

Whither engagement? Challenges for community engagement within academia

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Abstract

Despite the commitment to engagement with the broader community that is central to understandings of the role of academics within the university tradition, there are now significant barriers to the performance of this role.

Significant changes in the management, funding and priorities of universities (prompted by government policy) have created conditions where community engagement is placed a distant third in the professional lives of contemporary academics behind research and teaching. Some have suggested that community engagement is not just a low priority activity in modern academia, but one that is consciously discouraged through questioned academic freedoms, more tenuous employment circumstances, and restrictive codes of conduct conditions at several universities. In addition, the widespread work intensification that has accompanied these other changes in University management has created significant disincentive to engage in community engagement for early career academics, women with children, and those seeking a healthy work-life balance.

This paper argues that while there has been much discussion of the privileging of research over teaching, the value and commitment to community service remains at the margins of reality and debate in Australian universities, and will continue to be while these challenges remain.

Introduction

Despite the commitment to engagement with the broader community that is central to understandings of the role of academics within the university tradition, there are now significant barriers to the performance of this role. Significant changes in the management, funding and priorities of universities (prompted by government policy) have created conditions where community engagement comes an inevitable distant third in the lives of most contemporary academics behind research and teaching. Some have suggested that community engagement is not just a low priority activity in modern academia, but one that is consciously discouraged through waning academic freedoms, more tenuous employment circumstances, and restrictive codes of conduct conditions at several universities (Polya 2001/2002).

This paper argues that while there has been much discussion of the privileging of research over teaching, the value and commitment to *community* service remains at the margins of reality and debate in Australian universities.

Community engagement and the academic in Australian higher education

To begin, I examine two key ideas central to the question of how the university should engage with the community and why. In this section I outline the traditional notion of the university and its role within wider society. The understanding(s) of the role of the University within the community shapes significantly both University and community expectations of engagement activities. In addition, the role of the academic on an individual basis is discussed to contextualise university expectations of individual academics with respect to community engagement.

The role of the academic

The working life of the academic has been conceived as a group of interrelated, equally important, roles: the teacher, the researcher, and the public intellectual. The belief that 'universities have a role in conserving and transmitting a public culture' (Maddox 2000, p. 327) is a long standing tradition in Australian universities. A well-developed academic is thought to be one that meaningfully engages all three of these critical purposes and domains in their work and continues to improve this engagement through self-reflection and personal development.

One of the reasons for an emphasis on the three facets of academic life and community engagement has been the acknowledgement that one of the important roles of the university is to be involved in, and contribute to, public debate. Community involvement and communication is at the heart of the relevance of academic pursuits. Interaction and participation in the wider community is essential to facilitate the dispersal and discussion of research insights and to stimulate debate on important issues. Universities in Australia have long been considered an important contributor to public life and the public good (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education

References Committee 2001), as well as a crucial site for knowledge generation and the development of intellectuals. These public roles assume engagement with the community as part of the wider identity and purpose of the university, and its academics.

Recent reforms in Australian higher education however have shifted understandings of what the university is. The net impact of these reforms has been to re-make universities as corporations and to step away from the notion of them contributing to the public good and the community (Marginson 2003). Universities are now conceived as corporations providing a private good for individual consumers. New priorities, funding arrangements and governance structures within universities emphasise commercialisation and place significant drivers on academics to privilege applied, industry-relevant commercial research above non-commercial research, teaching and community engagement. Increasingly, notions of community engagement and relevance in universities are becoming conceived through the lens of commercialisation. Service has become something provided to students of higher education, and on committees within universities, rather than something performed as a public good to the wider community. Thus, to many academics and universities, service is to the profession or the University.

Indeed, community engagement itself, and what it means, is being significantly re-made. Relevance has come to be defined by vocation and outcomes based teaching and learning. The relevance of academic learning and academia itself has been vocationalised (Duke 2004) – thus, community engagement has increasingly become thought of as a process of engaging students with the workplaces and industries they will work in. Community engagement is something academics help students do; the literature is dominated by examples of community engagement as ‘service learning’ (for example see: McFadden et al 2002; Ross & Ardel 1999), or internships and industry placements to provide ‘learning for the workplace’ (Langworthy & Turner 2003). For example, Griffith University’s Academic Plan sets out five signature experiences to promote, including engaging community. It places value on: ‘community engagement as a *context for learning*’ (O’Connor 2003: 2; emphasis added). Thus, in this understanding of community engagement, the focus is on the student experience of learning within a community context, rather than meeting community need per se. These comments should not be seen to detract from the valuable experiences service learning or work-integrated-learning provides students; however, the university’s engagement with the wider community cannot be reduced simply to vocational placement opportunities for students during their education.

The other way in which community engagement has come to be thought of is as “relevant” research; academics show community engagement through applied, industry-based or commercially relevant research and partnerships. Research which has clear commercial applications, and industry-based research partnerships, are encouraged by universities that have experienced declining direct funding for research, as well as an increase in competition for a much reduced external funding pool. Australian Research Council (ARC) funding attracts applications from only the top 10% of researchers in Australian universities, yet only has a 20% success rate (Polya 2001/2002). With such intense competition, it’s not surprising that universities and researchers have turned to promoting projects with an external commercial or industry focus to access funds. Despite the decline in direct funding, government measures of university “success” still focus overwhelmingly on research output, thus, so must universities.

However, one area where academics may be able to significantly contribute to the public good is through linking community engagement to their research. Unfortunately, research funding opportunities with *community based* partners are limited. ARC Linkage Grants do provide the possibility of collaboration with community partners, though many would be limited by the requirement to provide funds or resources that are then matched by the ARC if the application is successful (Webber 2002). This is especially unlikely in light of the preference given to those projects where community partners are shown to contribute a significant financial commitment, rather than just time, personnel or materials (Graeme Turner, personal communication, August 6 2004). University research budgets also make only small proportions of their total available for community partnership research, if at all, providing the bulk of their internal budgets for developing projects with medium-term prospects as industry-based, commercially-applicable, or ARC fundable research. These trends will only be exacerbated further by the current RQF (research quality framework) exercise being conducted.

Thus, the idea of research as a public good for the benefit of the community has been eroded with Australian universities instead moving towards research that has clear commercial applications and industry-based applications for particular clients (Polya 2001/2002). Increasingly, government funding formulas have privileged those outcomes that can be easily quantified for measurement, and research is no different (DETYA 1999) and unquantifiable outputs have become at risk of marginalisation. Again, this implication is further amplified by the RQF in Australian universities. Further underlining this, staff are promoted and given prestige on the basis of research

output and funding attracted (Webber 2002). Therefore, community engagement and service is also marginalised, not just by the emphasis on research in university reward systems, but also through the *type* of research that is encouraged, funded and ultimately privileged within academia.

Earlier notions of public debate and engagement

Universities, while conceived and practised as institutions for the elite, were also considered to be important contributors, initiators, and vehicles of public debate and engagement. While it is certainly arguable that this engagement was limited to certain sections of the community, notably bureaucracy and government officialdom, the ivory tower was regardless a part of, or expected to be part of, active debate and engagement in the public domain.

This public role of universities, as well as their contribution to training a professional elite and contributing to public research and innovation, has been an important justification for the public funding of universities, and other governmental support. Universities are conceived to have contributed to, and been part of, the public good.

Thus, the role of academics has been formalised as one consisting of three separate roles: teaching, research and community service. However, over time, this definition of the academic role appears to have changed. The literature of academic roles and workloads predominantly refers to administration in the place of service (McInnis 1996; McInnis 2000). There is some mystery surrounding how and why this third role of academics transformed, but the subtle changes in the literature appear from the early 1980s. In some universities, the role went from community service to simply service, which implied an interpretation of 'service to the university' rather than 'service to the community'. This certainly marked a beginning in Australian universities of a move away from a public role for individual academics. Over time, this role has shifted to being widely accepted as administration, which has come to be an important role for academics through the changes to university management structures and the role of academics within it.

How are universities engaging?

Community engagement is a broad term, and one that can mean many things. However, I argue that in this paper, the current activities and projects undertaken by universities that they point to as constituting community engagement can be categorised as one of three types: engagement through research, engagement through community partnerships, and engagement through teaching and learning. In each of these areas, what has

come to represent community engagement is actually a clear retreat from the university as a public good, and has become commodified – a move toward commodifying the activities of Universities further.

Engagement through research

One of the areas that universities point to as being of significant benefit and of providing important engagement with the community is the through research. It is argued that research in and of itself provides tangible and intangible benefits to the community. Others have been known to argue that research can constitute community service, for example, in the area of health research (for example see: Westall et al 2006; Arcury 1999). However, community engagement is not the same as community service – indeed, service can be a passive act, performed without any regard for the needs, desires or preferences of the community. Community engagement requires entering the community, it requires public engagement and debate with the community. Research therefore that is community engagement, cannot be research that is conducted without the consultation, involvement and perhaps even request of the community. This certainly disqualifies much research within universities that is argued to be community engagement. Research with broad or amorphous benefits, certainly does not qualify as engaged research. Not all research has to be disqualified, but it certainly does narrow what research might be considered engaged research, and it does suggest that research conducted within these parameters, is not the kind of research that is funded, pursued or rewarded by universities. This is particularly important when one considers the declining amount of research funding available, the increasing competition for available funds, and the impending introduction of new quality assurance and funding imperatives for universities (such as the Research Quality Framework) based on the research outputs of individual Universities. Thus, even universities or academics interested in undertaking truly engaged research, are constrained by the imperatives of current higher education policies and funding availability.

Engagement through community partnerships

A potential area of significant community engagement is through research partnerships with communities and/or community organisations. However, successfully conceiving, funding and completing of such partnerships faces significant challenges. In a time when community organisations and community projects have experienced declining public investment from the Howard government, many community organisations that have experienced public support in the past are

struggling to maintain their day to day functions (Maddison & Denniss 2006), let alone being able to fund staff or research important to their goals.

However, there are significant barriers to this potential being realised. One of the clearest issues related to community based research partnerships is related to funding imperatives. Universities have experienced declining real investment and are thus only able to undertake research partnerships where measured outputs are available, and preferably, plentiful. The majority of university and external funding schemes designed for community based partnerships, are actually designed for commercial partnerships – the partner organisation is expected to provide matching support equal with that supplied by the funding body in cash, staffing, and other support. This certainly limits opportunities for individual researchers to establish partnerships with community organisations that lack the resources for research or other projects. Again, this is an example of the commodification of opportunities for engagement between universities and the community, removing them further from a public purpose.

Engagement through teaching and learning

One of the areas that is particularly significant for community engagement is the increasing popularity of service teaching or work learning or service learning. Well established in the United States, this is a method by which universities or colleges engage local communities through students. Typically, courses and course credit is structured around a project, or a component of service learning in organisations or service fields (i.e. teaching, nursing, etc) that serves local communities, but also provides individual students with practical training and skills relevant to their future career aspirations. While from a pedagogical standpoint, these schemes are important for students, one can question whether local community needs are necessarily met, or fully understood. The primary motivation for such projects is to provide students with important aspects of career training, but often, another reason cited is to provide them with a sense of citizenship or civic responsibility (Trostle & Hersh 2003; Mehafey 2005). While these are worthwhile aims, there is no guarantee that such projects are always designed or implemented with the community's needs in mind. Rather, projects of this nature, or community engagement projects of this kind, represent community engagement that provides a direct benefit to universities and individual students, again representing a commodification, rather than true community engagement.

Obstacles to engagement

I argue that the current modes of engaging community through and within university structures is primarily organised around a commodification of the university's relationships with society. I argue that a key role once performed within public debate and by individual public intellectuals has been negatively impacted by this ongoing commodification and has decreased the public face and public engagement of universities. Further discounting and reductions in society's embrace and expectations of a public role for universities has the potential to further devalue the public role and thus public funding of universities.

There has been much written, over the last 10 years about the decline of the public intellectual. While we need not be as dramatic as Karger & Hernandez (2004) or Macfarlane (2005) in pronouncing the death of the public intellectual, it can certainly be argued that the decline has been swift and dramatic – prominent public intellectuals are few and far between. The academic has certainly retreated from the public domain, and the reasons for this are too many to explore fully in this paper except to say that the constraints on academic engagement with the community occur at the individual level, the university level, the community level, and due to larger constraints in the public domain – overcoming these barriers are an individual academic is difficult. One interesting factor behind this has been the perception of public engagement as activism. It is true that some public intellectuals certainly perform an advocacy or activism role in their community engagement, for example, John Pilger and Noam Chomsky. However, it is the subtle criticism here that needs to be examined. The perception of a public intellectual as an activist suggests that activism is somehow an inherently bad thing. In the context of increased corporatisation of universities, of narrowing of university agendas, and of tighter control of the role of academics, this is a dangerous suggestion. I would suggest however that activism can only be an inherently bad thing if it is somehow based on the assumption that those who are activists are not objective and those who are not activists are objective.

Perhaps most importantly, the potential for community engagement itself relies on a strong and healthy public domain. Developments in neo-liberal societies certainly highlight the decline of the public domain. Engagement, speech and assembly in the public domain has certainly declined and become more regulated (for example, in regard to Australia see: Hamilton & Maddisson 2007). Also, as governments and the state withdraws further from public life, and as important aspects of social, political and economic life are privatised, the public domain itself becomes smaller and more tenuous.

Conclusion

A key question that remains outstanding in the debate on universities and community engagement remains that of determining what communities want. As community engagement becomes increasingly commodified, this is a question that is considered less and less. In a commodified approach to community engagement, the key question is not what the community needs, but what certain sections of the community want and can afford, as well as pinpointing those groups able to assist with meeting students' employment aspirations.

When decisions about community engagement are driven by commercial imperatives rather than identified or articulated community need, the focus of engagement is not only narrow, but also skewed. Research projects, work-integrated-learning, or community service learning and collaborative projects under such an approach, will fail to be driven by community need, and will instead be driven by the imperatives of both university funding, such as quality research outputs, and by those community groups and agents that can afford to engage with universities and projects. This approach neglects that real community needs will not be met when this is not the primary determinant in the process of choosing means and avenues of engaging with the community or society as a whole.

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