

The economies of engagement: The nature of university engagement in the corporate university

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Abstract

This paper will broach for consideration a central question that confronts those undertaking university engagement initiatives: *What does it mean to engage from the perspective of the university?* Drawing on the author's experiences of engaging with a local government 'industry partner' over several years, the practice of engagement will be explored according to the economies of engagement that form around these acts of engagement within and beyond the corporatized university. In making a case for how effective engagement might proceed, the concept of *translation* will be presented as both a metaphor and method for traversing the knowledge ecologies of the university and community/industry partner. As a mechanism by which the knowledge ecologies of the university and partner might be considered, translation provides the opportunity to reconsider the ways in which knowledge is used and constructed and of what value the university might be in wider community and industry settings. The author's experiences in deploying a participatory partnership hinged on an *ethic of engagement* will be presented, along with a consideration for how the learning of each other's knowledge cultures might produce meaningful outcomes.

University Engagement; Knowledge Ecologies; Corporatized University; Economies of Engagement

Framed by reconsiderations of the place and purpose of the university within wider public spheres, the question of how the university should *engage* has emerged in recent years as a prominent theme of discussion both within and beyond the academy. Read against a backdrop of increased expectation for accountability and the unprecedented regulation of higher education systems in many countries (OECD 2013), the *value* of the university to societal and industry concerns has been drawn into sharp focus, with emphasis given to the utility that academic pursuits might hold within globalised knowledge economies (Watermeyer 2012; Deem, Hillyard and Reed 2007; Kerr 2001; Nossal 1997). These arguments draw from rationalist logics, and in keeping with viewpoints oriented by what has been designated as 'neoliberalism', position the purpose and structure of the university in predominantly economic terms. The outcomes of this reframing include the operation of universities as corporate entities, decreased (and decreasing) public expenditure on universities and higher education, and corollary increased reliance on private income sources and the often-uneasy arrangements with corporate sponsorship that these bring (OECD 2013; Marginson 2000).

One prominent demonstration of the workings of the contemporary, corporate university is seen with engagement. Whether termed outreach, community engagement, university-community partnership, stakeholder collaboration or permutations of these and similar other terms, the form that engagement has taken in the contemporary university provides a demonstration of the ways universities conceive of themselves as *valuable* public institutions. The measures underpinning this value however remain somewhat more vague and when considered in light of the stark and largely economic bases that have driven university reform in many countries in recent years, the core intentions underpinning university engagement initiatives remain difficult to ascertain. This paper will explore the dynamics of this seeming rush to engagement, and in doing so will highlight the pressures brought to bear on the contemporary university and those publics toward whom the engagement is targeted.

Value and the University

Although recent reformulations of the value-proposition of the university have positioned the economics of higher education as a principal measure of value, the realignment of what it is the university might deliver as a public good within this dynamic provides an interesting counter-point to older views of the university as existing *in and of* (and in some senses *for*) itself; a somewhat untouchable institution of repute and prestige functioning outside of the concerns of economics and societal strictures (Clark 1987). As a site of knowledge production, universities globally have been under pressure to explicate what purposes they might serve, how the products of academic labour might find value and ultimately, what returns on public investment they might generate. Older views of the university existing simply as a site of knowledge maintenance and production (Burnes, Wend and Todnem By 2014) have given way to more outwardly focussed, externally active and socially engaged visions; a shift in purpose that Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt, and Terra (2000) refer to as an evolution from *ivory tower* exclusivity to 'university entrepreneurialism'.

Simon Marginson has been particularly prolific in detailing these shifts in the expectations of higher education and the 'social and cultural character of the outcomes or 'goods' produced by higher education' (2007: 309). As he highlights, "[p]ublic good/goods in higher education do not emerge in a vacuum but under specific conditions that enable and limit what can be

achieved' (Marginson 2011: 420). In terms of the radical reconfigurations of public expenditure on the university, and the concomitant effects this has on the identity and sense of purpose of the university, a point of contention emerges around how the university might invest itself into purposes that are indeed greater than itself. As Marginson (2011) notes:

...if we want to maintain distinctive higher education institutions, they need a foundational public purpose—one that is more than a marketing slogan; and one grounded in more than the survival of the university for its own sake...(413).

The uneasy evolution of the university into a corporate entity that is increasingly not of or for *the publics* in which it is immediately situated place the contemporary university in something of a precarious position. A number of questions arise in consideration of this point; to what purpose does the university align if it acknowledges the distance it has from the publics with whom it geographically sits? How might the realities of global education markets and flows of wealth, knowledge and populations be negotiated? Balancing the seemingly crossed purposes of being locally situated but globally competitive is the challenge facing the contemporary university.

Within the university, and in company with more traditional measures of academic output (research publications and teaching quality as two), engagement has emerged as a significant mechanism through which the outputs (or indeed, *products*) of the university have been mobilised (Perkman, King and Pavelin 2011; McNall, Reed, Brown and Allen 2009; Holland and Ramaley 2008). While these engagement initiatives are conducted variously because-of, sometimes in spite of, but always in context of incentives extant from within the university to do so, the pressures (albeit subtle in most cases) felt to enact and then make known these engagement initiatives, and the relative publicity that accrue from these efforts, provide an interesting case-in-point for what is framed here as an *economy-of-engagement*. In particular, it is suggested that even when the hard-edged corporatisation of the university is massaged via engagement initiatives, the 'clash of values' (Marginson 2000: 29) of deploying engagement in an effort to appear interested and invested often results in engagement that amounts to not much more than veiled attempts to sure-up enrolments, reputation and good-will. The outcome of this sort of positioning of engagement prefaces the economic challenges engagement is often deployed to meet. Engagement in this regard is reduced to little more than solicitation; the demonstration of the value of being present and active within publics, but all the while cast in terms of the economic returns it produces.

The Nature of Engagement

An impression that might be derived from university attempts to engage over the last decade is one of a university *forced* to make meaningful to publics and industry the work that it does. Underlying this is a logic of relevance where a form of positive presence can be both deployed and measured as a panacea to reassure distrusting local publics and stave-off threatening global education markets. This is intimated in Rowe and Brass' (2008) pointed summation that universities (and the staff within them) are often considered to be:

'out of touch', disconnected from the 'real world', outside the ivory tower, complacently and indulgently oblivious to 'ordinary people's' needs and priorities. (678)

Observations such as this highlight a perceived, if not real, problem of the function of universities in the current era. Dill (1982) suggested some time ago when noting the dual-effect of 'exogenous shocks such as the globalisation of higher education markets as well as alterations in endogenous processes such as the technology of information' (22) that the public perception of the university has shifted so-much-so that the *old* ways of doing things while not yet redundant, now coalesce with seemingly endless administrative reporting tasks, the maintenance of solely income-derived research agendas, fundamental shifts in teaching and pedagogy and myriad other functions that are designed to provide empirical accounts of the value of academic labours. This layer of *administrivia* however is often considered secondary to the *real work* of academics but necessary for the maintenance of reputation. Often times engagement too is viewed this way—as a task not considered to be truly academic, but one that is demanded as fundamental for justifying the existence of the university.

Central amongst this is the very idea of engagement and what it historically has come to represent. When cast across an amalgam of activities as diverse as research partnerships with community and industry bodies, education outreach, media briefings, visits to schools and other education providers, the provision of community awards, provision of public services, the enactment of affirmative action initiatives and more (University of Western Sydney 2014; University of Melbourne 2014a; University of South Australia 2014; University of Sunshine Coast 2014), the nature of engagement as it currently stands in universities is both complex and unwieldy in definition. In short, 'engagement' can come to mean all manner of activities that in one way or other derive an audience or point of reception *outside* of the university.

Typical definitions of engagement used by universities are indicated in the following:

Engagement is a term used to describe the process and range of activities where the university interacts, connects and collaborates with its stakeholders to achieve wider benefits through its actions. (University of Sunshine Coast 2014)

Knowledge partnerships are interactions between the university and external groups or individuals and are essential to ensuring the university's public-spirited character. Melbourne will continue to expand the number and scope of its knowledge partnerships and ensure effective metrics to promote excellence in these activities. The university values its relationship with alumni, and acknowledges that there are many more opportunities to be explored. (University of Melbourne 2014a)

A theme common to many of the definitions applied by universities is the promise of mutual benefit that engagement acts might result in. An expression of this is captured in the following:

As urban universities around the country have discovered, the engagement invariably turns out to be mutually beneficial. (Houston Chronicle 2014)

The challenge at the time was to become 'more accessible to non-academic communities, players, and potential partners'. Attention was focused on activities that fell under the description 'knowledge transfer', acknowledging that the university occupies a public space and is expected to contribute to intellectual, social and economic life. (University of Melbourne 2014b).

The assertion of the value and role of the university within these views is predominant, but exactly how this is to occur remains somewhat more vague and spread across a number of sites of enactment. Engagement refers to an almost endless array of activities conducted outside the walls of the academy, but at core, contemporary iterations generally preface engagement being done with partners beyond the university, but in ways that remain 'mutually beneficial' and ensure a return on the investment of time and money.

Bruning, McGrew and Cooper (2006) identify this approach to university engagement under a 'town-gown' model. In this conceptualisation the university maintains an outward focus, symbolically reifying a split between the university and the host community (something Rooney (2014) notes when suggesting that '[t]he term town-gown itself typically conjures up acrimony and tension which has frequently played out when academic and community stakeholders have interacted'). Such an approach to engagement prefaces the university as *having something to offer* to community and industry partners. On a more malevolent front, this approach also suggests something of the ways the corporate university might consider the community as a site of opportunity; as a site for the discovery of new student and research markets, or more generally as a location to assert a presence within the reputation-laden higher education landscape. If engagement comes to be deployed simply as an effort to sure up the university's interests, then nothing much will ultimately change. Instead, Bruning, McGrew and Cooper (2006) suggest that universities intent on genuinely engaging should enact engagement initiatives that enable community members to genuinely access the university; via such things as the provision of opportunities to access and participate in the intellectual, artistic and sporting cultures of the academy. A caveat to taking this approach however is that, for the corporate university, these activities may not readily translate into profit.

It remains that the tensions present within the 'corporate university' (Giroux 2011; Washburn 2011) will have an effect on how engagement initiatives are conducted, not least in terms of how individual academics confront the landscape of the university and community, but also in how community and industry partnerships might be welcomed *into* the university as genuine and mutually meaningful. This theme is important, as it suggests what might be referred to as a *dialogic* approach to engagement, whereby the roles of both the university and engagement partner have valuable contributions to make to the collaboration; a theme that will be touched on again later in this article.

What follows is an account of this author's own experiences of engaging with a local government partner in professional development and research collaborations. Prefaced amongst a discussion of the pragmatic aspects of working mutually, collaboratively and with an ethic of respect, a theorisation of the differing 'knowledge ecologies' that both the author and his local government collaborators confronted as part of the engagement will be offered. Charted as an *act of translation*, the engagement experience functioned according to the learning of each others' *languages*; languages constituted by the professional practice, institutional dynamics and epistemic conditions of each institutional setting. Detailed here is an account of how engagement might be considered via these acts of translation.

A Case Example: Working with Toowoomba Regional Council

In early 2011 members of staff of the Toowoomba Regional Council's Community Development and Facilities branch approached the author to undertake an evaluation

review of their youth community engagement initiatives. This progressed successfully and reports were prepared as each evaluation was conducted. Further collaborations were invited—in fact, in 2012, the author attended the branch strategic planning meetings and was invited to offer insights as a research collaborator.

This led to a major project stream; one that is still running and is currently funded through the *Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government*. The ‘engagement’ became somewhat more serious at this point, as now it was being noticed; both within the university and local government setting as well as by external funding agencies. This recognition afforded a *currency* to the work; not just in terms of the funding stream the grant provided at an immediate level, but also in terms of a noticeable, but far harder to quantify sense of prestige. This currency was formulated around what came to be understood as an economy of engagement, manifesting in such markers of prestige as public recognition and announcements regarding the funding success in university communiqué, positive recognition from colleagues mobilised through the recognition of expertise and the seeking of advice on matters of engagement conduct and practice, invitations to speak on research and engagement in university forums and so on. This economy of engagement carried a sense of status as its underlying currency. Although universities have long held their markers of prestige, whether through the vaunting of research, and perhaps more recently (but arguably less prominently) teaching success, engagement has also risen to a level of prominence. As a point from which prestige might be gained and status conferred, engagement affords a specific currency within the corporate university.

The form of engagement undertaken in the case detailed here blended research and consultancy; consultancy via the provision of program evaluations of the youth community engagement initiatives run by the Community Development and Facilities branch, but mobilised as research according to the opportunities this engagement provided to access case sites, participant groups and other sources of data. It was in these terms that the currency of the engagement materialised as something tangible, manifesting (eventually) in the form of written reports and, significantly, scholarly journal articles (of which, this article is itself an example).

The act of translation that was core to this engagement initiative worked on a number of levels. Firstly, and within the context of a university system that increasingly requires justification of the time and resources expended, the value of the currency had to be shown in terms of the ‘measurable output’ (as they have come to be known); journal articles published and other such markers of value recognised by the university. But importantly, the translation also needed to function the other way, and be of some meaningful significance to the partner. While the first of these acts of translation I had some form of control over (namely through the production of scholarly publications and similar ‘outputs’ that drew from the data-sets able to be captured during the engagement), the second was much more fluid and difficult. Ensuring that what emerged from the evaluations and research collaborations had some value (and meaning) to the local government partner involved preparing outputs that weren’t typically recognised within the university. It was with this that a dilemma emerged. Ultimately, and in terms of the act of translation operating *as the framing of understandings*, what was at stake was the mutual creation of knowledge generated out of the engagement, but of which, only selected forms were recognised as valuable. Although the partner engaged also had desires for what should result from this engagement, the outcomes of value required from the university invariably meant little in the partner context. Beyond highlighting some fundamental issues of the purpose and value of traditional scholarly outputs as mechanisms of knowledge transfer, what this emphasised

were the competing forces at play within the engagement act. Something had to give; and in this particular instance, this involved the preparation of reports, presentations and similar outcomes that were highly valued by the engagement partner, but not necessarily recognised by the university (and most certainly not remunerated as a legitimate component of an academic workload).

There were two dimensions of this translation that marked the nature of this engagement. Firstly was the translation of respective measures of value for each institution; for the local government partners, the translation of consultancy funding into forms that would enhance organisational capability was key, with this demonstrated in professional development programs convened as part of the wider engagement and the enactment of recommendations from reports prepared from the findings of research. For the university, the translation charted a different set of outcomes to justify the time and intellectual labour applied to these engagement acts; namely the preparation of reportable research outcomes in the form of journal articles. This related to a wider economy of engagement where the value proposition of undertaking this work was prefaced on the translation of this academic labour into a recognisable form of value for the university.

The second translation occurred according to the coalescence of the knowledge ecologies the engagement motivated. As a fundamental aspect of the engagement, I had to learn my engagement partner's language, as they did mine. At the centre of this was a pedagogical encounter and one in which learning was central to the engagement. One moment during a consultancy program provided a key example of this (Hickey, Bates and Reynolds 2014)¹. I quickly realised that the way I spoke, the way I did things as an academic researcher weren't going to cut it when working with my partners in the branch. For instance, I was often encouraged by the manager of the branch and fellow participants in the program to *keep things straightforward, and avoid the academic jargon*. My language, the language I took for granted but subsequently went to efforts to keep 'straightforward', didn't always enable communication with my collaborators. I also realised that the way my local government colleagues spoke and did things were in many instances foreign to me. Things like using certain acronyms and processes to describe practice and 'internal' structures didn't mean much to me, but were profoundly important for my colleagues. This was the inner working of the organisation on show; here was the expression of the knowledge ecology of this place, one that was rhetorically unfamiliar to me and epistemologically oriented in different ways. Just as my partners were learning my language, I too had to negotiate and *learn* theirs. This was important—the *translation* of the respective knowledge ecologies of university and local government became a prompt for learning—a pedagogical encounter.

This clearly took time. Collaborations such as this require the investment of time to form connections, generate trust and enable the flow of communication between partners. The measurement of this aspect of the engagement did not however translate fully back to the university. Time spent on impromptu visits to meet with collaborators, in framing up aspects of projects at different stages and the process of generally getting down to the business of collaborating didn't count. This was the 'grey' labour of the collaboration. Unless included as a component of the financial costing of a formal consultancy arrangement—something that not all engagement activities can or should contain—this time remained invisible and was borne by, in this case, me as the individual academic conducting this work 'off the clock', in my own time. Although the realities of academic work are such that increasing portions of work are done on the individual's 'own time' (Damrosch 1995), it struck how some things counted while others clearly did not.

The risk is that a rush toward engagement that only produces tangible outcomes for the university will result in the sort of engagement that is only interested in the 'survival of the university for its own sake' (Marginson 2011: 413). This will of course result in an aberration, and without mechanisms for recognising value that extend beyond the economic alone and that result in engagement practices that are mercenary and fixated solely on the gain of the university, not only do opportunities to enact scholarly work beyond the university dissipate, but so too does the very purpose of the university as a public institution. In extracting only that which satisfies the balance sheet, so much more is missed. It also occurs at a very pragmatic level, that in seeking to engage but by limiting the possibility for recognising the real work of those staff who undertake the engagement, a basic neglect is present. Beyond seeing remuneration as a basic inducement to entice staff to engage with partners, providing mechanisms for effectively recognising the non-economic value of engagement would serve individual staff, and universities, well.

The Ethics of Engagement

The case example detailed above was conducted with an ethic for practice in mind; of expecting reciprocity and mutual benefit, of prefacing respect for other ways of knowing and doing things and maintaining equality of viewpoints and responsibility for ensuring that what I had to say as an academic actually came to mean something for my partners. It meant that the translation of the academic knowledge I carried remained of significance for my local government partners *and* that in return, the local government knowledge that I confronted provided new avenues for understanding to me. It isn't a case that as academics *we know it all*—that theory and method are somehow concentrated in the university ready for deployment in the wilds of community and industry. Similarly, it isn't to say that community or industry fulfil in entirety the role of repository of what it is the university is trying to get its hands on; whether this be some virgin case site for a research application or inquiry, or perhaps more mercenarily, as a source of funding.

What is at stake in effective engagement is the *coalescence* of knowledge ecologies. As academics we have *our* 'knowledge', just as industry and community have theirs. This is a type of 'situated knowledge' in the sense that Haraway (1988) might see it. There are logics at play within these situated knowledges—epistemological orientations that denote how things come to be done and known in each location. It is the shape and 'mood' of the knowledge ecology and what it prescribes of those ways of knowing that determines how the engagement will proceed. But at core, what the engagement is about is the traversing of these knowledge ecologies via acts of translation to find some new terrain of shared understanding and collaboration. To borrow very loosely from Homi Bhabha (2004), this is the seeking of a 'third space' of understanding from which the engagement might become meaningful².

The central point from this discussion is that the respective knowledge ecologies of the university and community or industry partner cannot in total be applied evenly to the other without some form of translation. But equally, the orientation from which this is done must take account of the ethics of engagement to honestly declare why the engagement is sought. If the engagement is solely interested in bolstering the economic position of the university, then some genuine declaration of these motives should be offered. If the engagement is however interested in genuinely seeking collaboration, then it would be wise to recognise that value from these forms of engagement extend beyond what can be reduced to economic measures alone. In the end, without asserting itself as an important

public institution interested in the support of its publics through open and collaborative engagement, the university really has little actual function.

Final Notes: Some thoughts on the conduct of university engagement

In terms of those engagement experiences noted above, what did all this mean? Firstly it came to say something about the implicit expectations core to engagement initiatives conducted by universities and the ways value is assigned to these. It also came to say something about the ways an individual academic might function and what limits and possibilities exist in the engagement act. Indeed, academics do have important and significant things to say, but these views are partial and specific to the knowledge ecologies that form them. As Paula Saukko (2005) importantly notes with regard to academic research:

Research is viewed as being not above or below, but in the middle, as one among many actors that forges connections between different institutions, people and things, creating, fomenting, and halting social processes (345).

This is important. If academics are to avoid *halting social processes* and to productively add to the creation of social relationships and settings, a deep consciousness of the limits of academic knowledge—the boundaries around this knowledge—must be recognised. This requires an ethic by which new knowledges might be broached via those acts of translation deployed during an engagement. Only then can new terrains of understanding be realised and the limits of the knowledge ecologies of the university be effectively traversed. But clearly, this also requires the acknowledgment of why the engagement is being conducted in the first place, and the exposure of the purpose to which the engagement is being put.

As a final remark to close this paper, what the experiences of engaging recounted briefly above offered was a chance to take stock of how it is that an external partner was engaged from the context of a contemporary university. This involved understanding intimately what the context of the university prescribes of academics and intellectual workers operating within a climate of significant change and competition—largely as a result of the corporatisation of the university as an economically motivated entity—but also the extent to which university knowledge might be counted as *useful* outside of the ivory tower. The boundaries of the knowledge ecologies of the university and the ways of knowing that these prescribe required translation for the engagement to occur, and it is this central point that must be acknowledged if engagement is to effectively proceed. It isn't enough to impose university knowledge onto a community; instead an ethic by which the dialogic engagement of those knowledges created variously within the university and those beyond must come together if a meaningful collaboration is to proceed. This will require universities to come to terms with how value is recognised, and how it is that engagement might be positioned to provide insight into the concerns and needs of those partners engaged. If the knowledge produced in the university is to have meaningful significance and impact, engagement with community, industry and other partners beyond the university must certainly proceed. Acknowledgment that this might sometimes induce financial costs but open the possibility for other, less tangible, mutual and infinitely more significant benefits, will also need to be given.

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¹ This program, the 'Evaluation and Assessment of Community Programs' professional development package, was a twelve module program that worked through research methods and evaluation

techniques. This program sought to provide my local government partners with skills in conducting their own evaluations- to shift the knowledge of research and evaluation procedure out of the university and into the practitioner's repertoire of skills. Hence, the label of 'practitioner researchers' was applied to my local government colleagues. They were now not only local government community engagement practitioners but also capable social researchers.

² This is certainly the application Martin, Snow and Torrez (2011) make of Bhabha's conceptualisation in their discussion of community-school partnerships.