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Managing the public perceptions of the higher education sector:
A re-engagement exercise

Dr Samuel Burgum & Dr Pauline Hanesworth examine public perceptions of the higher education sector and consider possible responses.

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Managing the public perceptions of the higher education sector:
A re-engagement exercise

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Managing the public perceptions of the higher education sector

The HEA's Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) Network identified this as one of the key challenges that the HE sector will need to address in the coming years. Indeed, recently we have seen not just a general discontent with our sector but also a perceived disconnect: between Higher Education Providers (HEPs) and government, between HEPs and their local communities and between HEPs and their own students.

So, we have heard Michael Gove claim that the UK has "had enough of experts" (Financial Times, 03.06.16), and Lord Adonis both castigates universities for running a "fees cartel" (The Guardian, 07.07.17) and calls for a removal of university status from so-called "lower-performing" post-92 institutions (THE, 12.10.17). We have witnessed general uproar over VC's remuneration (e.g. The Guardian, 14.09.17) and grade inflation (e.g. The Independent, 19.07.17), and we have seen Jo Johnson criticising student union no-platforming policies, arguing that universities are failing to protect freedom of speech (The Guardian, 26.12.17).

Brexit in particular has exposed deep divisions between HEPs and the general public, with localities with universities, as well as proportions of the population with degrees more likely to vote remain than those without (The Guardian, 23.06.16), and with 85% of students who voted choosing to remain (YouthSight, 24.07.16). These splits reflect a deeper divide in society evidenced by the latest British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA 34, 2017) which revealed "a stark

and growing divide between young people with a degree education and older people with no formal qualifications", for example in their views about the economic impact of immigration, on same-sex relationships, on transgender prejudice, and on abortion.

Finally, we have seen student discontent, for example around tuition fees and the TEF, made manifest in the partial boycott of the NSS which meant twelve HEPs failed to have a publishable NSS score in 2017 (THE, 09.08.17, WonkHE, 09.08.17). We have also seen student frustration at institutionalised – and in particular curriculum-based, colonialism and lack of diversity – in such campaigns as "Why is my curriculum white?", "Decolonising/Liberating the Curriculum" and "Rhodes Must Fall" (NUS, 11.03.15, SOAS, 18.01.17, NUS, 18.01.17, The Guardian, 16.03.16; the latter of which was erroneously reduced to a case of damnatio memoriae by the UK media).

These divisions are not unique to the UK: we cannot forget that the "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign began in South Africa. Hong Kong too saw widespread student activism in the form of pro-democracy protests and boycotts in 2014 and 2015, and the country has seen more recent unease with Hong Kong residents concerned about the "preservation of academic freedom and signs of intervention from the mainland" (British Council, 2017). In Algeria, the higher education ministry forbid any activity on campuses related to political campaigning prior to the general election (UWN, 05.05.17), and in Australia the education minister has criticised its own HEPs for benefiting from their so-called "rivers of gold" (THE, 20.10.17).

When addressing the management of public perceptions of higher education, we are then tackling the issue on two fronts: externally in relation to government, local authorities, citizens, voters, taxpayers and employers, and internally in relation to students – current, prospective and alumni – parents, sponsors etc. All of these stakeholders have a part to play in determining the societal role of higher education, and so are key in how our sector is perceived and articulated: managing public perceptions is then about re-engaging these stakeholders.

Embracing an engagement model

We know that higher education is of benefit to society not just in developing graduates, but also in contributing to the economy, in changing lives through research, in supporting local areas etc. (cf. UUK, 2017). However, the discontent articulated above suggests that this value proposition does not satisfy some of our stakeholders. Perhaps, then, our focus should not be on satisfaction but engagement. This is not a new concept (cf. Watson et al, 2011); it returns us to the so-called third mission of the higher education sector: public/ communities engagement. It is because of this third mission that we have such entities as the Talloires Network, a global association of HEPs committed to "strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education"; Engagement Australia, comprising at least 70% of Australian Universities and dedicated to improving university-community engagement; and the Carnegie Foundation's Community Engagement Classification, a recognition process through which HEPs can evidence that they are a "community engaged institution."

Such engagement does not have to be built solely on an "us and them" model (e.g. through outreach programmes to local communities or through only using research findings to the benefit of local communities), but rather can be predicated upon participation. Such a focus may
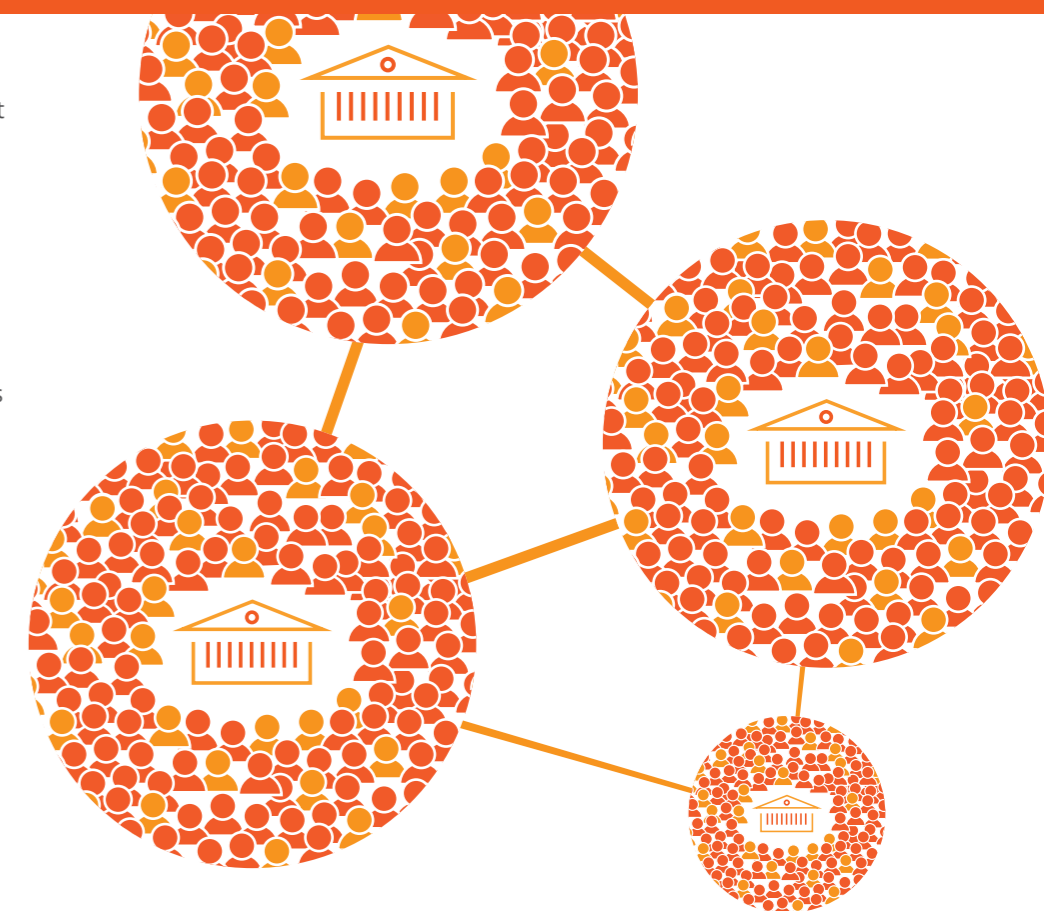
require a new approach to the civic ownership of university resources, to how university spaces are used by all stakeholders, and to how research is not just made available but created, e.g. with greater use of participatory action research.

This participation might be enacted on a tangible level. Consider how University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University are working with local partners and government in a collective effort to enhance, and where necessary regenerate, the Sheffield City Region for example through Sheffield's Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre and SHU's planned Advanced Wellbeing Research Centre (THE, 10.08.17). Consider too, RMIT University's New Academic Street, a campus redevelopment project designed specifically to "improve the permeability of the campus" and strengthen the university's connections and engagements with the city's central business district in which it is situated (WonkHE, 19.10.17) or Oxford Brookes' Open Campus initiative, which highlights the potential for public-campus interactions through university facilities. By embracing engagement

as participation – as collective and collaborative – we can work to bridge the disconnect between higher education and our localities.[1]

Such participatory engagement might also be less tangible. Here we wander into the realm of the purpose of HE. Reflecting on the Lords' consideration of the Higher Education and Research Bill, Lord Stevenson argued that whilst HEPs are "tools of economic progress and social mobility" they also exist to "serve both the knowledge economy and the knowledge society" (THE, 11.01.17). In a world of increasing isolationism where "fake news" and "alternative facts" are shaping the political landscape, participation with our "localities", particularly in relation to research, can serve not just to engage the public, but also try to promote a clearer understanding of how expertise is arrived at, and its value in objectively evidencing decision making.

However, the impact here is reciprocal. As Bhambra (2015) argues, our understanding of what constitutes knowledge depends on the "knowledge makers". A diversity of knowledge producers can lead to

a wider legitimisation of ideas and a deeper understanding of knowledge itself. Whilst Bhambra's example relates to how increasing demographic diversity amongst research staff in relation to gender and sexual identity impacted on the widening and deepening of "legitimate knowledge" in the discipline of sociology, such an example can be applied more broadly. By participating with our stakeholders in the development of knowledge, we not just work to re-engage them, bridging the disconnect, but we also work with a broader diversity of "knowledge makers", yielding a richer understanding of the world, and, perhaps, richer research itself.

Incorporating pedagogies of participation

A participatory approach aims not only to connect the missions of research and public engagement, but is also predicated on a closing of the gap between these and teaching. Whichever way we take the student activism outlined in the first section, we cannot deny that it evidences strong student engagement in their education experience. Indeed, the latest NSS scores suggest that whilst students are generally satisfied with their higher education experience (with an average score of 84%), they want to engage more in the shaping of this experience, and for their voice to be heard (the average student voice score was 73%: HEFCE, 2017).

This does not just relate to tuition fees, the TEF and de-colonialising curricula and campuses, but also to the mechanics behind teaching excellence. We have seen, for example, students argue for better support for frontline teaching staff in order to ensure teaching excellence, for secure teaching contracts, for enough pay for proper subsistence for such staff, and for sufficient training opportunities. These have been manifest in NUS and student union campaigns against zero hours contracts (The Guardian, 16.11.17, Edinburgh University Students' Association campaign) and also in the latest HEA-HEPI student academic

experience survey. In this survey, students were asked to rank the importance of different characteristics of teaching staff, and compare this to whether they felt that staff had demonstrated these qualities (Neves and Hillman, 2017, figure 11.5, p. 44). Whilst respondents saw the research status of their lecturers as less important, despite being amply demonstrated, they felt that CPD in teaching and training in how to teach was of high importance but less evidenced.

Cumulatively, then, these campaigns and surveys suggest that whilst students are engaged in their education experience and are willing to be politically and socially active in shaping it, either their voice is not fully heard and/or is not acted upon, meaning their potential as partners – and thus their engagement potential – is not being fulfilled.

One of the ways in which to address this, and so to look to bridge the disconnect between HEPs and students, is to embrace what Lambert (2009) calls a "pedagogies of participation" approach, particularly in relation to research-based teaching. By adopting this approach, academics can begin to break down boundaries between student and teacher, as well as teaching and research. Such separations are currently entrenched by separate roles (e.g. teaching vs. research fellowships), different regulatory structures (e.g. TEF vs. REF, see Blackmore, 2016), as well as policies that presuppose a provider/consumer relationship between academics and students. In contrast, Lambert argues that adopting the participatory approach of research-based teaching "foregrounds an explicit commitment to the idea that students are producers of knowledge, sometimes in collaboration with other students, with the communities with/in which they carry out research, and/or with their teachers" (see also Burgum and Stoakes, 2016). In other words, one way of managing perceptions of HE in society and of improving institutional reputation is through our own students, so long as we take a different pedagogic approach that engages them and

their communities through research. In so doing, and in conjunction with the participatory research activities suggested in section two, the bringing together of research/teaching, community/public and student is strengthened.

Research-based teaching is not, however, the only solution. Pedagogies of participation in all its guises (cf. the various students as co-producers and co-creators approaches) is a method by which we can bridge the disconnect between HEPs and students.

"Service learning" is another possibility by which the student/HEP and community/HEP divide can be bridged. Such an approach was adopted by Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU: an HEA Global Teaching Excellence Award finalist). For PolyU, service learning (SL) is an "experimental learning pedagogy that integrates community service with academic study and reflections" (see their ServiceLearning@ PolyU website). It aims to both enhance students' civic responsibility and engagement and also to "benefit the community at large".

Community engagement projects themselves are common to HE. See for example, De Montfort University's Square Mile project in which academics and student volunteers "offer potentially life-changing services in the Leicester community" or the University of Nottingham's Undergraduate Community Internship Programme.[2] Where service learning differs is that, rather than occurring through volunteering activities as is most common, student engagement in the community is instead

embedded within curricula: teaching and public engagement are brought together. So, at PolyU, service learning has become an institution-wide pedagogy with every student being required to complete an SL module (which are discipline specific)[3] as part of their degree: it is a core part of student learning. Such an approach has been seen not just to improve student learning and to break down barriers between students/academics/communities and between teaching/research/public engagement, but also to develop graduates who benefitted from the university's links with business, industry, professional sectors, and employers. In so doing, then, the public role of HEPs begins to blend with its more neoliberal (here meaning market-orientated) leanings.

Revisiting the purpose of HE

The neoliberal and the public service role of HEPs are often seen as mutually exclusive, if not mutually destructive. This does not, however, need to be the case. Consider, for example, the Responsabilidad Social Universitaria (RSU) approach to engagement gaining traction amongst HEPs in Latin America (see Appe et

al, 2017). This model, which centres on social responsibility (focusing on economic, social and environmental sustainability), brings together the various elements/purposes of HE, seeing them as mutually dependent. For example, the model sees HE as market-orientated, in that it prioritises HEPs' relevance to the economy and engagement with private businesses. It also sees HE as public-focused in that it contributes to social mobility and tackles national and international situations, calling on researchers to "address critical social problems related to poverty, corruption, inequity, and environment degradation." It sees HEPs as developing graduate attributes: predicated on pedagogies of participation to prepare students to "take an active role in the democratic process." Finally, it sees itself as socially cohesive, breaking down the barriers between HEPs, students and the public in its assertion that "students and community members should participate as equals within the academic institution to promote social change and research."

In adopting such an engagement model, then, these HEPs bring together their business, research, teaching, and public functions

into one conglomerate entity. The purpose of HE no longer becomes about neoliberal vs social, but instead is economic and social and epistemological and educational.

Whether or not the RSU model is suited to all institutions is debatable. However, we can learn from this example: with a unified purpose, underpinned by a similar philosophy of participation to that which we have been advocating, these HEPs have the potential to become not just "in" or "for" their localities but part of them. The possibility here is that our stakeholders are not seen as such (as "stakeholders"), but rather are active members of our institutions. In this way, the managing of public perceptions of the higher education sector becomes less about public relations or exercises in persuasion, and more about working cohesively towards common goals. Thus, by adopting a philosophy of participation, we do not just work to re-engage the disaffected and the disconnected, but we also work – potentially – to reconfigure how we are situated within our "localities", how we conduct our "business" and what we think of as HE itself.

Footnotes

[1] "Localities" might mean regional, national or global and might operate in the physical or virtual (or both) worlds: our HEPs are multi-located, comprising multi-national and virtual "campuses", whose research, teaching and engagement occur in and impact on a global network rather than on single fixed geographic points.

[2] Cf. the UK National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement.

[3] Consider the examples of "Financial literacy for low-income youth in Hong Kong", "Serving the community through teaching English", or "Mentoring health ambassadors for school communities". Between 2012/13 and 2016/17, PolyU had contributed over 350,000 hours of service to the community.

[4] For guidelines on the institutionalisation of service-learning, see Grönlund and Nortomaa, 2017, an output of the Erasmus+ funded Europe Engage project, which sought to identify existing SL practice, promote SL as a pedagogical approach and create an SL network.

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