public scrutiny of the ways in which universities can and should serve the public; increased competition for students and research income; the need to develop and communicate distinctiveness in a competitive marketplace; widening participation; and concerns for the employability of graduates.
1.1 Empirical Research: key findings

Based on our empirical research with over 200 people working within and in partnership with universities we found:

- **Optimism** and enthusiasm for the future of engagement: that considerable **progress** has been made over the last ten years to **embed high quality engagement** within higher education institutions (HEIs), as evidenced by:

  a) The growing number of **innovative, collaborative** projects involving HE staff, students, and partner organisations across the arts, sciences, business, social sciences and humanities.

  b) The growing number of institutions and **senior management committed to engagement** as a **strategic priority** and defining characteristic of their institution: accompanied by structures to recognise, support, and reward **high quality engagement work** and **collaborative partnerships**.

  c) The demand for and development of more **meaningful**, sustained relationships between HEIs and their **partners**.

  d) **A supportive funding environment**: the inclusion of Impact Case Studies in the Research Excellence Framework (REF, HEFCE); the Concordat for Engaging the Public with Research (RCUK); innovative funding initiatives such as the NCCPE and the Beacons for Public Engagement (RCUK, Higher Education Funding Councils and Wellcome Trust); the Catalysts for Public Engagement with Research Project (RCUK, 2013); the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded Connected Communities Project; and Engaging Science (Wellcome Trust).

- Despite the unfavourable economic climate, and budgetary cuts, most profoundly affecting community partners’ capacity to engage with universities, people thought a **culture of engagement** is beginning to take hold and is strengthening, as evidenced by:

  a) The number of people **committed to building Engaged Futures**, with the skills, knowledge, values and confidence to support innovative projects and partnerships.

  b) The evolution and strengthening of **collaborative relationships** with partner organisations, some of which were creating an ongoing legacy.

  c) **Maturing structures and debates**. For example, many questioned whether evangelism is still necessary, that there is no longer a need to convince people engagement matters: can those committed to Engaged Futures now focus on the **how to engage** rather than the **why we engage**?

1.2 Building Engaged Futures: linking trends to values

Based on our analysis of empirical data on contexts and trends, we identified six overarching factors supporting the ongoing expansion of public engagement in UK universities:

1) **Market-based incentives** for universities to distinguish themselves as ‘engaged universities’ in a crowded and competitive market for students and research income.

2) **Bureaucratic controls**: academics are increasingly expected to demonstrate the social and economic impact of their research, for instance through the REF.

3) A steadily consolidating policy focus from all major political parties on **greater societal interaction** by universities and researchers, for instance through public engagement with science and knowledge exchange.
4) Greater scrutiny of universities and other publically funded institutions and pressure to increase transparency and accountability.

5) A shift away from single authoritative experts, towards more pluralistic forms of evidence and growing recognition of the significance of situated knowledge.

6) The re-emergence of civic universities, as engines of regional growth and development that contribute to the local community, business and civil society.

These over-arching trends demonstrate there are many compelling drivers for universities to continue to expand public engagement work. However these trends provide few safeguards for the delivery of high quality engagement: as a mechanism through which the interests of the public (business, charities, local government, students, the general public, tax payers) shape the outlook, values, and activities of universities. For universities to engage with the public in a way that delivers social and economic benefits for society, it is important to dig deeper, to understand the rationales motivating a culture of openness, collaboration, and knowledge exchange. Using the framework developed by Fiorino (1989) and subsequent work by Stirling (2006, 2008), we analysed these trends in terms of three imperatives for engagement:

- **Instrumental** imperatives: we engage because it makes decisions more legitimate, that engagement supports the incumbent interests of academics and universities.

- **Substantive** imperatives: we engage because non-experts see problems, issues and solutions that experts miss. Participation increases the quality of academic work and the functioning of universities.

- **Normative** imperatives: we engage because democratic ideals call for maximum participation, which counter the power of incumbent interests and allow those who are affected by decisions to have influence.

Many of the people we spoke to support a normative view of engagement work, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because a normative rationale for engagement work takes universities into new and dynamic places: that universities are not only more accountable to the public, but also integral and integrated within a vibrant democracy, economy and society. As such this consultation sought to understand what those collaborating with universities, as community partners, want from an Engaged University, and what those responsible for delivering engagement activities (senior managers, academics, public engagement specialists and funders) aspire to achieve through their engagement activities.

### 1.3 Aspirations of Community Partners

The NCCPE has actively supported community partners to identify barriers to positive engagement and develop more productive and mutually beneficial relationships with universities. The consultation helped to make explicit community partners’ various aspirations and motivations to engage with universities:

a) For universities to recognise and value the expertise of people outside academia: as co-applicants in funding bids, as co-producers of knowledge; as contributors to curriculum development; and supporters of student volunteering and learning placements.

b) For universities to add value to partner organisations, to develop relationships of mutual benefit that are not always or wholly focused on research (for instance, providing access to people, or utilising university resources and spaces for learning).

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c) For universities to have a stronger connection with their localities by being open and accessible places where people from different backgrounds can meet, exchange ideas, and build relationships and collaborate in a relaxed and welcoming environment.

d) For universities to offer opportunities for partners to reflect critically on their work or to provide evaluation of partner services in order to credibly demonstrate their value.

e) For universities to reflect the voices and knowledges of marginalised communities to ensure research provides wider benefits for larger sections of society.

f) For partner organisations involved in collaborative work with universities to be adequately funded to support this engagement.

1.4 Shared Visions for an Engaged University of the Future

The consultation was an opportunity for people working inside and outside the HE sector to think 'outside the box', to articulate visions for the future of an Engaged University, beyond the structures which currently contain and constrain the flow of knowledge, expertise, resources and people into and out of the HE sector. Our consultees shared many visions of the future 'Engaged University'. We have synthesised these into five themes which capture the centres of gravity around which these visions cohered:

**Theme 1: space and place**

Universities are seen and behave as a resource for the real world, exemplified in how they integrate with their localities and share space and place.

**Theme 2: digital media and open data**

Knowledge is open and accessible to the public. Universities collectively and individually prioritise initiatives to support open data and digital engagement with HEIs.

**Theme 3: engaged research**

The whole research endeavour is more open, transparent, accountable, inclusive, collaborative and purposeful - to help understand and solve key societal challenges.

**Theme 4: engaged learning**

Universities bring learning to life in settings outside the university, by investing in lifelong learning and by unlocking the potential of students to learn in collaboration with community organisations, building value for all involved.

**Theme 5: people and partnerships**

The movement of people inside and outside the university and mutuality in partnerships enables universities and their partners to innovate for the benefit of the economy and society.
This ‘visioning’ work revealed that - for an Engaged University to flourish – profound structural changes to the HE landscape would be necessary, such that:

a) The public and partner organisations have greater input to determine the types of projects funded by universities and the nature of engagements with the public.

b) **Peer-reviewed journal** articles are **not** the principal or exclusive measure of academic success (as materials read by a small community of interested academics).

c) High quality **engagement work** is **valued** and **rewarded** by universities and peers.

d) The knowledge generated by researchers is made more **available** and **accessible** to the public and other relevant partners.

e) Applied research and participatory methodologies are more **highly valued**, as is the knowledge and expertise of communities outside the university.

f) Universities foster **life-long learning** and support others to develop the critical skills and tools needed to conduct rigorous and relevant research to improve their lives.

g) The public have a sense of ownership and **pride in their local university** as a result of having engaged with it.

h) Universities are institutions which the public hold in **high regard** as exemplars of ethical behaviour and practice.

i) Universities nurture **students** to become ‘**world-ready graduates**’, equipped with knowledge and expertise to contribute to society as citizens, employees and future leaders.

### 1.5 Defining qualities of an Engaged University

Our consultees identified a range of **current drivers** and **trends** which make it in the interest of universities to engage. These included, for instance, meeting funding requirements like impact assessment in the REF, and strengthening market position and institutional reputation.

However, such bureaucratic and market-based drivers are **not sufficient safeguards** to deliver high quality engagement work that is of benefit to other publics (community partners, businesses, students, the public, patients) and universities.

Based on the analysis of people’s visions, we have identified three essential qualities of an Engaged University. These qualities encapsulate the challenges to build outward-looking universities for the twenty-first century:

- **Porous**: an Engaged University supports the two-way flow of information, people and resources across permeable boundaries which integrate and connect universities physically, digitally and intellectually to society.

- **Dynamic**: an Engaged University takes risks to do things differently. It acts to bring about change, functions as a catalyst for debate and dialogue, and has expertise in facilitating and mobilising change through learning and research.

- **Values-led**: an Engaged University is principled. It seeks to listen and learn from society, and work in collaboration with other organisations to address key societal challenges. The values of engagement are embedded throughout the institution: openness, mutuality and respect.
1.6 Conclusion

This consultation has captured many of the current challenges and aspirations of a committed group of people working to improve the relationships between universities and society. The majority of people we spoke to are committed to engagement as a mechanism to transform lives, opportunities and practices.

The full report provides detailed evidence of their collective understandings of the trends, rationales and values underpinning the expansion of high quality engagement work in HEIs across the UK. We hope that the findings from the project will help to:

- **Build understanding** of how current trends can be harnessed to shape the delivery of high quality engagement.
- **Build understanding** and awareness of the ideas and innovations shaping engaged practices now and in the future.
- **Stimulate** debate about the risk and rewards of engagement work.

Our consultees told us that engagement work is challenging, but also rewarding, and that there is considerable optimism that, for a variety of reasons and in response to a number of societal pressures, the future for engagement is relatively secure.

From an instrumental perspective, engagement fits neatly with key strategic priorities: to widen participation and improve the employability of graduates. Funding requirements encourage engaged work to improve accountability, although many are critical that this produces a form of engagement which adds little to projects.

However, many people who participated in our consultation were committed to engagement for normative reasons: that this is the right thing to do, and that engagement work can be transformative, enabling people to shape and share in the future of HE. A significant number also quoted substantive reasons: that, done well, engagement leads to better research and teaching.

We hope that the visions and values articulated so eloquently by our consultees – and which we have attempted to synthesise in this brief summary - will provide inspiration and structure to guide future work. However, the consultation also made clear that there is a huge amount still to play for, and real risks and threats to be addressed in moving towards a more deeply ‘engaged’ university sector. Like all good conversations, the consultation has raised new questions and left some issues unresolved. To that end, we think it is important to highlight some of the critical questions which we think need more work if we are to successfully navigate towards the kind of engaged vision that has begun to emerge through this process. We have highlighted some of these challenges below, through the voices of our collaborators. We would love to know what you think.
**HOW ‘POROUS’ CAN UNIVERSITIES BECOME BEFORE THEY COMPROMISE THEIR INDEPENDENCE AND IDENTITY?**

“It’s really important to ‘open up’ universities – but in doing so do we risk losing the critical distance that we actually need to maintain our usefulness to society?” (PE Specialist, HE)

**IS ENGAGEMENT THE RIGHT WORD TO DESCRIBE WHAT WE ASPIRE TO?**

“For me, the most powerful word is collaboration. The ‘collaborative university’ captures the partnership element. The ‘engaged university’ could be quite one sided. It doesn’t tell me who it is engaged with and whether they are willing partners. It assumes engagement on the part of the public – but universities have to work hard to get that. Collaboration is the name of the game.” (Academic)

“It’s not about imposing our own view of the world onto the world: not about engagement for engagement’s sake. It’s about dialogue and building relationships with partners.” (PE Specialist, HE)

**DO WE NEED HARDER-EDGED ARGUMENTS AND EVIDENCE?**

“We need to create an argument that is intellectually sound. It’s not just about charity, being friendly.” (Senior Manager HE)

“It should be principled, not tender hearted – this is what you do when you are feeling charitable or being patronising or a bit soft. The things we engage with are some of the most fundamental things that help people live effectively – community conflict, living with disabilities environment, health – it’s something that is very core to how we live rather than how we think we live – it’s got to have a solidity to it.” (Senior Manager HE)

**SHOULD ENGAGEMENT BE MANDATORY?**

“It’s not a new mantra that all the universities have to buy into.” (PE specialist, HE)

“There seems to be a general feeling community engagement is a good thing – but if it is not core to your mission, don’t do it half-heartedly.” (Funder)
However you chose to use this summary or the full report, we hope you find it a useful stimulus for change. We welcome your comments and feedback.

We are extremely grateful to all those who gave up their time and shared their opinions for Engaged Futures, while accepting responsibility for the limitations of this report. A full list of participants is provided in the full report.
National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement’s vision is of a higher education sector making a vital, strategic and valued contribution to 21st-century society through its public engagement activity. We are working to help support universities to improve, value and increase the quantity and quality of their public engagement and embed it into their core practice.

www.publicengagement.ac.uk