



Doing community engagement differently in the time of pandemic

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As University communities are increasingly affected by the global pandemic, University engagement will and should 'look different' in 2020. There is a risk that academic engagement may be pushed to the sidelines during the time of global pandemic.

Although Covid-19 doesn't discriminate, it impacts differently across the intersections of the macro-social dimensions that shape communities – age, class, gender, race, places in the world¹. The diversity, scale and complexity of implications for the University community are such that it is pivotal for University to remain engaged during the pandemic.

Around the world, confused communication and frequent changes of policy and advice could hamper the coordination of engagement efforts and responses. In Australia, medical scientists and politicians have rightly taken the centre stage in the Covid-19 outbreak, leaving little space for the voices and concerns of the broader communities. At University level, the urgent priority has been set for academics to focus on converting to online teaching and Covid-19 related research.

Pandemics can create a sense that 'we are in it together'. This reiterates the fundamental role of engagement during this time. For example, a relationship based on trust will help social researchers to explore the processes of social exclusion experienced in a changing society. An ethical engagement would ensure that the voices and perspectives of the marginalised would be captured and represented in policy making.

An engaged University is one that is resilient, creative and responsive to the issues that affect society. Experts have warned of the unprecedented implications that transcend public health and economy. We will be confronted by broader and more complex social-cultural, psychological, political and economic implications - rising mental health issues, unemployment, crimes, housing crisis, domestic violence, recessions and heightened global conflict and violence.

To create a new future, we will need to learn from the larger force. Through engagement, Universities will be able to stay on top and ahead of this massive turning tide; academics and researchers will be able to produce relevant knowledge and resources the world needs in response to the uncertain time.

Covid-19 forces many traditional institutions and service-providers, including Universities and academics, to 'think outside-the-box'. As Universities are no longer able to teach, research or engage with their students, collaborators and partners in usual ways, it is easy for people to feel overwhelmed, disempowered and react to changes in fight-or-flight modes.

1 • *Age* (Evidence shows that older people are more vulnerable than the younger people; while many younger people are perceived to be invincible than the older generation);
• *Class* (it is difficult to self-isolate in the comfort of a well-established upper-middle class home than an over-crowded unit with limited facilities);
• *Gender* (men are more likely to get infected than women; while women are likely to work in service-industries, expected to perform home-school duties and at risk of domestic violence amid 'stay at home' campaign);
• *Race* (Xenophobic and racist outbreak targeting the Asian communities and businesses more than other groups; Political narratives of Chinese virus have continued to incite fears, prejudices and biases against the Chinese); and
• *Places in the world* (Covid19 could be an even more dangerous weapon in war-torn countries and conflict-zones)

Psychologists have encouraged individuals to focus on small, manageable actions that could foster a sense of control and togetherness. We could ask:

- *What are some of the simple actions that we could take, so that we could assist our collective community in pushing through this challenging time?*
- *What are some of the small actions the University community could take so that we could build solidarity and a sense of collective resilience?*
- *What are some of the collective actions we could take now to mobilise and enable the University community 'bounce back' and recover in the aftermath of the crisis?*

Recommendations

The following recommendations offer small actions that a University community could take to remain connected and engaged with themselves and with their communities:

- 1) 'Remain still' – Accepting the fact that Covid-19 pandemic will impact on the ways we work; and accept that there are small actions we can take to remain in control. Psychologists for Peace have suggested the importance of remaining calm, staying still and grounded until the storm goes away.
- 2) 'Go within' – Distilling, reviewing and reflecting on our existing engagement practices, our intentions, our purposes, our relationships with our collaborators. Were those partnerships healthy? Sustainable?
- 3) When ready, 'reach out' - send an email, a phone call, and/or arrange an online meeting to check in with our community, including our existing collaborators and partners how are they travelling. Recognise that people are affected differently. Consider using peaceful ways to express ourselves as we seek to help others.
- 4) 'Go beyond' - form a virtual community of practice and meet online to share resources, information and support. For example, staff across Academic Divisions and Chancellery at the University of Melbourne formed a community of practice called Research Engagement and Impact Network to foster peer-to-peer support and sharing of resources.
- 5) 'Remain engaged' – Show interest in keeping in touch through small actions, such as setting up a regular meeting calendar and reminders to meet online at agreed dates and times. This simple gesture could build trust and enduring commitments. Some Universities have introduced e-newsletters to share updates and information. For example, Simon Fraser University in Canada created a weekly online newsletter that aims to boost positive community spirits through sharing constructive ideas and insights, practical tips and information to create stronger, more engaged and enabling communities during this extra-ordinary time.
- 6) 'Upskill' – This could be a good opportunity to pick up new skills. Enroll in some professional development courses and training to gain new engagement knowledge and skills. Many people are first-time users of Zoom video conferencing, producing webinars and learning to host an online conference. Many of these courses are available free of charge, online. It is forgivable to make mistakes but useful to pick up some new skills. In promoting a healthy community spirit, some may even elect to share their skills online.
- 7) 'Get organised and coordinated' – adopting a strategic and structural approach to coordinate with internal and external stakeholders could quickly build capacity and reduce duplications of effort, wastages and errors. For example, the University of Nottingham has been quick in stepping up, coordinating local, national and regional efforts to tackle Covid-19 and its impact on the communities. They draw on five principles to lead a range of proactive initiatives: be strategic, be sustainable, be smart, be safe and be sensible.
- 8) 'Collaborate' – We could double our individual efforts and impacts if we collaborate using innovative and digital platforms. For example, the Psychology Society of South Africa has joined a multi-stakeholder initiative to support South African health care workers. They coordinate a database of mental health care providers who are willing to volunteer their time to help health care workers cope psychologically during the time of Covid-19 pandemic.

These examples reflect Urie Bronfenbrenner's social ecological framework for human development, which is widely used in Peace Psychology. The model emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of, factors within and across all levels of, engaged individuals and their social environment. Recognising that engagement involves multiple levels of activities and influences, a series of more proactive, reflective and well-developed engagement activities would and could shape and influence positive outcomes.

Author

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