

# Are you engaged in engagement?

December 2014 saw the launch of the ACU Engage Community – a new special interest group for all those working or involved in university community engagement. Here, **David Phipps** offers an overview of this important area and suggests how universities can start to bring their institutions closer to the society around them.

**T**he ACU Engage Community is a new forum for all those involved in engagement activities that support teaching, learning and research in higher education. Through discussion, debate, news, and the exchange of good practice, the Community will explore how engagement with communities, the public, and the intended users of research can maximise the impact of academic research on public policies, professional practices, and social services. But what do we mean by ‘engagement’ and why is it so important?

## Understanding engagement

Many terms are potentially captured under the concept of university community engagement, including the scholarship of engagement, commercialisation, the third mission, public-facing activities, and student volunteering.

Equally wide-ranging are the methods for engagement. Within the teaching and learning side of the university, for example, we may find service learning, internships and co-op programmes; many undergraduate and graduate courses are also teaching and practicing methods of engagement. In university research departments, meanwhile, we see methods such as community-based research, knowledge mobilisation (also known as research uptake), engaged scholarship, and more.

This article, then, will focus on the variety of engagement activities that support research and engaged scholarship, starting with some key concepts.

## Key concepts

**Knowledge mobilisation**, also known as research uptake, turns research into action. By connecting research, researchers and trainees to partners, stakeholders and end users, research and expertise can inform decisions about new products, policies and services.

Knowledge mobilisation activities include the transfer, translation, and exchange of knowledge for the mutual benefit of academic and non-academic partners. Knowledge mobilisation (the process) may contribute to social innovation (the outcome).

**Social innovation** is the creation or application of research and knowledge to develop sustainable solutions to social, environmental and cultural challenges, with a focus on systems change as well as individual innovations. Social innovation results in more efficient and effective human services, more responsive public policies, and greater cultural understanding.

**Community engagement** is ‘the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity’ (Carnegie Foundation).

**Community-engaged scholarship** involves the researcher in a mutually-beneficial partnership with the community. It results in scholarship deriving from teaching, discovery, integration, application, or engagement.

**Community-based research** occurs when the research questions are driven by community partners, engaging academic and community researchers as equal participants in all stages of the research process. Community-based research is a co-production methodology.

## What are the benefits?

Regardless of the words you choose to illustrate your research engagement activities, there are significant potential benefits for communities and academic partners alike.

- A group of UK-based researchers – Nutley, Walter, and Davies – have shown that research that is co-produced between community and campus collaborators is known to have a greater impact on decision-making than research that is simply translated or transferred from researchers to users. Their book – *Using evidence: How research can inform public services* – is a must-have title for anyone interested in research uptake and how engagement can support the policy and practice impacts of research and evidence.
- The trust which is developed through engagement helps to enhance access to data and to research subjects, thus improving the quality of data and providing more rigorous evidence to partners.

- Students who work with community organisations – through either internships, co-op programmes, or service learning – are exposed to experiences, ways of knowing, and employment opportunities beyond the traditional scholarly career path.
- Community organisations have the opportunity to partner their practice and community expertise with academic expertise to develop new evidence to inform decisions about programmes and services. This evidence will therefore be grounded both in academic rigour and in the reality of community and lived experience.

## The role of partners

Research has the potential to inform decisions about new products, professional practice, public policies, and social services. But this doesn’t happen through research alone. Researchers don’t make and sell products, our industrial partners do. Researchers don’t make public policies, our public sector partners do. And other than practitioners such as health providers and social workers, researchers don’t usually deliver services; our social and healthcare partners do. Impact, therefore, is created by working with partners from the private, public, and non-profit sectors, and is measured by the effect of their products, policies, and services on the lives of citizens.

The following case study from York University in Canada – describing a collaboration between a postgraduate student and an emergency shelter for young people and families in crisis – demonstrates knowledge mobilisation in action.

## Case study: the YES Shelter for Youth and Families of Peterborough

The YES Shelter for Youth and Families of Peterborough in Ontario, Canada, had two challenges: first, a structural budget deficit (local welfare funding only covered two thirds of the cost of a person in a bed); and, second, a ‘revolving door’ situation in which young people were admitted in a crisis, became stabilised, and then left the shelter only to return again in crisis. The shelter contacted York University’s Knowledge Mobilisation

Unit in search of research expertise which could provide a better understanding of their users' needs.

This collaboration resulted in the development of a life-skills mentoring programme, training local social work students as mentors to the young people in crisis. Students were already taking part in practical placements at the shelter, involving cleaning, cooking, and doing repairs. As a result of the collaboration, however, the students are undertaking mentoring and counselling work, and getting better practical experience as a result. Meanwhile, the YES Shelter now only employs students who have worked as mentors, meaning the organisation benefits from better-trained staff.

The programme didn't solve the 'revolving door' problem but it did reduce the length of stays, therefore reducing resource utilisation. The shelter also 'sold' the programme to Children's Aid and the John Howard Society – delivering life-skills mentoring to two large non-profit organisations and creating a revenue stream in the process. This turned the shelter into a revenue-generating social enterprise. And, because it was now delivering training programmes, it became eligible for funding from the Ontario Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities, helping to address the structural budget deficit.

Finally, the postgraduate student who worked in collaboration with the shelter, Naomi Nichols, published four papers, won a PhD thesis prize, and has a book on its way to publication illustrating the benefits accrued to academic and community partners in the collaboration.

In this example, knowledge mobilisation (the 'how') was the process that brokered and supported the collaboration between the

postgraduate student and the Youth Emergency Shelter. The impact (the 'what') of that collaboration was the life-skills mentoring programme – a social innovation.

### Challenges to engagement

There are, of course, some challenges to engagement. These include:

- **A lack of time:** University faculty members have the privilege of protected time for research, but this is often not the case for community collaborators.
- **The attribution of power in collaborative initiatives:** Who controls the resources, the research question, and the dissemination?
- **Capacity-building and development:** Who trains who to work in collaboration?

While there is lots of promise for community engagement, attention clearly needs to be paid to working across the boundaries of community and campus partners to support authentic and 'democratic' partnerships.

### What can you do?

**Researchers:** Students, both graduate and undergraduate, are great knowledge mobilisers, given the right opportunity (such as coursework or internships) and training. Learn to value community and practice-derived knowledge on a par with academic knowledge. Become active on your university's senate, tenure and promotion committees – and within student unions – to advocate for incentives and rewards for community engagement. This is ultimately under the control of faculty, not the university administration.

**Research partners:** Seek out training to work with academic researchers. Advocate for your organisation to create protected time for

research and to develop incentives and rewards to become authentic research partners.

**Universities:** Work with tenure and promotion committees – and through collective bargaining – to establish incentives and rewards for engaged scholarship. Don't just focus on communicating the impact of past research, but rather develop institutional structures to support engaged scholarship that create the conditions for impact. Develop training for research uptake, such as that highlighted by the ACU-led DRUSSA programme (see page 18 of this issue).

**Research funders:** Include non-academic experts as peer reviewers to help assess the potential for impact beyond the university. If impact is a function of partners collaborating with researchers – and if you expect impact from the funds you've awarded – then make collaborating community partners eligible to receive funding for collaborative work at their sites. In addition, don't rely on end-of-project reporting to capture impact. Ask for reports on the continuing impact of the project 3-5 years after the end of the funding period, and require that community partners contribute to these reports.

**Intermediaries/advocates:** Encourage dialogue with and within universities to enable the recommendations listed above. Drive the dialogue with funders. Create programming to support those who support university community engagement, research uptake and knowledge mobilisation.

In conclusion, there are some challenges to working in this new paradigm that require those who have traditionally held power to step back and create room for those with complementary forms of knowledge and expertise. But the payoffs include research that not only has an impact on other scholars but also on the community, through new products, more responsive public policies, and improved social services. ■

## ACU Member Communities

The ACU Engage Community is the first in a cohort of new special interest groups – known as Member Communities – to be launched over the coming year.

In May 2015, the ACU Research, Knowledge and Information Community will launch with a reception held as part of the ACU's 'Research and Innovation for global challenges' conference in South Africa. The community is aimed at all university staff who support and encourage, but don't directly engage in, the research process. This will be followed in June 2015 by the ACU Internationalisation Community, which aims to explore major developments in international education, including issues relating to student and staff mobility, international campuses, and the internationalisation of curricula and research.

We invite all ACU members with an interest in these areas to become a part of the Member Communities and join the growing debate. We want to hear about your work, your thoughts on the current challenges in the sector, and how your university is working to overcome them. To join, visit [www.acu.ac.uk/member-communities](http://www.acu.ac.uk/member-communities)

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To join the ACU Engage Community, visit [www.acu.ac.uk/engage](http://www.acu.ac.uk/engage)