

# **Benchmarking university community engagement: Developing a national approach in Australia**

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This article provides the background and describes the processes involved in establishing a national approach to benchmarking the way universities engage with their local and regional communities in Australia. Local and regional community engagement is a rapidly expanding activity in Australian public universities and is increasingly being seen as part of the universal quality assurance assessment process. An initiative of the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA), the benchmarking framework was developed over almost three years and involved considerable consultation and testing. The framework comprises an institutional questionnaire, a partner perceptions survey and a 'good practice' template. The instruments were tested in a pilot of 12 AUCEA member universities and will be implemented in all 33 AUCEA member universities in late 2008. Comparative results will be available early in 2009. The framework will assist universities and their community partners improve their contribution to society and the environment through mutual knowledge exchange, learning and enterprising action.

## **The environment for university and community engagement in Australia**

### ***AUCEA***

The last decade in Australia has seen a significant increase in the connections universities are making with their local and regional communities. To provide support to this, the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) was established five years ago ([www.aucea.net.au](http://www.aucea.net.au)). The AUCEA develops tools, encourages networking and dialogue, learning and scholarship to facilitate meaningful connections between its member universities and the local and regional communities in which they are located. It also runs an annual national conference, an on-line journal (*The Australasian Journal of University Community Engagement*), an on-line newsletter for member institutions, and a visiting scholars program. The AUCEA is a voluntary association with membership to date comprising 33 of the 38 public universities in Australia.

Over the past nearly three years the AUCEA has been designing a benchmarking framework to assist member universities evaluate their community engagement activities. An initial planning document was prepared, several membership workshops held, and a working group established. An institutional questionnaire, a partner survey and a 'good practice' template were prepared for pilot testing among 12 member institutions. A full evaluation for all member universities and their partners will take place late in 2008. It is planned that the evaluations will be carried out nationally on a regular basis following this.

The community engagement benchmarking framework developed in Australia has a dual purpose. First, to enable universities to make ongoing comparisons with other universities throughout Australia and, through this, the adoption of 'good practice' continuous improvement where relevant to their circumstances, while retaining individual institutional performance confidentiality. Second, to provide the core framework elements to enable each university to tailor a comprehensive local benchmarking process, consistent with their particular mission and community context, within an overall institutional quality management agenda.

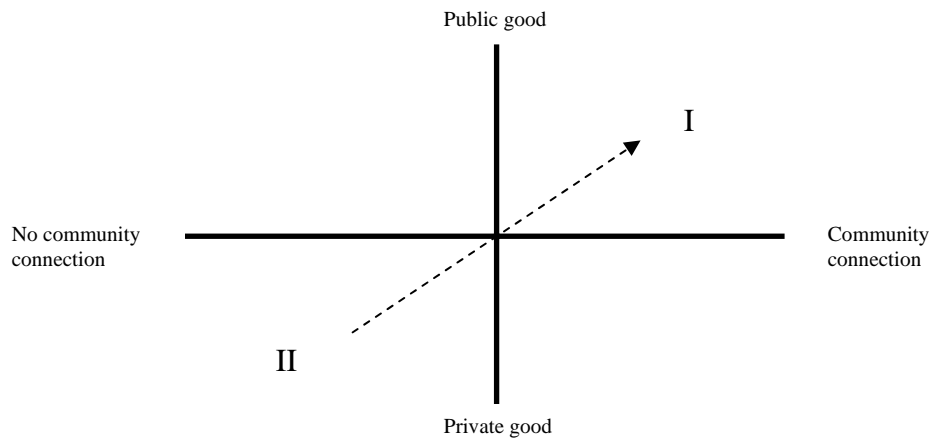
### ***Third stream funding***

The pressure of globalisation and the recognition of the importance of knowledge and expertise in this context has in many countries seen the growing importance of the university in building a viable regional and local community (Goddard 1997, Arbo and Benneworth 2007, OECD 2007). In Australia this growing interest, together with a strong program of campus regionalisation (Garlick 1998, 2000, Garlick and Pryor 2003), led to a policy discussion among a number of interest groups about the need for an additional or 'third stream' of university funding, alongside education and research funding (AVCC 2005, BHERT 2006, FASTS 2006). AUCEA and the benchmarking project however saw community engagement not as an additional or separate university function to mainstream research and education, but as a way of knowledge working that

embraced full university scholarship within existing education and research funding streams (see [www.aucea.net.au](http://www.aucea.net.au)).

For the AUCEA, community engagement by universities is underpinned by two factors. First, that some portion of academic goals are best achieved through collaborative knowledge-based relationships with the local and regional community in which they are located. Second, universities as publicly funded, autonomous, and spatially distributed institutions of learning and knowledge, have a responsibility through the creation of human capital and the research and innovation they carry out to ethically contribute to the 'public good' big issues of the world that resonate in their local and regional communities (Boyer 1996, Garlick and Palmer 2007 and 2008). Quadrant I in the schematic Figure 1 best represents the AUCEA approach to this sphere of university activity.

Figure 1: **University purpose and community focus**



### ***Quality audit***

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) carries out regular institutional audits of university quality ([www.auqa.gov.au](http://www.auqa.gov.au)), including more recently their community and regional engagement responsibilities. The mission of AUQA is to undertake periodic audits of higher education institutions so as to report on the relative standards of the Australian higher education system and its quality assurance processes.

University engagement responsibilities with their local and regional communities will increasingly feature in the regular quality audit assessments undertaken by AUQA. The benchmarking work undertaken under the auspices of AUCEA, and discussed in this article, is likely to form a basis for future institutional quality audit work of AUQA.

### ***Institutional viability***

The last ten years has seen a regionalisation of university campuses throughout Australia facilitated by an equity policy of government to enhance participation in non-metropolitan and peri-urban areas (Garlick 1998, 2000; Garlick and Pryor 2002). There

has however been research (Stevenson et al 1999) over recent years that has dispelled the effectiveness of such a singular approach. Policies that do not cause universities to go beyond a 'just being there' approach to their spatiality will not achieve their institutional viability objectives. It is also unlikely they will have any positive knowledge-based impact on the viability of the community in which the campus is located.

Simple university location without engagement has not been a recipe for regionalised campus viability. Many universities have more recently therefore sought to strengthen their local and regional connectivity to ensure their program offerings rate highly in local student preferences, their programs and graduates are consistent with business and community needs, and there are local research partnerships and resource sharing to minimise operating costs.

### ***Research Quality Framework***

The final area with the potential to further influence the increased take-up of community and regional development engagement initiatives by higher education institutions in Australia relates to increasing policy pressure by government for university research funding to demonstrate meaningful and purposeful impact in business and the community (Bishop 2006). What policy funding format this will take with a new Federal Government is still to be determined, however it is likely that assessing the impact of community and regional engagement processes will figure in this.

### **Measuring engagement**

#### ***Why measure?***

The practice of benchmarking can have two objectives. First, it can be used as a means for assessing the quality and cost performance of an organisation's practices and processes in the context of industry-wide or function-specific 'good practice' comparisons. This is usually carried out as part of an organisation's accountability responsibility to an accrediting, funding or regulatory authority. Second, and more fundamentally, benchmarking can be used as an on-going diagnostic management tool focused on learning, collaboration and leadership to achieve continuous improvement in the organisation over time.

The last ten years has seen a growth in performance benchmarking in the higher education environment as governments have sought increased quality in teaching and learning, greater industry applicability in research, greater efficiency in institutional operation, and greater prudential responsibility for the public funds provided (Garlick and Pryor 2002).

Universities receive considerable public funding to deliver on their education, research and innovation responsibilities. Funding agencies want to be assured that funding is being spent in areas that are consistent with national efficiency and equity priorities. Quality outcomes are therefore important. Universities are also one of the few institutions with the critical mass, spatial presence, focus on knowledge creation and distribution, and international connectivity to contribute to the sustainability of the

communities in which they are located. Communities also want to be convinced that a university presence is a net positive contributor to their areas and not one that contributes to a 'brain drain' of human capital and diminished competitiveness. University and community partnerships are important.

However, for the most part university budgets are tight and resource allocation decisions need to be made based on where the best returns on outlay, including broader returns to the 'public good', can be obtained. A strategy of community and regional engagement will only be resourced if the returns on outlay are sufficient.

Until now, there has been no comprehensive and ongoing performance assessment framework in place in Australia for community and regional engagement (Garlick and Pryor 2003, Garlick and Langworthy 2004).

### *Types of measurement*

Generally there have been three broad types of assessment that are undertaken by universities of their regional and community engagement. These are: (a) guided self-evaluation with expert peer review; (b) metric assessment based on an agreed schedule or typology of measures; and (c) a hybrid of (a) and (b).

#### Self-assessment and Peer-review:

The first way to view benchmarking in the university situation uses normative terms like 'collaboration', 'organisation learning', 'inclusiveness', 'reflection', 'review', 'leadership', and 'improvement'. This way is about connecting up relevant stakeholders both within and outside the institution in such a way that leads to knowledge exchange about why, what, where and how improvement might occur. Recent performance assessment of university contribution to regional development by the OECD (2007) is an example of a comprehensive application of this approach ([www.oecd.org/edu/higher/regionaldevelopment](http://www.oecd.org/edu/higher/regionaldevelopment)). Other examples of this kind are those regularly undertaken and published by The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) (see <http://www.finheec.fi>) for the engagement between universities and their local communities.

Self-assessment and peer review processes deliver informed points of view about what is working well and where improvement can be made. They are mostly qualitative based on the expertise of the reviewers.

There are advantages and disadvantages with the self-evaluation and peer review approach to benchmarking the contribution of the university to regional and local communities. An important advantage is that it enables a learned process between the reviewer and the reviewed and allows the acquisition of more intelligence based on probing questions by knowledgeable and skilled interviewers. Use of a consistent peer-review team and interviewing template potentially enables cross-regional and cross-national evaluative comparisons. A further advantage is that it enables a focus and connection with key community objectives, rather than an assessment framework that sits outside a specific set of articulated community priorities. The disadvantages are that

reviewers may be influenced in their assessments by their home higher education system and culture, there may be questions about methods of group decision making, and so on.

#### Framework Metrics:

There are now a number of frameworks that have been developed with a considerable metric component that focus on the engaged relationship between communities and their regional and local communities (see Charles and Benneworth 2001, Gelmon 2001, Kellog Commission 1999, Committee on Institutional Cooperation 2005, New Generation Universities 2005). In most cases consultation (with varying degrees of thoroughness) underpins the structuring of the framework itself. The advantages of such approaches are that they more readily enable comparative study across institutions, regions, cultures and systems, which is attractive to funding agencies. The disadvantages are that they rather tend to provide a static framework based around the nature of the institutional partnership with the community and are not always operationally connected to the achievement of long term core institutional or 'public good' objectives. It is also possible such approaches do not offer a learning framework that enable improvement based on dialogue and the exchange of knowledge.

Such approaches tend to emphasise short-term performance assessment rather than focus on long-term improvement, and tend not to join up functional areas through learning about improvement, thereby limiting longer run commitment to implementation.

### **The AUCEA benchmarking project**

#### ***Background***

The AUCEA benchmarking discussion began at its national conference in 2005 where the disparate understandings and needs of member institutions were identified. In 2006 a discussion paper, *Assessing University Community Engagement* (Garlick & Langworthy, 2006), drawing on other experiences and was workshopped with all AUCEA member universities. Over the following 12 months a working group of 12 member universities developed the benchmarking framework and its instruments, and undertook a pilot benchmarking exercise in 12 institutions and their communities.

A hybrid approach was taken in the AUCEA benchmarking framework based on a balance of mutual dialogue, reflective learning, and qualitative self-assessment, as well as quantitative data that are readily available and indicative. The approach balanced short and long term assessment considerations recognising the need to regularly report to partner and interest groups and the need for a long term view of the way universities meaningfully contribute to society and the environment locally, regionally, nationally and globally. The approach also sought to balance the need for measures and targets that address both the *process* of partnership building and the progression toward the intended *outcomes*.

#### ***Benchmarking principles***

Based on member consultation and the literature, the following two principles guided the construction of the benchmarking framework:

- That it assist the university and its community partners improve their contribution to society and the environment through mutual knowledge exchange and action; and
- the process of engagement between universities and their communities is a learning process where all participants see themselves as learners.

### ***Framework instruments and processes***

Goals, strategies and measures:

Five overarching community engagement goals were identified as being common to all university circumstances, irrespective of structural diversity and stage of development. The five goals are:

- To facilitate informed debate and dialogue in the community on issues of local and global importance;
- to ensure university governance, management and administration processes support effective community engagement;
- to ensure the university is accessible, outward reaching and responsive to its communities;
- to ensure the social, environmental, cultural and economic value of research to the university's communities; and
- to design and deliver high quality teaching and learning that responds to community needs and produces graduates who are ethical, employable and engaged citizens.

Eighteen strategies and supporting performance measures were aligned to the five goals. The measures were both quantitative and qualitative, with the qualitative measures populated through a convergence of the qualitative measures in both the institutional questionnaire and the partner perception survey.

Filters:

To assess the reasonableness of each identified measure, a series of filters was used before their final selection. The filters covered the following broad areas:

- Relevance and applicability;
- efficiency and cost of collection;
- ensuring comparability across institutions, communities and over time;
- are transparent and auditable;
- balance between qualitative and quantitative;
- give information about the future; and
- are replicable.

Institutional questionnaire:

The institutional questionnaire requires both quantitative and qualitative responses to the community engagement role of the university. The quantitative data

required were identified to be in areas that may either already be collected for other purposes, or could quite easily be added to other data gathering processes. The qualitative data are based around responding to a four point self-assessment scale reflecting the degree of engagement and covered areas such as structural support, support for dialogue and partnership among staff and students, support provided through university governance and management arrangements, university accessibility, and the role of teaching programs and research in fostering engagement. A whole-of-university approach to the determination of this data in the individual institution assessment process is recommended to ensure a consensus view. The questions in the institutional survey broadly equate with the goals outlined in the framework document

Partner perceptions survey:

Each university was asked to nominate 15 community partners that could complete an anonymous questionnaire on-line about the nature of their engagement relationship. This included 10 longstanding and five new community partners. The questionnaire comprised a five point Likert scale describing the relationship with the university in terms of university accessibility, communication, stewardship, participation, relevance, and leadership. The questionnaire also included two open ended questions asking for an overall assessment of the value of the relationship with the university.

‘Good’ practice case examples:

Each university was asked to complete a ‘good practice’ template for what they considered to be examples of their three best community partnerships. The template asks for a description of the project, its benefits, the role of partners, communication strategies, lessons learnt, quantitative and qualitative performance measures, and success factors.

Pilot and final implementation:

A six month pilot of the various instruments was carried out among 12 diverse member universities from November 2007. The aim of the pilot was to identify where revisions needed to be made based on institution and partner feedback, and to gather the benchmarking data from the instruments to assist with the design of the full comparison framework. The final version of the benchmarking framework package is being launched at the AUCEA National Conference in July 2008.

AUCEA will manage the data assessment, portrayal of benchmarks and the bank of good practice initiatives to encourage sharing, learning and improvement. The first full cycle of the benchmarking framework is expected to be completed at the end of 2008 with comparative results available from early 2009.

## **Challenges**

One of the most sensitive matters in constructing the university and community engagement benchmarking framework was ensuring confidentiality of results for individual participants while at the same time providing a framework that will encourage learning and improvement through cooperation. There will be no ‘league ladder’ approach in the portrayal of the results.

A second challenge has been to balance the short-term performance assessment reporting required by regulatory and funding agencies with the long-term need to contribute to better outcomes globally and locally.

A third issue for resolution was how institutional and community diversity should be reflected and allowed for in benchmarking comparisons and how structural categorisations such as institutional age, size and location can be analysed through time.

Finally, it is recognized that the benchmarking framework needed to form part of and be informed by other university quality assurance frameworks.

## **Conclusions**

The development of an agreed community engagement benchmarking framework for Australian universities will be fully in place by the end of 2008 with the first comparative analysis available from early 2009. This should assist in building good practice sharing, learning and improvement among universities and their communities in the way they mutually contribute to global and local priorities through knowledge exploitation.

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