



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

UNDERSTANDING UNIVERSITY ENGAGEMENT:

The impact of COVID-19 on collaborations
and partnerships

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The University of Melbourne acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which our company is located and where we conduct our work. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past and present. The University of Melbourne is committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.

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Executive summary

Increasingly, effective university-industry-government-community engagement is critical to addressing global and local issues. This engagement requires universities to work collaboratively with individuals and organisations that may have different sets of rules, systems, structures and cultures. While universities engage with other organisations to support teaching, conduct research and support local communities, several studies have found that there are many challenges and barriers to effective partnerships. Not all collaborations have been successful.

There are several factors that contribute to undermine engagement and collaboration. Among these are communication barriers, lack of commitment and trust, different approaches and expectations, inadequate expertise, resources and time, lack of shared purposes and weak collaborative cultures.

In Australia, the definition of engagement has shifted and policy frameworks have adopted different interpretations. In general, this can be summarised as a gradual shift from a discourse of public good to one of the knowledge economy. There has also been dissonance in engagement vision and methodologies.

A lack of high-quality and systemic professional development programs and consistent strategic direction has led to fragmented and ad hoc engagement approaches. This constitutes a missed opportunity, given the increasing emphasis on engagement in universities' missions and vision statements in recent years.

In 2020 the global pandemic forced university staff to significantly shift their engagement activities and approaches. The disruptions also amplified a range of social inequities and injustices around the world.

In preparing for post-COVID-19 environment, this study sets out to explore the key barriers and challenges facing university staff and external stakeholders in sustaining engagement, and proposes ways to improve university external engagement. A total of 25 in-depth interviews were conducted during the pandemic disruptions with university staff across disciplines, levels and portfolios at the University of Melbourne, aiming to explore the different meanings, purposes, barriers and future outlooks on the ways in which universities engage with our society.

The research findings have provided a range of rich and in-depth perspectives and inspired a number of recommendations. The key findings are:

1. Individual perspectives shape understanding of and the different approaches to engagement. Without systematic thinking, guidance and shared understanding, engagement could be limited.
2. There are inadequate knowledge, capabilities and resources to support university-stakeholder engagement and partnerships.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity to reflect on what engagement meant and how to best facilitate it, highlighting the importance of building genuine and trusting relationships with external organisations.
4. Fostering the right culture, systems and structures, supported by clearer strategic direction, priority and investment within the university could strengthen and promote more purpose-driven and reciprocal engagement.
5. Knowledge transfer has traditionally been the dominant approach. However, the research findings highlight the importance of two-way knowledge exchange and knowledge co-creation to promote mutuality and reciprocal, accountable and impactful partnerships between universities and society.
6. External stakeholders offer important insights that university communities could learn and benefit from in achieving the University's strategic priorities and goals.

Key recommendations

1. Have broad but clear definitions of engagement and partnership.
2. Enhance performance review processes, promotion criteria and professional development programs to foster a stronger culture of cooperation and collaboration.
3. Facilitate professional development that integrates systemic thinking about engagement and partnership skills ensuring ethical and consistent approaches.
4. Provide leadership and resources to implement engagement that draws on scholarship and good practice.
5. Ensure there is a University group or committee that has strategic oversight of engagement and partnership activities, including commissioning research and evidence-gathering, promoting successful practice and developing policy.

While these recommendations may be fairly broad, they are included here in order to encourage conversation and inform the development of a University-wide engagement framework



The Engaged University Project

Purposes and aims

For decades, engagement has been seen as a core value for universities (Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2001). Numerous policies, reports and research papers have set out the case for engagement and how it is manifested in research, in teaching, and in service to the community.

By definition, engagement is the interaction between the University and public, organisations and individuals for mutual benefit and enrichment. Universities often engage with policy makers, businesses, industries and communities at local and international levels to build partnerships that bring mutual benefits.

The interactions, relationships and networks that connect us rely on regular and open communication – but in 2020, COVID-19 meant we had to change the way we do everything, including the way we engage with the wider community, government and organisations.

The purpose of this study is to understand the professional development needs of university staff in external engagement as they move through different phases of COVID-19 related disruptions. The final scale and scope of these disruptions are unknown. Hence this study is designed to collect data to better understand the implications of the pandemic to the ways in which staff engage with our society at the ‘current’ conjuncture.

The aims of the research are to investigate:

- What impacts had the COVID-19 pandemic on the University’s engagement activities, capacity and capability?
- What professional development do university staff need to overcome and thrive in their engagement efforts in the post-COVID-19 recovery?
- What are the effective professional development models to strengthen post-COVID-19 engagement practices?

Research context and background

In recent years there has been increased pressure on universities worldwide to demonstrate their value to society (Association of Commonwealth Universities, 2001; Bourke, 2013). One way this has transpired is a requirement for universities to demonstrate connection to external stakeholders. Engagement has been embedded in many universities’ operations, functions and missions by underpinning the relationships and exchanges between staff, students and society (Rybnycek & Konigsgruber 2019; Veugelers, Cassiman, 2005; Watson et al 2011; Winter, Wiseman & Muirhead, 2006).

Engagement takes many forms depending on the context and goals – from building relationships between an institution and local communities that support access to cultural activities, to student work placements with local organisations and through to formal research collaborations between researchers and business (Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008).

Engagement can be a goal in itself to provide an opportunity for innovative research collaboration, learning or broader experiences (Pasque, Smerek, Dwyer, Bowman, Mallory, 2005; Katsonis, 2019). Engagement can vary in scale – from large-scale public events to small-scale, targeted interactions with individuals or groups (Gruba, 2020). In the context of universities, engagement could be carried out in ways such as ‘knowledge translation’ (one-directional knowledge transfer), ‘knowledge exchange’ (two-directional knowledge sharing) and ‘knowledge co-creation’ (involving stakeholders from the beginning to the end to co-develop ideas and interventions).

For many years at the University of Melbourne, engagement has been integral to teaching and research, and is the basis for these core activities (Engagement at Melbourne 2016-2020). Engagement is viewed as an essential ingredient to build public trust and relationships with society (Advancing Melbourne 2030, 2020).

At the turn of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shook almost every Higher Education institution in Australia and around the world. The pandemic and its related disruptions caused a decrease in community engagement for 48% of universities in the Asia Pacific (p36, Marinoni, Land & Jensen, 2020), and further impact is anticipated due to financial limitations. New measures include 'pausing' face-to-face teaching, transferring to online teaching and learning modes and creating virtual campuses, which have been introduced in order to enable universities to keep operating, albeit from a distance.

The activities supporting engagement with community, industry and government in support of teaching, research and community initiatives have also been converted to virtual and online modes (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guardia & Koole, 2020). Considering the social values, such as strengthening the net of interconnectivity, which underpin many engagement activities and their capacity to support, build trust and foster solidarity with individuals and groups, the ways in which universities engage with their collaborators and partners during the COVID-19 crisis could give rise to a range of ethical dilemmas.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was adopted for this study. A series of focus-groups and one-on-one interviews were conducted over Zoom between September and November 2020.

All of the interviews were conducted during the second lockdown period and the state of emergency in Victoria in September and October 2020.

Overall, the project has interviewed a total of 24 participants. Five of them were the University of Melbourne's institutes' managers; three of them were leaders in the Chancellery of the University of Melbourne; 13 of them described their roles as 'engagement specialists or professionals' within the university; six of them were academics; three contributors were external stakeholders.

The interviews had an average duration of 40 mins. Written consent was organised via email correspondence.

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed into texts documents. Key words and phrases were highlighted to extract significant points. Thematic analysis was used to interpret emerging patterns and trends of the qualitative, text-based data (literature and transcribed interviews and focus groups).

Sample

The research sample is individuals who are able to provide insights into the issues, challenges and potentials through which University engagement capacity and capability can be strengthened, and the ways in which COVID-19 has affected how they engage, collaborate and partner.

Research participants consisted of two groups:

- University staff (Academics and researchers, professional staff and graduate research students across Academic Divisions, Chancellery and institutes at the University of Melbourne)
- University collaborators and partners

University staff participants consisted of those with fixed-term contracts, ongoing and casuals across a range of professional and academic levels and roles.

University collaborators and partners consisted of a sample of individuals from organisations such as government departments, agencies, businesses, non-profit organisations and peak bodies who have collaborated with the University in some formal and informal capacity. Their collaboration must have been with at least one member of staff at the University of Melbourne. Information written in plain language was used to establish contact with the external partners.

Recruitment of participants was through an advertisement in Staff News and to internal staff networks, such as the Research Engagement and Impact Network, Faculty Research Managers, Early Career researcher networks and professional networks of the research team.

Selections were based on criteria such as:

- whether they had first-hand experience of University-Industry-Community engagement, and
- were available, prepared and willing to contribute to the study in 2020.

The study also accepted participants from any gender, although age was limited to those between 19-80 years of age.

Participants

Between September 2020 and March 2021, the research team interviewed 25 participants with different roles and responsibilities across the university. 20 out of the total interviewees were female, which may reflect the higher proportion of females in some of the networks used for participant recruitment.

The participants consist of *two* engagement executive leaders, whose roles include developing partnerships with communities and connecting them with the University via teaching, research and services, overseeing the implementation of engagement strategy, identifying opportunities for engagement and ensuring right settings and policies are in place within the university to support internal staff to engage externally. One participant is a university-wide partnership manager whose responsibilities involve university-wide research enterprise and development. Four institute managers, whose roles include connecting with external stakeholders with university academics to advance our research and teaching, through running institutes' programs, webinars and institutes' newsletters.

Five of the interviewees are faculty-based engagement and partnership managers, who lead engagement teams, organise events, live and online, for students to engage with industry partners and vice versa. They also support Faculty Deans and Associate Deans in Engagement. Some of them focus on building research partnerships, student experiences and reputation building.

The study included interviews with two project officers who provide event assistance, support academics by organising forums, presentations, public communications and non-academic publication to publicise their research to the public. They also support the Head of Schools in their engagement roles. One of the interviewed professional staff is located in a regional campus and is responsible for organising public events and facilitating knowledge transfer.

In terms of the academics, the team has interviewed two ECAs (level A), one mid-career academic (level B-C), and three senior academics (level D-E). Some have limited engagement experience, while others have participated in policy engagement, government engagement and social media engagement. One of these senior academics is a faculty-based Associate Dean Engagement. Another senior academic has a secondment role with the Chancellery. The interviewed academics have Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) backgrounds. The project team had an opportunity to interview three external stakeholders who have collaborated with university researchers, institutes and faculties in recent years.

Literature review

In order to situate our study within existing debates about engagement between universities and society, the research team conducted a literature review of Australian and international research and policy literature.

At a macro level, the use of the term 'engagement' in universities internationally describes a variety of strategies, activities, relationships and outputs across teaching, research and service (Maassen, 2014; Rubens et al, 2017). These activities can range from highly formalised partnerships with organisations (such as co-designing an innovation) to wide scale informal interaction with the public (such as public seminars).

The literature review resulted in the brief timeline outlined in Table 1 that covers some of the significant consultative reports, policies and frameworks that have shaped global and local conversations. The table presents global and national debates and juxtaposes this with strategies developed and adopted by the University of Melbourne. It also provides the context for this report's research analysis, in particular, identifying the kinds of challenges and opportunities facing the higher education sector, in this instance the University of Melbourne, in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Timeline of engagement

	Global and national debates	University of Melbourne's engagement strategies
1930s-1970s		<p>The University has withheld the idea of 'a place apart' from 1935 to 1975 signified the University as a privilege and independent institution separated from the society to purely focus on knowledge enlightenment.</p> <p>The University was becoming aware of a need to 'engage' more actively with the community in 1975, however, its primary notions of 'engagement' is only about its graduates or alumni. Concept of partnership with non-academic stakeholders was considered antithetical to the true purpose of a university.</p> <p>The shift of definition of 'engagement' with the public was catalysed by student movement in the 1960th. For example, the University Assembly and the women working group (Poynter & Rasmussen, 2016; Rasmussen, 2018)</p>
1980s	In the UK pre-existing mission-based approaches to university engagement became more focused as government and funder priorities focused on building greater understanding of science, increasing public involvement in research and contributing directly to research impact (Chikoore, Proberts, Fry and Creaser, 2016; Watermeyer, 2012).	<p>David Peddington, (VC 1988-1995), determined to achieve greater 'visibility' in the public. Hosted the University Expo in 1988 focused on showcasing the University.</p> <p>He adopted a high public profile in the community on behalf of the University, reclaiming explicitly 'a public responsibility to promote and disseminate culture; to instil moral values', as well as to conduct world-class research (Rasmussen, 2018, p 160).</p>
1990s	In the USA there has been a broad debate about the role of universities in society since the establishment of the Land Grant universities, with civic engagement through teaching, collaborative partnerships and service learning becoming a core mission for universities by the early 2000s (Boyer, 1996; Saltmarsh, 2017).	<p>As government funding to HE sector declines, UoM as increasingly blurred the boundaries between a public institution and private, for-profit engagement practices.</p> <p>Raymond Priestly, first salaried VC, has focused on raising prosperity of the University.</p> <p>Alan Gilbert, VC of 1996-2003, implemented a more entrepreneurial University agenda (p. 210), and 'established Melbourne University Private (1998 –2005), and participated in 'engagement' with an element of self-interested 'marketing' (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 242)</p>
2001	The Association of Commonwealth Universities, an international network of universities, published a consultative report which called engagement as a "core value" for universities, and framed university engagement as "academic citizenship", "academic values" and "academic virtues" (ACU, 2001, p.6).	
2002	<p>In Australia, growing interest in university-community engagement coincided with the 2002 <i>Higher Education at the Crossroads</i> paper, also known as the Nelson Reforms. The related discussion paper signified a new conversation in HE policy.</p> <p>Engagement as "core business", "integral" rather than adjunct to the existing functions, "two way" and "mutual" process (p. 23).</p>	

Table 1: Timeline of engagement

	Global and national debates	University of Melbourne's engagement strategies
2003	Establishment of the Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA), which later become Engagement Australia.	There is a growing public discourse demanding that universities demonstrate their engagement with their wider community, as providing high quality education and research were not enough (Rasmussen, 2018). “[The University to] become more transparent, more permeable and more structured in its engagement with the wider society” (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 317)
2005	Australian Universities held a Quality Forum Year of Engagement. The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC), Business and Higher Education Roundtable (B-HERT) and Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRUA) each put forward submissions to the government supporting the establishment of “separate, identifiable funding program to support university engagement” (AVCC, 2005, p.3; IRUA, 2006; B-HERT, 2006).	Growing Esteem (2005-2010) Strategy has included engagement within knowledge transfer activities: ‘knowledge transfer activities should both shape and shadow the University's research and teaching priorities, and be informed by active social and economic engagement.’ (Growing Esteem, p.4). According to Rasmussen (2018), by 2005, the understanding of ‘civic university’ and ‘public good’ had been substantially eroded, replaced by private commercial business mindset.
2006	Some European countries had begun earmarking a set of percentage of funds provided to universities for ‘knowledge transfer and technology’. For example In Switzerland, it was 10 per cent (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 318). All 8 Victorian universities had incorporated engagement into their mission and vision, but this has not yet entered their strategic plans (Goedegebuure & van der Lee, 2006). Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) commissioned a report entitled <i>The emerging business of knowledge transfer</i> , where knowledge transfer was confined to the economic contribution of university knowledge. (Howard, DEST & Howard Partners, 2005)	A university taskforce was established in March 2006 to develop a definition and framework for knowledge transfer, which was defined as “intellectual capital through a two-way mutually beneficial interaction between the University and the non-academic sectors” (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 318). “A scoping study found 366 examples of activities that fitted the definition, and 70% of which delivered benefits for both the University and partners. But a more focused research was needed.” (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 318). The University's effort in raising awareness of ‘knowledge transfer’ and ‘engagement’ internally and externally has contributed to cultural change through extensive digital communication, e.g. UniNews, Melbourne University Staff/Student E-news, and Up Close radio podcasts (launched in 2006).
2007	Shifting rhetoric of engagement - from ‘knowledge society’ to “knowledge economy”; from basic research to government-driven research (see, Singh, 2007).	“Connecting Melbourne”, a magazine devoted to ‘showcasing successful knowledge transfer projects was launched in late 2007. The inaugural Knowledge Transfer Excellence awards were presented (Rasmussen, 2018).

Table 1: Timeline of engagement

	Global and national debates	University of Melbourne's engagement strategies
2008	At the international level, engagement is increasingly considered the 'third mission' with increasing focus on the interconnection and interdependencies between HE and the wider society (see Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008).	
	In Australia, the Bradley Review of HE took the majority views from the submissions that engagement is integral to Universities' teaching and research. This however leads to recommendation that engagement does not require third stream funding (Bradley, 2008).	
2009	Emerging international preference for the term 'knowledge exchange' over 'knowledge transfer', and the subsequent trend towards 'engagement' (Barker, 2015, p. 482; Sharrock, 2009, p. 4).	<p>"The term 'knowledge transfer' had a short life". The University switched back into using the term 'engagement' by 2010 (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 319).</p> <p>The University hosted the inaugural Carlton Community Day especially for the residents of local public housing, it was aimed to make the campus more 'familiar and accessible' (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 326).</p>
2010		Growing Esteem Strategy (2010-2020) introduced engagement as the third strand of 'triple helix', with teaching and research making up the remaining two. Importantly, this placed engagement on an equal footing with the University's traditional activities.
		A new Alumni Council was established to strengthen the connection between graduates and the University. The aim was to provide life-long 'social and professional value for graduates', particularly in areas of mentoring and networking (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 322).
2013	Australian government discussion paper entitled <i>Assessing the wider benefits arising from university-based research</i> is absent a broader concept of engagement (DICCSTE, 2013; cited in Barker, 2015, p. 483).	
2014	University Compacts include provision for optional engagement performance indicators.	
2015	A review of university engagement policy in Australia found that "In Australia, the peripheralisation of engagement in universities begins with weak government policy support and guidance. This has vacillated between a broad understanding of engagement that captures its social impact and 'public good' characteristics, and a narrow focus on the economic benefits of engaged research." (Barker, 2015, p. 478)	<p>A consultative report documented internal assessment of engagement activities in 12 Faculties and Schools in UoM.</p> <p>Launched of Pursuit, to show case 'the cutting-edge research, teaching and informed opinion of its world-leading academics'.</p> <p>Launched of Policy Shop podcasts, which present regular discussion of public policy and the way it affects Australia and the world.</p>

Table 1: Timeline of engagement

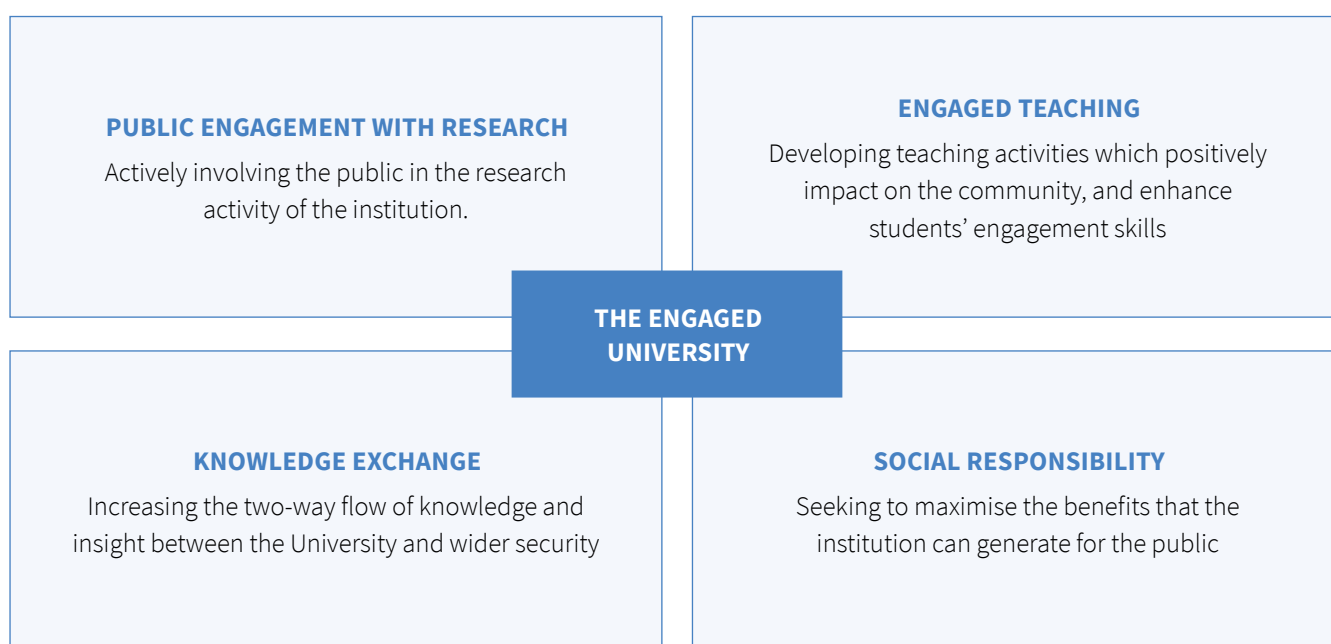
	Global and national debates	University of Melbourne's engagement strategies
2016		<p>Launch of Engagement at Melbourne 2016-2020 strategy. It emphasises that engagement is an enduring commitment for increasing public values, engaged students and engaged research.</p> <p>Academic Performance Framework recognises engagement as one of three core dimensions with detailed guide <i>A Guide to Engagement in Your Academic Career</i></p>
2017		Vice Chancellor, Glyn Davis (2005-2018) described three strands to the University's engagement with the wider communities: 1) galleries and other cultural offerings, 2) online learning and 3) commercial or economic partnerships. (Rasmussen, 2018)
2018	Australian government introduced the ARC engagement and impact assessment framework which includes impact criteria in major funding programs.	Melbourne Connect precinct launched, which is designed to co-locate industry partners with university researchers to innovate and create.
2020	<p>The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement launched a resource pack entitled <i>The Engaged University: Turning words into action</i> co-authored by the University of Melbourne's Pro-Vice Chancellor in Strategy and Culture Julie Wells features case studies from King's College London, Sheffield Hallam University, Rutgers University, University of Chicago, University of Manchester and Newcastle University.</p> <p>The document presents the ways in which universities are strategically investing in engagement – both people and programmes.</p>	<p>Launch of Advancing Melbourne 2030 strategy.</p> <p>"At a time when many institutions are suffering a loss of public trust and the nature of knowledge itself is under question, a university can serve society well through renewing its focus on engaging with its communities." (p.3, Maskell, 2020)</p> <p>Research Engagement and Impact Network (REIN) founded in Feb 2020.</p> <p>MCSHE ran the inaugural "Engaged University Symposium" in May 2020.</p> <p>MCSHE launched "Spotlight on Engagement" and "Collaborative Partnership for Impact" webinar series.</p>
2021	Australian government launches a consultative process focusing on commercialised research and knowledge translation.	<p>Melbourne Connect opened in March 2021.</p> <p>MCHSE developed the 12 modules Purposeful Engagement Handbook and Purposeful Engagement workshops available to all UoM staff.</p>

As the timeline shows, the notion of university-external engagement is not new. In Australia, the term ‘engagement’ has been adopted widely in the missions and visions of Australian universities for about two decades (IRUA, 2005).¹ Nevertheless, these visions often fall short in implementing strategies and resourcing (Barker, 2015). The practicality of doing engagement, including resource allocation decision for engagement activities, is hampered by the inconsistent policy recommendations in the Innovative Research Universities Australia paper (2005) and the Bradley Review (2008). While many universities have incorporated the ‘third mission’ framework, there has been prevarication around institutional commitment to invest and build the capabilities and capacities for engagement.

Over time, the notion of engagement has encompassed commercial partnerships and economic development. Due to a lack of rigorous measurements and indicators for effective engagement, a one-directional notion of knowledge transfer and translation have since been widely promoted and adapted for their quantifiable quality. This runs in parallel with increased pressure by government funders (such as the Australian Research Council’s Engagement and Impact Assessment 2018) and private investors (such as venture capital investors) for measuring and reporting of engagement and impact - the sector has seen engagement activities become more complex, more ‘conflicted’, and yet more important to the university (Etzkowitz, & Gulbrandsen, 2004; Watson et. Al, 2011).

In more recent years, engagement has become increasingly visible in Australian university strategic documents and mission statements. For example, the University of Sydney stated that “engage with us” to “tackling wicked problems together”; while the University of Queensland has a Partner Engagement Strategy, Framework and an interactive dashboard that measure the impact of engagement and track outcomes. Nevertheless, its concept remains elusive. Many debates have centred on definitions as well as the complexities in performing, capturing and assessing the value of engagement (Barker, 2015; Compagnucc & Spigarelli, 2020). Barker (2015) provided an overview of the shift around the meaning of engagement, including the use of terms such as ‘knowledge translation’ and ‘knowledge exchange’ in the early 2010s as government and universities grappled with the key drivers and aims of various knowledge-driven activities.

In the UK, where public engagement by universities is a government priority, there are established definitions, frameworks and resources to support university engagement. There are, however, significant challenges in integrating engagement into the existing demands and priorities of academics and responses by institutions vary widely (Watermeyer, 2015; Locke, et.al 2016).



¹ For example, “The University of Melbourne’s enduring commitment to public contribution has seen its engagement with society evolve over the generations” (p. 3., Engagement at Melbourne 2015-2020).

The rise of the 'impact agenda' internationally has seen an adoption of existing engagement practices in the service of research impact, with many viewing engagement as a means of achieving impact (e.g., Rickard, Steele, Kokshagina & Moraes, 2020; Smith, & Bandola-Gill, 2020; Watermeyer, 2012). In Australia the *Engagement and Impact Assessment* exercise in 2018 and inclusion of impact criteria in major funding programs have increased attention on the role of stakeholder engagement in enabling research impact (Murphy & McGrath, 2018). Innovative tools are developed. For example, the University of Queensland, for example, has set up The Partner Engagement Framework (PEF) and created a PEF interactive dashboard to assess the impact of engagement and tracking outcomes.

Academics are calling for more progressive re-conceptualisation of engagement and impact, urging universities to shift from a university-centric (1st generation), to a partnership (2nd generation) and eventually to a holistic and ecological paradigm (3rd generation) (Rickart, Steele & Morales, 2020).

At the individual level, there are two main discourses about the drivers for individual academic engagement – firstly, in response to extrinsic requirements from their institution, funders or partners; and secondly, their individual and personal motivations (Sormani, Baaken, & van der Sijde, 2021). For most academics lack of time is a significant challenge in undertaking engagement-related activities (Harvey, Marshall, Jordan, & Kitson, 2015), with their performance and career progression relying on research outputs, funding success and to a lesser extent teaching (and, especially, student satisfaction) scores. In universities, engagement has been adopted to varying degrees within promotion and performance criteria alongside pre-existing requirements for 'service', however this is still not seen as a priority by academics (Murphy & McGrath, 2018; Sutherland, 2017). For most researchers the direct incentives, support and guidance for individual researchers to undertake engagement are largely shaped by the requirements of their methodologies, career stage, individual research partnerships, access to resources and recognition (Bliemel & Zipparo, 2020).

Training and professional development is a key element to achieving institutional goals and enabling researchers to undertake productive engagement as part of teaching and research (Burchell, Sheppard and Chambers, 2017; Clarysse, Tartari, & Salter, 2011; Dollinger et.al, 2018).

The pandemic has emphasised more than ever the need for universities to have robust and effective engagement practices that enable public access to information, and to access public information. Effective community engagement by scientists played a key role in supporting public understanding of vaccines and facilitating equal access to health care (Burgess, et.al., 2021). Communications skills and agile project management enabled academics in business disciplines to engage with small business to provide free support to struggling businesses (Brauner, et al, 2020). However, the response by universities can be hindered by the reduction of activities to online, limits on resources due to job cuts and increased teaching loads (Marshman, Baré & Beard, 2020; Zhou, 2020). While universities worldwide have responded quickly to the many immediate challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the continuing disruption requires longer term adaptation to ensure continued effective engagement – ensuring staff have the skills and resources to undertake this work is key (Aurbach & DeVaney, 2020).

In 2016, the University of Melbourne launched an engagement strategy and established a range of engagement-oriented leadership and professional roles across Faculties, Institutes and in the Chancellery. The characteristics of the roles include high-level strategic and policy development, academic leadership such as Associate Dean Engagement, professional roles seeking funding and philanthropic donations, event management and dissemination of newsletters, business development, and front line project collaboration and partnership development (Engagement Strategy Incubator Discussion Paper, 2015).

Findings

The following sections outline the findings, which are organised according to key themes and perspectives, including:

- Part 1, which provides information on indigenous perspectives, external stakeholder perspectives, and internal staff perspectives. It also provides a summary of emerging themes.
- Part 2 presents issues and opportunities emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Part 3 outlines recommendations.

Part 1. Making sense of university engagement

1.1 Indigenous perspectives

It is important to highlight Indigenous perspectives of engagement for various reasons. First, they are central to the University's priorities and goals (Advancing Melbourne 2030) and therefore crucial in informing university engagement practices. Second, they are often under-represented, if not mis-represented. The insights and definitions of engagement from the Indigenous perspective is illuminating. For example, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of respectful long-term relationships, reciprocity, engagement principles and best practice. The idea of being an Indigenous person working in a university is viewed as being a mediator between the community and academia. This is demonstrated in the following quote, as the interviewee explained what is university engagement.

"One way to describe what engagement, in Indigenous way of doing things, is we think about everything is holistically interconnected with one another. We as human are in system. It makes sense to not just focus on one thing or focus on what we do as separate things. Engagement is about how to create a more connected space on how we work, so engagement is about making sure that it is about our individual and personal responsibility to make sure that what we do have public values, and that what you do is connected with people inside and outside of your institution. And you bring everyone along in your journey – you are constantly telling people what you are doing and getting feedback – that way we have a better product, and have more cohesive system in what we are doing. Engagement is what every best practice should be, that everyone knows what is going on, there is no secrets, and you would get better outcome out of that because the inputs from everyone helps you to create something that everyone benefits."

Engagement is embedded in everyday practices – it could be seamless (hence invisible) or messy (and noticeable). For example,

"Engagement is something that when it is done well, no one notices it. Engagement can look clunky and clumsy in the early stage, but this is about letting people know you exist, and introduce what you are there for. That way you are opening a channel for discussions. Engagement means regularly checking in with people to provide bits of information. Some may not seem relevant, but it is important that you go to people rather than asking them to come to you. It is a way of being and doing where the relationship drives the activities."

Rather than letting the activities drive the relationship (such as sending out newsletters and running public seminars), the Indigenous perspectives revealed the relationship-driven nature of engagement. The interconnected notion of 'being' and 'doing' sets the premise and acknowledgement that engagement can be messy (i.e. clunky and clumsy in the early stages). Apparently the messiness should be a norm.

There is much the University community could learn from the indigenous perspective when thinking about engagement:

"Engagement is not only important, it is foundational. It's part of everything, but also needs to stand alone. It is not a priority at the uni at the moment. Engagement is essential to everything we do. [The] University has moved from consultation to engagement but needs to move ahead to focus on relationships and for these to be the driver of process."

1.2 External stakeholders' perspectives

1.2.1 RECIPROCITY AND MUTUALITY

External collaborator voices mattered to the staff we interviewed in this study. The research found a strong and consistent theme around the importance of “equal partnerships” and “two-way knowledge co-creation”. For example,

“To me, engagement is [academics] connect[ing] with the people at the grassroot level; at the same time offering opportunities for the community to access to university facilities and resources. No one should be benefit more from another. Should be done in equal ways and involve ongoing negotiation to achieve common goals and achieve win-win positions. To me, engagement needs to have a long-term outlook. We need to bring people together and ensure we treat people equally if we want to achieve a long-term outcome.”

Some of the individual and institutional barriers for effective engagement are recognised by external stakeholders. For example,

“Some university staff don't necessarily have the skills and resources to engage. Some people don't see the values to engage. Some don't feel that they were rewarded or acknowledged that engagement is part of their core important work. Some don't have the support to do it in meaningful way. Some leaders don't support or champion it. Some think engagement is difficult. It is difficult to measure (like using a traditional matrix). Some think it is a 'nice to have' but not a fundamental part of the work. There is a lack of structured and consistent ways of doing engagement. Not knowing where to start.”

1.2.2 ADDRESSING THE UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIPS BY EQUIPPING THEM WITH RESEARCH CAPABILITY.

The external stakeholders observed a lack of appreciation and understanding among many academics about the benefits of forging a more equitable relationships between the University and its partners. As one external stakeholder stated:

“Many communities found that collaborating with universities is un-achievable. Many communities thought university is for the 'rich' people. Sometimes people forgot that the universities are funded by the communities. Some university staff hold traditional ways of thinking that their roles are just teachers and research, and that engagement is not part of their roles... University staff need to understand that they are engaging with people who have families and communities. These people are not machines or robots. University staff need to have that kind of cultural awareness and intelligence when they teach and interact with [non-academics].”

One external stakeholder invited academics to put themselves in the shoes of non-academic partners to understand the imbalances:

“Academic language is very dense and conceptually heavy. Community can't just take a sentence as it is, we have to think about it and process it in relation to concepts and constructs. It is a different way of thinking. We need to learn how to do it. Communities need to upskill to be able to engage with academics' thinking, writing and processes. Having an entry point is important. It also shows community the values of research, and how objective research can be, and how research can be used to connect with policy and practices on the ground. That is not automatically understood by a lot of people if we are not a part of it. There is room for academics to write in lay language. But now I also understand (after doing MSEI fellowship) the need to write in academic language. It is worthwhile to do research translation to increase accessibility.”

From the perspective of an external stakeholder, it is indeed a privilege for academics to have committed non-academic collaborators and partners:

“Working with academics and going through the academic processes such as the ethics application can be very daunting. It is very rigorous and time consuming. So communities would have to be very committed to engage with academics with their research.”

One external stakeholder shared an example of an equitable and enabling partnership – that is being empowered to collaborate, operate and communicate at a higher (academic) level:

“To me, engagement equals to dialogue... We are co-authoring and publishing academic journal article together. The connection with academic research protocols, peer review, and being supported throughout the process gave me an insight of academic world of how things work, even how to go through ethics application process [and I found these] really interesting.”

1.2.3 DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY

University professional and academic staff reflected on the importance of building skills and practices that support diversity and inclusion in engagement as part of teaching, research and service. This involved strengthening the University’s internal ecosystem, working with leaders and programs within the University to support faculty initiatives, reflecting on deficiencies in current approaches and identifying new strategies.

An experienced external stakeholder reflected on the importance of taking a variety of approaches to university engagement:

“People having different definitions of engagement may not be a problem. Engagement is sensitive to the context, resources and goals of the program, it shapes how we could engage purposefully, meaningfully and ethically. So, it will inevitably look different to different people. With this in the backdrop, ‘what is engagement’ is an important question for people to explore. This needs to be acknowledged. Simplistic definitions or singular definitions can be problematic. A spectrum approach is necessary. As a community of practice, we need to have the literacy why we do what we do. In the spectrum model, we are not comparing apples with apples, people are not talking about the same thing - some see engagement as creating a mailing list, the others see engagement as deep collaboration and partnerships with the community. And that is okay.”



1.3 Internal and role-specific understanding of engagement

The study found that ‘what engagement looks like’, is strongly linked to individuals’ roles and appointments within the university. As their roles shifted, their vantage points and perspectives altered as well. To assist in making sense of these patterns, we analysed the definitions according to four main groupings - junior professionals (e.g. project officers), senior professionals (e.g. managers and directors), early career academics and senior academics. The categorisation process does not mean to create a broad stroke objective conclusion, but to provide new insights into of the differences and nuances.

Roles	Likely perspective on engagement and their role on engagement
Early Career Academics (ECAs)	Engaging with stakeholders a natural part of career building.
Senior academics	Co-designing projects with partners, influencing policy.
Project officers	Coordinating public events (online and in-person), websites, creating mailing lists and distributing newsletters.
Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creating opportunities for external stakeholders to connect with faculty members to identify mutually beneficial collaborative opportunities in teaching and research.• Working with academics to strengthen their external engagement.• Providing reciprocal exchanges of knowledge and cultural benefits with the public and organisations.

1.3.1 ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES

Early career academics (ECA) felt ambivalent about engagement and shared examples of the benefits and disadvantages of devoting time to these activities. One ECA said while they were discouraged by supervisors from spending time on engagement instead of grant applications or publications, they were also encouraged by others within their faculty and praised for their engagement efforts. While they themselves gained significant satisfaction and learning opportunities from engagement, they regretted that it was not formally recognised in performance reviews.

ECAs admitted that they did not fully understand what engagement means or how to undertake it. *“Engagement is part of my role but it is a little vague in my KPIs and job description how these should be done. So I made it up as I go along.”*

Engagement as a concept is confusing to many because it includes diverse activities, from promotional activities and providing expert advice to government to building partnerships with industry.

“[Engagement is] a form of public communication – taking research out and communicate with the public. There are good reasons to do this. This is to promote our research and to promote our university...” and “a lot of people come to me looking for radio interviews, TV interviews, newspaper articles and podcasts. I am on the State Government committee where I struggle with [their notions of engagement]- there is a role in engagement in building collaboration with industry. To me it is weird.”

Some expressed the view that experience working with professionals from other fields outside academia could make a difference in the ways academics understood engagement. Some of the more experienced academics expressed a more assured understanding of the need for engagement:

“My definition of engagement is different from the university because I hang out with people who are not academics. The ability to speak to non-academics is something the university doesn't value enough, and not giving people the skills to do that well. The relevance of the work we do is not translated to the society.”

For others, experiences beyond academia could shift academic perceptions of their role, responsibilities and priorities:

"The driver for me [to engage] is that I was a practitioner before I become an academic. I like to know that what I do is useful to the public. I also like to educate people. That is why I write blogs. People sometimes feel that they are disempowered and their lack of knowledge to [x discipline]. I wanted to talk to people and share the kinds of things I teach and research that are relevant to the public and the [profession]."

Not surprisingly, some of the most senior academics/professors shared the ways in which engagement is embedded in their academic practice. They emphasised the principles of two-way engagement, highlighting the need for reciprocity and mutual benefits. For example, one academic considered that engagement is:

"Working very closely with partners in relationships, co-designing projects relevant to people outside the university, working with them as partners, not just curiosity-driven research. The [research] impact can be clearer if there is engagement. You can't just come up with some [policy] and expect the government to change their mind. An engaged research is more likely to lead to policy change."

Another Professor shared the view that engagement has a role to play *"to get a better result with partners rather than just focus on individual benefits"*, and *"all my work is engagement in a way. Even in my academic work... For me, engagement is telling people what we do, why [our work] is useful, and to get people inputs and to learn from people."*

One senior executive pointed out that ECAs embrace engagement more so than senior academics: *"Indeed, younger academics/ECAs are more receptive and open to engagement, maybe this is because they don't see a long-term career as academics and want to build a more rounded skill set."*

A manager of an institute reflected that *"some academics are focused on research and dissemination and don't see the need to engage. This could be due to the expectation and privilege they have. The pressure to achieve academic outputs and lack of time to engage are key reasons, especially for those that do teaching."*

1.3.2 PROFESSIONAL STAFF PERSPECTIVES

Professional staff understanding of 'engagement' is shaped by their specific roles - whether they have direct engagement with external stakeholders, or provide support to senior academics' engagement activities. For example, a project officer of an ARC project described *"the heart of engagement is communication. [It is about] getting everyone talking and connected. Letting people know that we are part of this amazing resource and events. Bringing people together in the same space. Bringing people together."* Engagement, to this staff member *"is a bridge-building exercise"*.

Two of the faculty-based engagement managers whose roles involve direct engagement, referred to engagement as *"working with external parties and having conversations with them about how we could reach mutual benefits that are beyond the internal university community"*. They emphasized two-way knowledge exchange and the co-creation of knowledge:

"Speaking with like-minded organisations and constituent institutions so mutual benefits could play out. Most of our engagement is long-term. We tend to have work on an annual cycle of events and projects that we return to year-on-year. Some are project-based (fixed-term)."

Interestingly, among the three managers of research centres and institutes, each had different levels of engagement literacy and expertise. This ranged from knowledge translation activities such as *"sending out newsletters and information that is useful to the audience"* to a deep understanding and appreciation of the disciplines, such as, *"we listen to our community and ensure we include diverse voices."* For the latter, there is an awareness of existing power imbalances between the university and some of its external stakeholders.

"Engagement means that we aren't working in an ivory tower, we need to ensure what we do is informed by two-way exchanges and listening to our community. People are affected by environmental issues and economic problems so it is critical to inform and listen to what they do and in a respectful and inclusive way."

Managers situated within academic Faculties and Schools considered 'engagement' and 'impact' as inseparable roles - that researchers needed to consider both engagement and impact in order to create real change in the real world. For example, *"engagement means [the] people who need to know your work, know about it and have buy-in. They are onboard with the journey... To me, engagement and impact make more sense to me because they both 'sit together'. There is no point to engage without impact and vice versa."*

As the sector has developed the conceptual frameworks and methodologies for engagement over the decades, such as shifting from knowledge translation (one-directional knowledge transfer), knowledge exchange (two-directional sharing) to knowledge co-creation (jointly developing ideas from the very beginning), this study has found that the idea of knowledge translation dominates people's understanding. *"Engaging with non-academics through research translation and research enrichment for mutual benefits,"* and *"engagement creates opportunities to extract data that benefits the university and researchers"* and *"reciprocity and recognise that engagement draws something from the communities which leads to better academic work"*.

None of the interviewees talked about whether any engagement activities could potentially bring unintended negative consequences to society, especially to marginalised communities. Despite speaking of themselves as being in privileged positions, there was little acknowledgement of the potential and actual power imbalances that may create barriers between the University and its external stakeholders.

1.4 Emerging themes

1.4.1 CONTRIBUTING TO THE PUBLIC GOOD

An interesting theme that emerged from the study is the strong intention to contribute to greater public good. An institute manager articulated the detailed processes and methodologies that viewed engagement as 'spectrum of involvement' from providing information, consultation, collaboration through to empowering community members.

An external partner who was interviewed highlighted the difference in culture between the majority of academics and the under-served community: *"we need to train them [the academics] how to engage and communicate with the diverse communities. They need to know how to navigate various cultural nuances. People need to know how to address our own bias."*

Some staff members discussed the barriers and issues for achieving public good that are found within the University. For example,

"internal engagement is a challenge. As an organisation we need to be genuine about doing engagement on an equal playing field. University and academics need to have the commitment to consider what support communities need to be able to participate equally."

1.4.2 MISALIGNMENT OF PRIORITIES

All of the senior executives of the University interviewed for this study acknowledged that some stakeholders find universities difficult to engage with and had some challenging relationships. *"Some industry partners have had negative or difficult experiences collaborating with universities."*

Some explained that the challenges are due to individual academics' attitudes: *"some researchers are a bit traditional - they expect their industry partners would take up their research."* An external stakeholder commented that *"sometimes people perceived academic work as being disconnect[ed] with the real world, or their work is not very applicable. While research still has value, academics have very different thinking and ways of processing things. These could be barriers for some people who want to engage with the academics..."*

A few managers have shared similar concerns, that *"many external stakeholders find universities and researchers quite hard to work with."* This could be due to the university's culture, as echoed by a senior executive, who believed that cultural change is needed especially to attract and keep the younger talents. *"The attitudes toward engagement have been uneven across the Faculties and disciplines in the university. I have worked with ECAs who share differing views and support for engagement from their supervisors. Engagement is not always encouraged [by their supervisors]. Part of the cultural change journey is to shift these traditional views to more open ones."*

The misalignment is confirmed by external stakeholders. One of them spoke at length about this challenge:

"The current university research infrastructures, systems and hierarchy could also disenable and disempower researchers to do engaged research. There could also be competing agendas in industry, policies and programs - They often want different things. They want to measure different things. They have different KPIs. So alignment with research focused engagement could be quite challenging. These apply to stakeholders and consumers who are brought into the system of university and they could immediately feel disempowered and out of their depth. I often think the universities are often unclear about why they engage. They feel mandated to engage in some ways by funders and institutions, but it doesn't work particularly well. Unfortunately, this reinforces disengagement because people have poor experience on both sides. They could share their (bad) experience with their colleagues, and this can be a vicious cycle of disengagement. The impact is mutual - when engagement doesn't work well for one, it probably doesn't work well for the other as well."

The theme of misalignment also emerged in the comments by ECAs relating to the conflicting messages they received about the value of engagement to the University against the lack of recognition it receives in promotion and performance systems.

1.4.3 BENEFITS TO THE UNIVERSITY AND THE RESEARCHERS

Many academics talked about the multiple benefits that engagement could bring to researchers and their research project as well as their teaching. For example, *“engagement is rewarding and affirming to a researcher. It creates opportunities you can't predict. We academics are to make a difference. We want to discover, experiment and create but have to tick the boxes of grants and outputs. Fundamentally doing engagement is always going to pay off because it addresses academics' fundamental drivers.”*

Engagement activities also provided benefits to students through building relationships with organisations that provided opportunities to gain practical experience in their field, exposure to international experts or connections with other institutions. Many mentioned the blurring of boundaries, and the ways in which engagement brings dual benefits to research and teaching that supported the development of long-term relationships with organisations beyond the contractual terms and period.

“Engagement is critical, whether this is teaching or research, it is about people coming together and doing something together. So much of what we do is enabled or facilitated by partnerships.”

Engagement brings strategic benefits. A senior executive spoke about the role of engagement as a way of building influence and strengths to achieve university goals.

“Engagement and collaboration are key to the way the university creates influence, innovation and how it will adapt in this difficult time. There needs to be a step-change to create the space for staff to develop the skills and to have the opportunity to work together - time, space and resources - time to reflect on why we engage, our goals and what activities are needed.”

As few staff members discussed the benefits to the stakeholders, the much university-centric, inward-focused framing and the imbalanced perspective-taking suggests that the university is in the 1st generation research impact culture, according to Rickart and colleagues' (2020) three generations of research impact ethos.

1.4.4 RISKS OF BEING SCRUTINISED BY OTHERS

Some interviewees expressed concerns that engaging with communities outside the university could be risky. *“When you engage with people, you are essentially opening up your ideas to the scrutiny of others.”* While this statement was framed in a positive light and acknowledged the need for accountability, there were also concerns about the risks associated with potential reputational damage. There are tensions between needing to produce relevant and socially impactful research and needing to protect oneself or the institution from unfair scrutiny.

1.4.5 SERENDIPITY

A few participants mentioned the beauty of serendipity in engagement.

“Relationship building is critical. It could open new opportunities and connections. Every now and then one of these connections could kick start a new trajectory for research.”

This illuminates another tension between a preference for much less top-down structure and rules for engagement, and a need for what Watermeyer (2015) described as ‘a more fluent, meaningful and reciprocal interface’ between staff and community for engagement so academics could feel more enabled and freer to engage and foster serendipity.

1.4.6 BARRIERS AND SILOS – IT’S DIFFICULT TO FIND THE FRONT DOOR

Interviewees reflected on the structural and systemic characteristics that have prevented effective engagement, creating silos within the University and barriers to those outside. A few managers acknowledged that the gigantic size of the institution could present real and perceived structural barriers for external stakeholders. *“They find it hard to find the front door, and to know how to progress issues or to address problems they face because the university is a very large institution, and it is very hard for them to navigate the system.”*

Improvement could be made at the digital interface to facilitate engagement. A different manager commented that *“it is hard for external people to find internal people. Our website and the new research portal are hard to navigate. The external organisations could find it difficult to get access to the right people within the university. Universities could be like a 'monolithic wall with no front door'.”*

Due to silos and a hierarchical system, another manager spoke about inefficiency and the need for greater streamlining of processes. *“The processes for contracting and partnerships can be very difficult and off-putting to external organisations. Unless you have a champion, otherwise it is very hard to navigate the university structure.”*

The external stakeholders identified a lack of clear strategy or processes that prevented or dissuaded staff from undertaking engagement:

“Not knowing where to start. When people look at engagement models, there is an overwhelming difference in models out there. Researchers not sure which one to go with, and question ‘what is the evidence that this model would work?’. There isn’t an enabling culture that contributes to building engagement.”

These barriers were confirmed by the academics. For example, one of the ECAs discussed at length the ways in which the hierarchical structure has directly impeded his/her performance and full potential:

“One of the issues for the university is that there is a standard mould of academic with unwritten hierarchy that prioritises research, then teaching, and engagement is a distant third. It would be good to let academics work to their strengths. I often don’t feel like I have right to engage. This could be my imposter syndrome. It is difficult to know where my voice might be important.”

1.4.7 COMPETITIVE AND SELF-PROMOTION CULTURE

A number of interviewees spoke about the lack of a cooperative and collaborative culture within the University. For example, a centre manager commented that:

“while engagement is very much in everyone’s job, we experience the most push-back from the researchers. This could be because many experienced researchers have been able to be successful in the past without having to engage with an external party. We try to establish a culture that working with external stakeholders is something positive, that the research could have greater real-world context. Many researchers don’t see that engagement is part of their roles. Another reason could be that engagement is highly dis-incentivised. In academic promotion scale, engagement is hard to define. It is not easy for some researchers to do. So, we help academics to identify which components of their roles could consist of engagement, and what might not be considered engagement when they go for promotion and grant applications. More so than ever, grant applications require researchers to articulate engagement. This could be a good way to change attitudes and culture of research - People start to value engagement as part of their roles.”

A culture that undervalues engagement, collaboration and partnership, is confirmed by a senior academic:

“Many academics see engagement as ‘more work’ as it is time consuming to set up relationships. In my discipline colleagues could do their work without any external relationships, so having a partner or engaging externally is not a priority. So in some disciplines, engagement is not regarded as relevant but a burden. To them, engagement won’t make their work better, more interesting or increase chances of getting grants. For some academics, they don’t even need grants, they just need study leave to do reading and writing. ECRs are probably more engaged and this might be driven by the need to get grants.”

The competitive culture within the University came across in individuals’ engagement behaviour and practices. As observed by the external stakeholders: *“[when] there isn’t an enabling culture [in universities] that contributes to building engagement, then people [from the University] get off on the wrong foot.”*

Competitive practices are akin to self-serving and ‘empire-building’. A centre manager commented that *“Universities, faculties and individual academics tend to build empires... and perceive sharing resources and embracing the others as threats.”*

The organisational culture within the University can create barriers to genuine and effective engagement. When engagement is aligned with short-termism and a self-serving agenda, this could significantly compromise the University’s ability and capacity to achieve long-term benefits for the broader society, as stated in *Advancing Melbourne 2030*.

Part 2. Implications of COVID-19

2.1 Challenges

The response to COVID-19 in Melbourne required the cancellation of all face-to-face events, teaching, research, meetings and office-based work at the University from March 2020-February 2021. The change to online video interactions using Zoom, MS Teams or Skype was rapid and support services were provided to assist staff in gaining the technical skills required to run the programs. Staff quickly learnt 'on the job' how to present, facilitate and manage audiences.

Our interviewees all remarked on the limitations of online only engagement for establishing and maintaining relationships, particularly those that relied on chance meetings at events, informal conversations or sharing a meal. Academics talked about research projects being adversely affected, stopped and adjusted, with many being unable to conduct research on sites or in the field. Those who regularly attended in person events or meetings felt the inability to meet with research partners and participants face-to-face had altered relationships. Those involved in working with community groups said they could not connect with individuals informally or understand their context without meeting face to face.

There were activities that could not be replaced by online meetings. The senior executives talked about being unable to host visitors for lunch at University House and enjoy the campus experience. These informal lunches and dinners are opportunities for external partners to establish connections, have informal conversations and seal agreements. Large scale public performances which provided community members with free access to the experience of attending a theatre or recital hall could not be replicated online. Once important components of these activities, such as printed brochures, postcards and event programs, had to be scrapped.

The sudden reliance on individual households' access to technology revealed inequalities and barriers to engagement. Households without a computer or internet connection and those juggling work and caring responsibilities were not able to engage, which only compounded the isolation of lockdown.

2.2 Silver-lining

Almost all the participants saw silver-linings to the pandemic's impact on their engagement activities. The unprecedented disruption forced many to try something new. The lockdown was seen by many as good time for staff members to reflect on some of the unsustainable practices of the past and focus on reviewing and resetting engagement strategies. For example, everyone now knows how to use Zoom because of COVID-19. *"Many projects have been on-hold. Some projects have been able to continue via Zoom. Interestingly, some of the projects do better in Zoom."*

COVID-19 related political and social upheavals have reminded institutions of the need to be better citizens. Previously, in person events limited the opportunities for engagement by those living in other regions, states and countries. Our interviewees reported more diverse participants, larger audiences and greater geographical reach through online events.

"Pre-COVID-19 you speak at a Panel. During COVID-19, your panel has a longer shelf space - people watch it later. It is confronting because this is going to live on, rather than speaking off cuff just at the moment."

Using the Zoom platform has expanded geographical reach. To colleagues working in the regional campuses and with communities with marginalised backgrounds, Zoom removed the need for travel and worked as a leveller in meetings. Regional participants were able to engage to the same level as colleagues based in Parkville.

A few institute managers talked about changes to their governance structure. The opportunity to diversify the composition of their advisory boards and committees (as well as audience base) was created because they could now invite people based in different countries and regions to participate and collaborate online.

A faculty engagement manager responded that *"we realised quickly that we have to start with a clean slate because we were negotiating with some of the stakeholders that have finance attached to the projects. So we need to re-negotiate with the established partners. Some play out differently."*

Some of the senior executives saw the disruptions as opportunities to stop and modify their practices to produce agile work that is responsive to the new context. For example, many groups were using the Pulse Survey to understand internal wellbeing and the future outlook. These data are useful to inform our response to COVID-19.

Many women appreciated the opportunity to participate, educate, meet and communicate online. They talked about the challenges of juggling parenting and work meant they often were not able to participate in events that are scheduled after work hours. Online events during the pandemic meant they did not have to juggle travel time and caring responsibilities in order to attend sessions.

"I make my engagement much more online. I have always been 'quiet' online. I just do more online now. I have 3 children. One good thing about COVID-19 is that I can cut down the commute. A lot of events at the Law Schools are at 6pm in Parkville, I often must organise multiple grandparents and neighbours to look after the kids in order to engage with the events. COVID-19 has made that kinds of engagement easier as we are now doing everything online."

The internet has created new opportunities – participants are able to attend events not limited to the ones organised by their Faculties, disciplines or institutions. They could access knowledge and debates from a wider horizon of experts from around the world.

An institute manager commented that:

"There are some opportunities - for example, we are able to bring in high calibre speakers from overseas to speak in our public lectures. We have raised the standard of our webinars and received very good feedback from our stakeholders. We normally have to fly them here and pay them. Now they don't even ask for payment. We used to have panel members from Melbourne, now we can have panellists from Italy, US and Asia. Students now have the chance to show their work to top experts. We are looking at how can we create learning and teaching space that we can invite students from around the world to learn together and taught by the same people and even co-teach with different people. The most obvious difference is that we have an international audience now. Our reach has increased. The quality of our program is very good. Now our webinars are twice a week, we are trying to give them the experience that they might appreciate during lockdown."

One interviewed ECA commented that the global pandemic has created a sense of urgency for many to reckon with their privilege and their impact on society. The loss of jobs has empowered ECAs to be more vocal about the challenges they face in doing their jobs. The online environment has created some opportunities, while not as effective, to call meetings with people more easily. For example, they could call an interdisciplinary ECA network meeting within a week.

2.3 Professional development

The study shows that there is a demand for more progressive professional development programs. A senior researcher who has completed several professional development sessions reflected on the lack of variety in the current offerings: *"Engagement is about relationships. Many research trainings are focusing on income generation. This kind of training may work in the 80s, less relevant in the 90s, certainly not in today's world. I would like to see more holistic, nurturing ways of doing engagement. Like the ways women do it."*

One of the interviewed external stakeholders talked at great length about the kinds of engagement workshops that could be useful for University staff:

"There is definitely a need for foundational skills and awareness training development [that covers] what are we talking about, how are people theorising engagement. This could be useful to everybody, including those who are thinking about engagement but doesn't know how to start. In addition to the foundational training, other PD could target the very experienced cohort like myself who also want to build more sophisticated areas and topics of interests and concerns, such as how do we engage meaningfully in times of COVID-19 and in a digital world. This higher-level PD could contribute to the broader culture building and shaping. Adding this complexity and nuance so people don't have narrow vision. Along this line, we need good tools, resources and practical things that people can take, read and apply, especially around the foundational stuff. If tools and trainings can only get you so far, then tailored bespoke support could really help build opportunities and address some of the more specialist needs. I don't like the consultancy approach that people come in and do the engagement for the academics. I do think a more sustainable approach is to train up the internal capacity so people can do it themselves. Peer to peer support and guidance (to show case sessions) could create opportunities for people to come together to discuss and workshop ideas. It is important not to only showcase the wins and best practices, but also the challenges people face to socialise and normalise the difficulties and complexities people face."

Another external stakeholder interviewed had also provided a long list of potential areas for meaningful engagement PDs.

“[Universities] need to put a strategy in place before one engages with the communities. When I say strategies, I mean start with identifying who are the stakeholders? Who do you want to engage? Then we need to know the characteristics of the stakeholders. Like creating a profile of what cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs they have? What are their biases? What are the challenges they face? What are the opportunities they have? What are the vehicles you are going to use to engage? (Do you use an interpreter? Do you use electronic? Do you go out? Do you attend conferences or functions? Are you going to a party?) What are the anticipated outcomes? What are the risks? How are you going to mitigate those risks? Once you have established these strategies, think about who are the key people who you can communicate with? Who are the bridge builders? What are the distinctive parts of the communities (what is the gender and age balance in the communities)? Where are the local schools or local community centres? Who are the movers and shakers? How do we approach them? Do we approach them very quickly or slowly? Or taking a medium pace? And why?”

This level of detail is acutely absent in the interviews with university staff. Overall, most staff members suggested practical and hands-on workshops, such as how to use specific digital and social media platforms, and how to increase research visibility. A few senior researchers discussed the kinds of professional development program that would help people ask ‘why’ questions to seek deeper answers. For example, *“the types of training that get academics to think about the values and applications of engagement, ask the why questions - such as why academics should engage. There are so many interesting ways to engage with impact, such as doing pro bono work. Being in the University is a massive privilege. We should be able to take some responsibility to give back to society. The values-based training is missing in some of the workshops I attended. We could have a mentoring program that nurtures and encourages each other and provide support. More peer-to-peer support would be useful. The support for soft-skills would be helpful.”*

Worth highlighting here is a piece of wisdom shared by an experienced professional staff member.

“Engagement is messy and complex. There is not 'cause and effect' that guarantees outcomes. Within a research context, some skill sets are often not seen as 'core skills'. Consultants are brought in to do one specific thing (e.g. writing grants) and go away. But a more sustainable approach is to build engagement skills into part of research methodology skill development and training. Engagement is emergingly a core skill for researcher. We should invest in it rather than paying consultants to come in and go. Consultants often have a vested interest not to build internal capacity, so they won't be out of the job.”

2.4 Advice to less experienced staff

The interviewees offered generous advice to less experienced staff about engagement. Among this was *“engage authentically”, “try to understand the context and purposes of engagement”, “stay curious”, “ask as many questions as you can to find the nuggets”, “be clear about why you engage. And be prepared to change” and “relationships is key in everything we do”.*

Some academics acknowledged the differing perspectives on the importance of engagement and encouraged others to *“carve out time” and “follow your intuition”.*

Part 3. Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to weed out the less sustainable practices, and a turning point for a more mutual and collaborative engagement and partnerships. The University could consider adopting the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Have broad but clear definitions of engagement and partnership.

The study found that the views on engagement and partnership were largely researchers- and university-centric, and may not align with the external stakeholders' views. Aligning university engagement and partnerships with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals could help bridging the gaps between university researchers and external stakeholders needs and expectations.

One specific initiative, for example, is setting up planning, review and evaluation systems aligning with a global framework such as the SDGs with university stakeholders at Melbourne Connect. Melbourne Connect is a newly designed facility that is set up to co-locate industries and university activities to spark greater innovations through collaborations and partnerships.

Alignment with the Advancing Melbourne 2030's goals and priorities:

Strategic goal 2: A vibrant, diverse and inclusive community, and a destination of choice for talented students and staff

Strategic goal 4: At the leading edge of discovery, understanding impact through research

Strategic goal 5: Lead, convene and collaborate through strategic partnerships on a global scale

Strategic priorities:

- Strengthen relationships with a global community of scholars, partners and alumni and ensure that the curriculum is informed by a global range of perspectives
- Support cross-disciplinarity, innovation and collaboration through the purposeful development of a network of precincts which bring together researchers and students with research partners.

Recommendation 2: Enhance performance review processes, promotion criteria and professional development programs to foster a stronger culture of cooperation and collaboration.

The study has found that competition, status quo and hierarchy have largely shaped the University's culture and identity. As the pandemic has heightened greater inequalities in society, many internal and external stakeholders are rethinking the university's role in society.

Fostering a culture of cooperation and collaboration is necessary in times of crises and disruption. However, it requires a whole-of-university approach. *Advancing Melbourne 2030* has emphasised the importance of collaboration and partnerships in achieving all the goals and priorities. Developing systemic plans and processes for recognising and supporting the engagement work of individuals will underpin broader cultural change. For example, immediate actions could include incorporating the expected qualities in selection criteria, promotion criteria and performance review which would reinforce the university's expectations and priorities. Actions for medium-term goals could include building internal professional development to build the capacity and capabilities of staff. Aligning these with university's priorities and goals is pivotal - setting clear targets and strategies would help achieving these longer-term aspirations.

Alignment with the Advancing Melbourne 2030's goals and priorities:

Strategic goal 2: A vibrant, diverse and inclusive community, and a destination of choice for talented students and staff

Strategic priorities:

- Cultivate a culture and environment that will be attractive to the most talented people from around the world
- Support cross-disciplinarity, innovation and collaboration through the purposeful development of a network of precincts which brings together researchers and students with research partners

Recommendation 3: Facilitate professional development that integrates systemic thinking about engagement and partnership skills ensuring ethical and consistent approaches

University engagement has involved both transactional and transformational forms. Holding space for conversations among university communities could help to re-prioritise and re-alignment with the University's broader purposes and the University's role in the society.

Putting 'place' at the centre and drawing on an eco-systemic framework could help shift ourselves from a self-serving mentality to a more opened mindset. Building engagement rhetoric that reflecting the general Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as well as Asia-Pacific principles and values, such as respect, reciprocity, mutuality, equality and sustainability, could re-orient some of the more opportunistic practices.

Alignment with the Advancing Melbourne 2030's goals and priorities:

Strategic goal 1: Embrace our place in Australia and the world, partnering in the future of Melbourne as a thriving and sustainable global city

Strategic goal 2: A vibrant, diverse and inclusive community, and a destination of choice for talented students and staff

Strategic goal 3: Students at the heart of the University, renowned for their outstanding knowledge, skills and societal influence

Strategic goal 4: At the leading edge of discovery, understanding and impact through research

Strategic goal 5: Lead, convene and collaborate through strategic partnerships on a global scale

Strategic priorities:

- Advance reconciliation and reciprocal learning with Indigenous peoples and communities
- Develop our precincts and campuses to contribute to social, economic and cultural wealth
- Strengthen opportunities for talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds

Recommendation 4: Provide leadership and resources to implement engagement that draws on scholarship and good practice.

Instead of assuming engagement as a 'given' process that would happen without any structure and system, high level thought leadership is needed to drive and guide ethical and sustainable approaches to engagement, collaboration and partnerships. Engagement should not be narrowly defined or confused with intellectual property registers, knowledge translation or impact. University needs to establish clearer understanding of engagement to ensure coherence and outcomes.

Evidence-based research could inform and strengthen university engagement and partnership. Systemic information gathering is needed to establish baseline data and develop benchmarks for effectiveness of past, present and emerging practices. Good data analysis could reveal hidden issues and unrealised patterns, trends and opportunities. This could shift conversations from subjective anecdotal claims to evidence-based discussions and decision making. Research could also review existing frameworks and tools, develop innovative methodologies and software that help capture and measure the real, societal impacts of university engagement and partnership.

As knowledge-based institutions, universities and researchers are in strong positions (and indeed, this is in the interests of the universities to produce new knowledge) to drive rigorous research-based partnership approaches that improve the wellbeing of people and the environment. Scholarship on university partnership (e.g. Rybníček & Königsgruber 2019), knowledge co-creation (e.g. Mauser et al, 2013), social innovation (e.g., Wahl, 2016), as well as high quality measurement frameworks are gaining momentum around the world.

Future research could explore questions such as:

- What are the appropriate indicators of 'successful partnership', ways of monitoring progress?
- What kind of technological innovation will assist the transition towards a collaborative culture and how will universities deploy these technologies?
- What kind of skill sets and professional expertise are needed in support of purposeful engagement and partnership?
- What are the new concepts, perspectives and paradigms that can inform and drive systemic transformation of knowledge co-creation?

Which policy changes, including new laws and regulatory changes, will support positive culture change?

How can universities create supportive networks of collaboration and partnerships united by common values and purposes?

Alignment with the Advancing Melbourne 2030's goals and priorities:

Strategic goal 4: At the leading edge of discovery, understanding and impact through research

Strategic priorities:

- Advance research success through targeted investment, enhanced cross-disciplinary partnerships and a renewed emphasis on translation;
- Support cross-disciplinarity, innovation and collaboration through the purposeful development of network of precincts which brings together researchers and students with research partners
- Lead on global challenges where we can make a significant contribution to the world, and develop centres of excellence that are global in reach, ambition and impact.

Recommendation 5: Ensure there is a University group or committee that has strategic oversight of engagement and partnership activities, including commissioning research and evidence-gathering, promoting successful practice and developing policy.

The ecosystem of the university is rich, diverse, complex and constantly changing. Ensuring there is a key group that has the oversight and accountability of university engagement activities would help mobilise the work. The group could consist of internal and external representatives who have the mandate to build capacity and provide the required oversight to drive university collaboration and partnerships toward a coherent and well-intended direction.

This group could promote access to peer support, connect academics and breaking silos. The group may facilitate processes that contribute to setting up Faculty-level goals and strategies to ensure academics and professional staff are appropriately supported their engagement.

Like the university's diversity and inclusion committee and sub-committee, the representations of the group could consist of the Associate Deans of Engagement, experts from existing Centres, Institutes and Faculties could be drawn upon, such as the Melbourne Interdisciplinary Research Institute (MIRI), the new Researcher Development Unit, the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education (MCSHE), Melbourne Connect, as well as representatives from the external stakeholders (government, enterprises, community and students). The function of this group could consist of, but not be limited to, providing partnership-specific strategic oversight, accountability, a strategic road map, policy and roll out of action plans. This body could be pivotal to bridging both internal and external stakeholders, as well as connecting different parts within the university, with a common objective to build university partnerships that are impactful, accountable to the people and environment university serve, that have clear alignment with the university's goals and priorities, as well as that achieve the broader societal and environmental goals.

Alignment with the Advancing Melbourne 2030's goals and priorities:

Strategic goal 2: A vibrant, diverse and inclusive community, and a destination of choice for talented students and staff

Strategic goal 4: At the leading edge of discovery, understanding and impact through research

Strategic goal 5: Lead, convene and collaborate through strategic partnerships on a global scale

While these recommendations may not be immediately actionable, they could be used to open conversation and develop into a University-wide engagement framework

5. Limitations of the research

The findings from this study are time-based and contextually-specific, while the data capture a range of perspectives from one relatively large and established higher education institution. The findings are not meant to be generalised to other higher education institutions in Australia or beyond.

The study was not intended to measure change, hence quantitative methodology, such as a survey, was not adopted. To ensure the psychological wellbeing of the participants, the research adopted a qualitative method - interviews - which generated much needed, rich and in-depth data. Considerable efforts were made to anonymise the participants. The interview data offers substantial insights into the nuances and complexity of engaging with both the internal and external stakeholders in the middle of a global crisis.

6. Conclusion

Poorly conceived and executed engagement and partnerships can be the Achilles' heel of the relations between a university and its various communities. This study has generated timely data, evidence and analysis that could contribute new knowledge to evidence-based policy making and practical engagement guidelines. COVID-19 has posed new challenges but also forced many internal and external stakeholders to do things differently. The recommended actions could bring multiple benefits across academic divisions, academic levels, and stakeholders, considering the interconnected nature of the university ecosystem.

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