What is Public Engagement?

Many definitions exist of public engagement – or for the related terms ‘civic engagement’, ‘community engagement’ and ‘the engaged university’. Many of these have been developed internationally. This document lists some of the most interesting that we have come across. Please do contact us to add to this list if you know of others, or if you have a particular favourite definition to share.

Definitions

“For the purposes of this initiative the term ‘public engagement’ covers a wide range of activities. Any good public engagement activity should involve specialists listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with nonspecialists. It covers schemes that involve nonspecialists in the work of HEIs and research institutes and centres, and can include participatory processes and activities in museums, arts festivals and science centres. However, it does not include activities where the primary purpose is to generate approval or acceptance of the institution (such as might be carried out by an organisation’s public relations department), or to recruit students, for example through open days. The term ‘public’ includes individuals, groups, young people and their families who do not currently have a formal relationship with an HEI through teaching, research or knowledge transfer, but who may have an interest in these activities.”

HEFCE 2006/49

‘Public engagement is a term that has recently been used, particularly in the UK, to describe ”the involvement of specialists listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with, non-specialists” (as defined by England’s university funding agency, HEFCE, in 2006’

Wikipedia

‘At the university, civic engagement has been conceptualized around two definitions. On one hand, the concept is defined as ‘a collection of practices loosely grouped under a policy framework designed to connect ... a university with its naturally constituent community.’ On the other hand, civic engagement is seen as presenting a challenge to universities ‘to be of and not just in the community; not simply to engage in “knowledge transfer” but to establish a dialogue across the boundary between the university and its community, which is open ended, fluid and experimental.’ Both definitions focus on the need for the university to be intricately linked with the community and engaged in a constant dialogue that values reciprocity’.

‘The university’s mission statement emphasizes that the institution should seek to be an ‘accessible, dynamic and responsive community of higher education, enhancing lives, communities, disciplines and professions.’ Further, it aims to ‘nurture its intellectual capital ethically, imaginatively, and sustainably, and make this widely available.’

University of Brighton

‘Community Engagement describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.’

Carnegie Foundation


2 Ibid.
The concept of ‘engagement’ can also cover a very wide range of modalities, from the blandest form of communication through to an active community development role by the University. Provision of information is important of course, in its own right, but effective engagement requires a genuine degree of involvement and dialogue leading to empowerment. Community engagement is made effective through the development of social capital, that is the extent and quality of citizen’s social engagement with the life of their communities. Social capital provides citizens with the information, the social networks and the personal confidence to engage with the world around them in a productive way. The University has a vital role to play in the development of this social capital.’

Dublin City University

The publicly engaged institution is fully committed to direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise for mutual benefit’.

American Association of State Colleges and Universities

‘Engagement is the partnership of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to:

1) enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity;
2) enhance curriculum, teaching and learning;
3) prepare educated, engaged citizens;
4) strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility;
5) address critical societal issues; and
6) contribute to the public good’.

University of Minnesota

Community engagement differs from other university activities involving local communities by both its goal and the character of the relationship which the university aims to build, ie one of partnership and shared objectives based on mutually recognised community and university competencies. Community engagement is not just a pleasant sound side-line but a set of strategic activities of more profound import’

Bradford University

‘Public Engagement involves a partnership in which there is mutually beneficial, two-way interaction between the university and some entity within the metropolitan region or the Commonwealth. Both Outreach and Public Engagement contribute to stewardship of place either by taking resources and expertise to off-campus locations or by bringing the public or subsets of the public onto the campus’.

Northern Kentucky University

“Engagement – in which institutions and communities form lasting relationships that influence, shape, and promote success in both spheres – is rare. More frequently, there is evidence of unilateral outreach, rather than partnership based on mutual benefit, mutual respect, and mutual accountability.”

Kellogg Foundation

Community engagement - initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the higher education institution in the areas of teaching and research are applied to address issues relevant to its community. Community engagement typically finds expression in a variety of forms, ranging from informal and relatively unstructured activities to formal and structured academic programmes addressed at particular community needs

South African Council on Higher Education
Our Definition of "Civic Engagement" is derived from the Association of Commonwealth Universities: Engagement implies strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world in at least four spheres:

- First, setting universities’ aims, purposes and priorities;
- Secondly, relating teaching and learning to the wider world;
- Thirdly, the back-and-forth-dialogue between researchers and practitioners; and,
- Fourthly, taking on fuller responsibilities as neighbours and citizens

Talloires network

Engagement is fully committed to direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies through the development, exchange and application of knowledge, information and expertise for mutual benefit’.

American Association of State Colleges and Universities

“Outreach and engagement occur when scholarship is applied directly for the public good and when the relationship between partners is reciprocal and mutually beneficial.”

Michigan State University, Office of Outreach and Engagement

University-community engagement is a two-way scholarly work that may be initiated/planed and coordinated by either side or in partnership, which are mutually beneficial and that cuts across the missions of teaching, research and service. From the point of view of their primary goal, engagement activities may take various forms, the most encountered in the literature being:

- Continuing education (studies), lifelong learning;
- Community-Based Research (CBR), Participatory (Action) Research (PAR/PR);
- Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR);
- Service learning, experiential learning;
- Outreach;
- Knowledge mobilization;
- Athletics, sports and recreation;
- Health education;
- Professional community service, technical assistance;
- Social advocacy;
- Cultural development;
- Economic / business partnership and development

University of Victoria

“By ‘community engagement’ we mean applying institutional resources (e.g., knowledge and expertise of students, faculty and staff; political position, buildings and land) to address and solve challenges facing communities through collaboration with these communities. ... Community engagement is not necessarily scholarship.”

Community Campus Partnerships for Health
“Engagement is defined as a meaningful and mutually beneficial collaboration with partners in education, business, and public and social service. It involves using:

- That aspect of teaching that enables learning beyond the campus walls;
- That aspect of research that makes what we discover useful beyond the academic community; and
- That aspect of service that directly benefits the public.”

Ohio State University

“Engagement is the partnership of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.”

Committee on Institutional Cooperation, Committee on Engagement

“By engagement, we refer to institutions that have redesigned their teaching, research, and extension and service functions to become even more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities, however community may be defined.”

National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges

“Community Engagement describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.”

Carnegie Foundation

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Kellogg Foundation

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American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)
Task Force on Public Engagement

“The scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic and ethical problems.”

Ernest Boyer, Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate

“Conscious efforts to bring the resources and expertise at our institutions to bear on community, state, national and international problems in a coherent way ... Moving beyond outreach and public service to a new conception of ‘engagement’ with the community (however defined) in ways that serve both institutional and community needs.”

Renewing the Covenant: Learning, Discovery and Engagement in a New Age and Different World
(Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities)
“Seven guiding characteristics seem to define an engaged institution. They constitute a seven-part test of engagement. 1) Responsiveness ... 2) Respect for partners ... 3) Academic neutrality ... 4) Accessibility ... 5) Integration ... 6) Coordination ... and 7) Resource partnerships...”

Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution
(Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities)