

Auditing and Evaluating University–Community Engagement: Lessons from a UK Case Study

Angie Hart, University of Brighton, a.hart@brighton.ac.uk
and Simon Northmore, University of Brighton,
S.R.Northmore@brighton.ac.uk

Abstract

The growing importance of community and public engagement activities in universities has led to an increasing emphasis on auditing and evaluating university–community partnerships. However, the development of effective audit and evaluation tools is still at a formative stage. This article presents a case study of the University of Brighton’s experience of evaluating such partnerships. Drawing on this experience, a review of the literature and an analysis of published measurement frameworks, the challenges of measuring community and public engagement are discussed and a typology of dimensions for university public engagement presented. A critique of the Brighton case study and the lessons learned provides a basis for clarifying the activities that universities might want to measure and the key questions they need to ask when determining which tools are appropriate.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been ‘an international convergence of interest on issues about the purposes of universities and colleges and their role in wider society’ (Watson, 2007, p. 1). This convergence revolves around the twin themes of the benefits to both universities and communities of scholarly engagement and the benefits to society more generally from the civic impacts of engagement. Communities, businesses and individuals can draw on the knowledge and expertise of universities to address ‘real world’ issues, while engagement initiatives can shape university research agendas and enhance student learning (Alter, 2005). At the same time, changing patterns of migration and multiculturalism that have

accompanied increasing globalisation have led to a reassertion of the role of higher education in strengthening social capital (McIlrath and Mac Labhrainn, 2007).

Thus, universities engage with local communities and the wider public as partners through a diverse range of activities. This article aims to provide some practical directions and ideas for developing a systematic approach to auditing and evaluating university–community engagement within this complex environment. The University of Brighton has been developing its work in evaluating community partnerships since 2003. This experience provides a useful case study of the challenges of evaluating university–community engagement. From a review of the literature and an examination of published measurement frameworks, the authors consider the definitional problems involved and present a typology of dimensions for university public engagement to help clarify the activities that universities might want to capture. The implications of these for measuring engagement are discussed.

Review of the literature

In undertaking the literature search the ISI Web of Knowledge (all citation indexes) was searched for papers from the year 2000, using the terms ‘university public engagement’; ‘community–university collaboration’; ‘evaluation, audit, higher education’; ‘evaluating university–community engagement’; and ‘evaluating public engagement’. A total of 150 papers were returned.

From these, 27 papers were initially selected as having some relevance to broader-level strategies for developing university community engagement and the processes by which universities might constructively build links with their local citizens and the wider public. Papers covered a diverse range of topics, including: the role of universities in a knowledge economy; case studies of public participation events; models of university–community partnership; service learning; and education for citizenship. However, the focus of the majority of these was not primarily on how such engagement could be evaluated. Indeed, the search terms ‘evaluating university–community engagement’ and ‘evaluating public engagement’ produced a mere five papers. Overall, only 13 papers drew attention to an evaluative element that went beyond individual descriptions of specific projects and that might have transferability to other situations. The following discussion focuses on these.

The literature search confirmed the impression that the development of effective audit and evaluation tools for university public engagement is

still at a formative stage. Indeed, a recent and very useful review of the literature on effective university–community partnering (Kenworthy-U'Ren and U'Ren, 2008) makes no reference to evaluation. Despite many examples of imaginative practical activity and a tradition, both in the UK and internationally, of the 'socially purposeful' university (rooted in the Victorian civic universities and the US land grant universities) evaluation and dissemination of this engagement work has been largely neglected. Oliver *et al.* (2008, p. 78), reviewing the literature on public involvement, arrive at the same conclusion:

Formal research of public involvement was rare. The literature was replete with enthusiastic reports and reflections but with little or no detail about public involvement, and often little attempt at objectivity.

Many of the relevant tools and approaches currently being developed, including the one developed at the University of Brighton (University of Brighton, 2009), are to be found in the 'grey' literature, including conference proceedings and web-based audit tools that are set up with wiki software. Thus, in addition to searching the bibliographic literature this material was also explored. Here an iterative approach was adopted: some of the most helpful sources resulted from following up interactive links and internal cross-links to websites and electronic source documents. This approach has limitations as it is difficult to provide a succinct audit trail and other valid sources may be overlooked. However, the grey literature is an important resource which will prove of value to others negotiating their way through this territory.

Despite widespread acknowledgement that universities should contribute to the development of the society of which they are a part, the problems in measuring university–community engagement include: a lack of focus on outcomes; a lack of standardised instruments and tools; and the variety of approaches currently being adopted (Hart *et al.*, 2009).

Rowe and Frewer (2000, p. 10), reviewing methods for evaluating the effectiveness of public involvement in science and technology policy, found that much of the discussion in the literature focused on criteria that were procedural rather than substantive, 'in that they relate to what makes for an effective process, rather than how to measure effective outcomes'. Granner and Sharpe (2004, p. 514), in a review of measurement tools for evaluating community coalitions aimed at promoting community health, found that the largest numbers of measures were for assessing individual or group characteristics, 'with impact and outcome measures being the least numerous'.

The lack of standardised measurement instruments for evaluation of civic engagement is widely noted (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Granner and Sharpe, 2004). Nonetheless, pressure for greater accountability has led to the growth of benchmarks and performance indicators designed to enable universities to demonstrate their socio-economic and cultural contribution at local and regional level. There has been less of a focus on developing tools to evaluate the processes by which higher education institutions establish community partnerships and how they are sustained (Kezar, 2005; Buys and Bursnall, 2007). As a consequence, 'little has been achieved in the development of robust measures reflecting the benefits that flow from such partnerships to **both** universities **and** communities with which they engage' (Goedegebuure and van der Lee, 2006, p. 4, emphasis added).

A further obstacle to the development of such measures is the wide variety of potential activities encompassed by what is here termed 'university community engagement'; the lack of precise definitions of important concepts; and the variety of approaches adopted in evaluating public involvement. Granner and Sharpe (2004) described a lack of conceptual clarity in the measures they reviewed. Oliver *et al.* (2008, p. 77) summed up the problem in the following way:

Methods for evaluating (university) public involvement can draw on literatures about public engagement with science, community involvement and action research. These literatures evaluate involvement organisationally (leadership, structures, resources and attitudes) within communities; procedurally; interpersonally (fairness and competence); and in terms of impact (such as mutual learning and civic agency, or influencing the research agenda).

From this brief review it is clear that there is no simple solution to the development of audit and evaluation tools for measuring university community engagement. Adding to this complexity is the discrepancy between locally driven measures and indicators (designed to evaluate specific engagement activities by a single institution or consortium) and those seeking to encapsulate more universal measures, for example the Russell Group (Mollas-Gallart *et al.*, 2002). The experience of evaluating the University of Brighton's community engagement work concurs with Rowe and Frewer's (2000) conclusion that defining 'what works best when' is a major task.

The measurement challenge: current approaches

In reviewing the available indicator sets for evaluating engagement, two approaches to dealing with these measurement challenges were

identified. At the strategic university level there are various attempts to define high-level institutional benchmarks. However, as Goedegebuure and van der Lee (2006) pointed out in discussing the Australian context, these can be rather abstract and do not necessarily provide directly usable indicators for public engagement.

At the project-specific level there are a variety of accounts of individual university activities that relate teaching and learning to the wider world, involve dialogue between practitioners, researchers and community members and are concerned with the wider role and responsibility of the university community (Hart *et al.*, 2007). However, these do not necessarily demonstrate benefits at an *institutional* level. Demonstrating impact at the level of citizen health or the local population and placing an economic value on those activities is even more problematic (Pearce *et al.*, 2007). An added difficulty is that long-term timescales are required for measuring both higher-level institutional outcomes and broader social/community outcomes.

Nor are there established conventions for determining quality in outreach and engagement, as there are for teaching and research (Southern Region Indicator Work Group, 2005). As a result, 'many university administrators are not aware of the breadth of community engagement that occurs within their own institutions' (Goedegebuure and van der Lee, 2006, p. 8).

The diversity of approaches to university–community engagement has resulted in the development of several indicator sets for evaluating engagement. The approaches summarised below help to articulate the different ways in which higher education institutions are currently engaging with audit, benchmarking and evaluation and point to broader trends in this field. A comprehensive discussion of these approaches can be found in a briefing paper by the authors of this article for the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (Hart *et al.*, 2009).

Many different organisations have been concerned with developing indicators and benchmarking tools, in particular at the institutional level. These include the Higher Education Funding Council for England's regional benchmarking tool (HEFCE, 2002) and the Higher Education Business and Community Interaction (HE-BCI) survey (HEFCE, 2007b). These are particularly useful for gathering information on regional and national trends and for broad-level strategic planning, especially in relation to regional partnerships. They provide a consistent basis for benchmarking and information management.

Similarly, the Russell Group of universities has created the Higher Education Community Engagement Model (Corporate Citizenship

Company, 2004) that has been available for use by any higher education institution since 2006. The aim of this benchmarking model is to capture community activities that are conducted over and above the university's core purposes of teaching and research. In addition to systematic monitoring to inform strategic planning it provides quantifiable evidence to demonstrate the value of community engagement.

In the USA, benchmarking and classification tools have had a longer history. The Carnegie Classification has been a leader in the field for three decades (the 2008 Documentation Framework and information on updates can be found on the Carnegie Foundation website). The 2008 Framework is valuable for documenting community engagement efforts and sets out a clear framework and comprehensive indicator sets for different areas of institutional engagement. Campus Compact, the Kellogg Commission and the Council of Independent Colleges are other examples of well-developed frameworks for classifying and benchmarking community engagement. US approaches are particularly strong on assessing institutional effectiveness and measuring the impact of service-learning and civic engagement initiatives on students, academic staff, the institution and the community.

At an international level, the Talloires/Tufts Inventory Tool for Higher Education Civic Engagement provides a comprehensive benchmarking questionnaire and a framework to drive more detailed baseline audit work. It also offers the potential to compare university achievements internationally (Tufts University, 2010).

While there has been considerable progress in developing indicators and benchmarking systems, the rigorous and comprehensive incorporation of *community* perspectives in audit and benchmarking is almost entirely absent across the higher education sector, both within the UK and beyond. Some have included consultation with community partners in developing their frameworks but there have been few attempts at producing evaluation tools that are useful in understanding the micro-dynamics of public engagement between individual university personnel, students, community groups and community members (for a more detailed analysis of the strengths and limitations of specific tools see Hart *et al.*, 2009).

One tool that stands out as the most comprehensive contribution in the UK context is the University of Bradford's REAP approach to measuring community engagement, which uses a self-assessment and measuring tool designed to capture essential inputs, outputs and outcomes for both university and community partners (Pearce *et al.*, 2007); see further on this in the section 'Working with other universities', below.

The aim of the REAP tool is to support those involved in community engagement activities to reflect critically on, and analyse, their work. It is a practical tool that has been adapted from methodologies in the field of UK community development and development work in the global South.

Approaches being developed outside the higher education sector may also have potential. The Work Foundation has produced a series of publications setting out a proposed framework for measuring outcomes in relation to 'public value' (Hills and Sullivan, 2006). Key criteria are whether measures are: appropriate; holistic; democratic; trustworthy; and that the measurement process itself generates public value. Within the heritage sector, the museums, libraries and archives (MLA) is developing outcome measures based on generic learning outcomes and generic social outcomes and mapping its outcomes framework against local area agreement indicators (MLA, 2007).

Elsewhere, Hart and Aumann (2007, p. 172), as academic and community practitioners, set out a framework aimed at helping practitioners, community members and university workers discover 'how they can best achieve effective partnership'. Dobbs and Moore (2002) showed how a model of participation can be built into working practice, allowing local people to play a successful role in the research process. They described work undertaken in Tyneside:

which sought to encourage community involvement in evaluation by employing, training and supporting local residents to carry out a range of baseline and impact surveys. (Dobbs and Moore, 2002, p. 157)

This process they found 'gave the survey results and the recommendations which resulted, widespread credibility amongst all stakeholders' (Dobbs and Moore, 2002, p. 168). While they do not spell out how their model can be used by others, such approaches appear open to adaptation.

Other sources provide a more general insight into the importance of taking into account the views of, and evaluation with, those with whom the university is engaged (Lerner and Simon, 1998; Todd *et al.*, 1998; Schoem *et al.*, 2004; Suarez-Balcazar *et al.*, 2005; Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH), 2006; Ambrose *et al.*, 2007; Aumann *et al.*, 2007; MacDonald *et al.*, 2007; Morrice *et al.*, 2007).

In developing this evaluation of community engagement activity, the University of Brighton has found the REAP tool a valuable way of capturing and evaluating the multidisciplinary and cross-boundary partnerships this work involves.

Evaluating community engagement at the University of Brighton: a case study

At the University of Brighton a major part of the university's community and public engagement activity is promoted and developed through the Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp) (University of Brighton, 2010). Cupp was founded in 2003, with the objective of tackling disadvantage and promoting sustainable development through partnership working. It has three interrelated aims:

- To ensure that the university's resources (intellectual and physical) are available to, informed by and used by its local and sub-regional communities;
- To enhance the community's and university's capacity for engagement for mutual benefit;
- To ensure that Cupp's resources are prioritised towards addressing inequalities within local communities.

In addition to supporting partnership projects, Cupp also aims to act as a 'gateway' between the University of Brighton and local community and voluntary organisations, with a reach across the south-east coastal area, including Eastbourne and Hastings. It has office space, a full time-equivalent staff of six, runs a helpdesk service and, through its academic links, can draw on the advice and expertise of 30 or more senior members of staff. Through successfully bidding for external funding, Cupp is currently acting as host to two programmes alongside its core work, with an annual budget of £550,000, involving over 100 academics and community partners per year (approximately 40 academics and 60 community partners). It is overseen by a steering group with strong participation from local community, voluntary and statutory organisations and most Cupp staff members have been or are still involved with running community groups.

Community engagement, as developed by Cupp, seeks to undertake work that provides mutual benefit to the community and to the university. Cupp is responsible for generating only a part of the university's public engagement work (since this can be said to include diverse provision such as student volunteering, access to university facilities, public/open events and socially oriented entrepreneurial activities). The last initiatives are audited and evaluated in a variety of ways, for example by the Volunteering Impact Assessment Framework. However, those involved with Cupp are increasingly taking a lead in supporting, encouraging and developing the university's public

and community engagement activities at all levels within the institution.

'Engagement' in the University Corporate Plan

The University of Brighton Corporate Plan includes 'engagement' as one of its five values: 'engagement with the cultural, social and economic life of our localities, region and nation; with international imperatives; and with the practical, intellectual and ethical issues of our partner organisations' (University of Brighton, 2007a). One of the six aims in the plan is that the university will 'become recognised as a leading UK university for the quality and range of its work in economic and social engagement and productive partnerships'.

Putting engagement as a central part of the corporate plan has implications for monitoring and evaluation. Included as one of the indicators of success is that the university will conduct 'a baseline and subsequent audit of community engagement in which the data show increased levels of engagement and local benefit from University activities' (University of Brighton, 2007a).

Evaluating the Cupp programme

In the early stages of the Cupp programme, a three-stage external evaluation of Cupp's work was commissioned (Roker, 2007). The evaluation was not on a large scale (accounting for one day per month of the consultant's time over three years), but aimed to take an overview of Cupp projects and activities, focusing on the experiences of those involved. The information was gathered in a variety of ways, including face-to-face and telephone interviews, focus groups and self-completion questionnaires. Basic audit data on the Cupp helpdesk, that is, data on contacts, nature of enquiries and follow-up actions, was also routinely collated, which enabled the university to monitor the volume and nature of inquiries. The views of academics and community partners on its effectiveness were also collected. Each project was expected to conduct a self-evaluation and for the larger Brighton and Sussex Community Knowledge Exchange (BSCKE) projects a framework for this was developed (Ambrose, 2004).

Stage 1 of the external evaluation was very early on and looked at how internal processes were working. An email questionnaire was sent to all those who had used the research helpdesk (21 replies received); an analysis was undertaken of evaluation forms from the research training

events that had been run to date; questionnaires were sent to the university and community 'leads' for each of the 15 projects that had been funded up to December 2004 (14 completed questionnaires received or completed over the telephone); and group interviews, face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews were held with 20 people involved in the steering group, development team, senior researchers group and Cupp team.

The great majority of respondents were positive about the helpdesk research training, the benefits of funded projects and Cupp's management. An important challenge identified at this stage was how to encourage greater community involvement in the university's management structures, which were seen as complex and confusing.

Stage 2 looked at how the supported projects had worked. Individual interviews were conducted with university and community participants, including those with both longer and more recent knowledge of Cupp projects and activities ($n = 32$). In addition, detailed case studies of two long-running activities were undertaken: a project to support refugees and asylum seekers into higher education; and the helpdesk. A clear finding was that respondents felt that Cupp's support had been essential to the success of the projects. The majority of respondents felt that Cupp was providing an effective infrastructure for community–university partnerships; meeting its key aims of supporting genuine community–university links; and focusing effectively on disadvantaged and excluded communities.

Key elements of an essential infrastructure for community–university partnerships were identified. These were: providing a 'first port of call' for university and community inquiries; a sound organisational and management structure; opportunities for learning and networking; and financial support. Several difficulties were also identified, including: workload and capacity issues; different language and systems of university and community staff; and problems of sustaining projects in the longer term. The overall conclusion of the evaluation was that while there were some uncertainties, both in ongoing funding and the capacity of university staff to meet growing demand, sound foundations had been established for future development.

Stage 3 attempted to assess impact. During September and October 2007, a survey was undertaken of key university and community partners in Cupp. This recorded the impact that Cupp had during the period of funding from Atlantic Philanthropies (March 2003 to February 2007). The focus was on capturing *quantitative* impacts. An equal number of community and university partners were surveyed ($n = 14$).

This was a relatively small-scale ‘snapshot’ survey. It did, however, indicate that in many ways involvement in Cupp had a significant impact on individuals and organisations. Results for the two groups are considered further below.

For community partners, involvement in Cupp had led to the development of new contacts with 47 people at the university. In addition, these seven organisations had a total of 16 contacts with the helpdesk and were involved in 26 Cupp activities. They had also made 22 new contacts with strategic planners and policy makers as a result of their involvement.

A notable impact was on grant applications and related success in securing grants: 10 applications were submitted, leading to 8 grants made with a total of £292,000. More broadly, most of the organisations considered that Cupp had led to an improvement in the quality of their services and all considered that they made more use of evidence and research findings in developing their services.

For the seven university partners, 302 new community contacts had been made and 75 new contacts with other university staff. Cupp involvement had also impacted significantly on teaching, with six new modules validated. In addition, 86 students had been involved in community-based work experience as a direct result of Cupp.

Cupp involvement had also had an impact on success in securing grants. In total the seven respondents had developed 17 grant applications and secured 15 of them, to a total value of £296,000. Finally, the university partners had undertaken a range of dissemination activities as a result of their work with Cupp. This included 22 presentations, 18 presentations to community groups, five journal articles and three book chapters. Some respondents also considered that Cupp involvement had had a significant impact on the research directions of their school and on their national and international profile.

Results of these external and self-evaluations as well as the helpdesk audit indicated that Cupp was a successful mechanism for developing mutually beneficial community–university partnerships. Indeed, Cupp’s success contributed to the university taking the decision to develop social engagement as a core part of its corporate plan for the period 2007–2012. This paved the way for the university to provide core funding for Cupp when the Atlantic Philanthropies’ grant ceased in 2007 (Atlantic Philanthropies being the initial funders of the university’s public engagement work). At this stage it was unrealistic to embark on a community audit as the university did not yet have a clear picture of what it wanted to measure.

The next challenge for the University of Brighton was to establish an audit tool that would create the baseline to assess whether the social engagement aspirations of the corporate plan were being realised. Cupp conducted a literature review of relevant approaches and two stood out as helpful to work with. The first was the audit instrument designed for use by universities signed up to the Talloires Declaration. This required self-scrutiny on a number of dimensions and the university submitted a Talloires audit in 2007 (University of Brighton, 2007b), making it clear that its proper completion would require a more detailed institutional audit, which was not at that time in place.

Working with other universities

To undertake a more detailed audit, the University of Cambridge was approached. Notwithstanding some limitations (Watson, 2007, pp. 110–111), Cambridge had established what seemed like a viable process for collecting the data and the University of Brighton wished to learn from its experience. The Cambridge tool both described a range of activities and gave a monetary value to them (University of Cambridge, 2004). The University of Brighton invited the colleague responsible for the Cambridge audit to the university to present the work and to discuss how it might apply to Brighton and the University of Brighton's audit tool went live in 2008. It is distributed to heads of school who are asked to collate data relating to the activity of their staff. Experience shows that strong support from the research officer and associate academic director supervising the project is needed to help heads of school complete the task in a meaningful way and that senior management backing for the audit is essential; the university's most senior administrator is on the audit working group. Undertaking this audit annually should ensure that the University of Brighton is able to assess the extent to which it is achieving the aspirations of the corporate plan. However, with the exception of Cambridge, it does not provide the university with the opportunity to benchmark its activity against that of other institutions. Even here the scope of the two is by no means identical. The Cambridge tool measures activity rather than impact and, as the Cambridge Community Engagement report comments:

This survey did not provide adequate data on the impact of these activities on the community . . . This is an important area for future development. (University of Cambridge, 2004, p. 26)

The audit then, provides a baseline from which the university is able to make a start with institutional measurement, including measuring

impact. The baseline audit data will be examined with a view to establishing the 'standards' to be achieved so that the tool can be reapplied in five years' time to assess what progress has been made.

As well as undertaking audit work, we wished to develop a process of evaluating partnership processes and their impact, incorporating a 'theory of change' approach (Anderson, 2005). The 'theory of change' approach specifies the changes (outcomes) planned by a particular programme or intervention and tries to spell out the intermediate steps behind the changes. Such an approach provides a 'pathway of change' that can be mapped and indicators that are defined to measure success at each level. A 'theory of change' approach is useful in community–university partnership work because it helps us to understand whether community–university partnerships are a useful mechanism for achieving desired outcomes and to understand whether, and if so how, university participation adds value.

To help achieve the aim of a more in-depth evaluation of partnership activity, the University of Brighton once again turned to the work of colleagues in another UK university who had spent much time and effort thinking through these issues. Colleagues at the University of Bradford have developed a metric known as REAP (Pearce *et al.*, 2007). In this metric, REAP represents reciprocity, externalities, access and partnerships and seeks to capture the 'public good' generated by a clear commitment to engagement. The externalities element in the Bradford tool aims to measure 'the economic value of activities of a societal nature' (Pearce *et al.*, 2007, pp. 5–6). One major advantage of REAP is that it is very practical: it is specifically designed to support those involved in community engagement activities, including community partners and to reflect critically on and analyse their work. Projects can collate the data themselves and are not reliant on having funds for external evaluation.

The University of Brighton has worked closely with University of Bradford colleagues to develop REAP so that partnership activity between all partners is captured. In developing this tool, we were keen to extend its reach, since the Bradford tool originally conceptualised partnership activity as a two-way relationship between the university and its partners, rather than seeking to understand how university–community partnerships are embedded in a variety of networks, in which the university may be just one actor. Working with Bradford, the University of Brighton has also sought to include an explicit theory of change in the model. Lead academics and community partners are attending work-

shop sessions on the REAP model and support is being given to them by development managers and Cupp's academic directorship, drawing on a briefing paper by the current authors (Hart *et al.*, 2009), the literature reviewed here and the university's previous experience of evaluating its community partnership work.

The advantage of REAP, by comparison with many of the approaches described earlier, is its relevance for understanding the micro-dynamics of community–university engagement. However, some limitations of the REAP metric should be noted. First, while it is very adaptable it is difficult to use for collating baseline data. REAP provides a coherent conceptual framework for mapping self-evaluation data collected by individual projects but not all projects have had the capacity or resources to build in systematic baseline data collection.

Second, some partnerships have felt that the binary framework of 'community' and 'university' partners suggested by REAP does not match the realities of their project. Some academics are also identified as members of a particular community. This can create productive relationships that are difficult to encapsulate within the REAP framework. Finally, some partners felt that the language used by the authors of REAP was too academic for many of those involved in data collection. Much effort went into translating REAP into more accessible language.

Attempts to satisfy funders' and other requirements for measuring economic impact have also proved difficult. There are models that can be used (Nicholls *et al.*, 2007) but this is painstaking and often expensive work. The intention is to continue to pursue this while recognising that it is not easy to establish the economic impact of community university activity, in particular where it is of a preventative nature.

Most recently, the University of Brighton has established a new Department of Economic and Social Engagement (EASE) that brings together its work on both economic and social engagement. In developing the social end of the economic and social engagement spectrum, the university undertook an internal consultation exercise to inform a social engagement strategy that will complement the existing economic engagement strategy. The process involved the drafting of a consultation document outlining current engagement activities and raising key questions about definitions, process, delivery structures, core business, community access, communications and evaluation procedures. In devising the strategy it sought to make sense of the range of activities involved using a model of dimensions of public engagement devised by the current authors (Hart *et al.*, 2009).

Dimensions of public engagement

In developing this evaluative approach and reflecting on our own and others' experience, it was necessary to confront the definitional question raised by the location of community and public engagement within higher education 'third stream' activity in general. One of the first definitions in the field was put forward by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU, 2001, p. i):

Engagement implies strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world in at least four spheres: setting universities' aims, purposes and priorities; relating teaching and learning to the wider world; the back-and-forth dialogue between researchers and practitioners; and taking on wider responsibilities as neighbours and citizens.

In launching the six Beacons of Public Engagement to establish a co-ordinated approach to recognising, rewarding and building capacity for public engagement, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has defined public engagement in the following way:

'Public engagement' involves specialists in higher education listening to, developing their understanding of, and interacting with non-specialists. The 'public' includes individuals and groups who do not currently have a formal relationship with an HEI through teaching, research or knowledge transfer. (HEFCE, 2007a)

The chief executive of HEFCE, in setting out its funding allocation for 2008–2009, saw these funds as helping to foster the wider social roles of universities through public and community engagement (HEFCE, 2008). Underpinning this is the notion that by opening up higher education to the public, research, teaching and learning will be enriched and local communities will enjoy wider benefits.

The descriptions of the Beacon projects on the National Co-ordinating Centre website reflect the multiple aims of university public engagement (National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2009). Key themes running through the descriptions are relevance, democratisation, exchange and inclusivity. The rationale here is that breaking down barriers to public involvement will ensure that universities are more relevant to society, that the public has trust in their work and that a more democratic research process will both strengthen academic excellence and develop knowledge for the common good. A useful distinction is made between knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange, where the latter is seen as involving genuine engagement activity that promotes questioning by the public and listening and involvement from staff and students.

Finally, in the Beacon portfolios an ethos of inclusivity underpins an explicit focus on disadvantaged and excluded communities, the needs of a multicultural society and sustainable living.

Given this range, it is unsurprising that there are several overlapping terms used to describe university community engagement activities, frequently used interchangeably. These include 'civic engagement', 'public engagement', 'community engagement', 'community outreach', 'community–university partnership' and 'knowledge exchange'. In some contexts engagement is also conceptualised as part of other agendas, for example volunteering, widening participation, social inclusion, public engagement with the political process, or global citizenship.

These are equally complex in themselves. Widening participation, for instance, is defined primarily as an equalities and diversity issue. However difficult to achieve, all individuals, whatever their gender, race, class or disability, should have equal access to the benefits of the 'graduate premium': higher earning potential, increased longevity and better health. A wider definition, however, links it more directly to public engagement. As Laing and Maddison argue, widening participation to higher education does not have to mean only access to existing courses:

if it is indeed the case that engaging with higher education, with universities and their resources, does have positive effects in terms of health, stability and happiness then maybe we should imagine a set of situations where all citizens and all social groups should be able to access the intellectual capital, the resources . . . and the learning networks which are at the heart of what makes a university. (Laing and Maddison, 2007, p. 13)

Thus one of the main challenges facing any university embarking on audit and evaluation of its community and public engagement activity is to reconcile a diversity of local, national and international interests regarding both the conceptualisation and practice of public engagement (Watson and Maddison, 2005, pp. 144–145; Council of Europe, 2006; Watson, 2007, pp. 108–113).

Elsewhere, Hart *et al.* (2009) specified some potential indicators related to seven dimensions of public engagement and attempted to assess the relevance, for specific purposes, of current UK and international approaches. However, this article does not propose yet another set of indicators or recommend any tools as being more 'fit for purpose'. The value of the framework is more that it can assist those involved in evaluating university–community engagement activities to decide which tools or approaches might be more useful (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Dimensions of university public engagement

Dimension of public engagement	Examples of engagement	Possible higher-level outcomes
1. Public access to facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to university libraries • Access to university buildings and physical facilities e.g. for conferences, meetings, events, accommodation, gardens, etc. • Shared facilities e.g. museums, art galleries • Public access to sports facilities • Summer sports schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased public support for the institution • Better informed public • Improved health and well-being
2. Public access to knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to established university curricula • Public engagement events, e.g. science fairs, science shops • Publicly accessible database of university expertise • Public involvement in research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased quality of life and well-being • Increased social capital/social cohesion/social inclusion • Enhanced public scholarship
3. Student engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student volunteering • Experiential learning e.g. practice placements, collaborative research projects • Curricular engagement • Student-led activities, e.g. arts, environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased student sense of civic engagement • Increased political participation
4. Faculty engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research centres draw on community advisers for support/direction • Volunteering outside working hours e.g. on trustee boards of local charities • Staff with social/community engagement as a specific part of their job 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social benefit to the community • Increased staff sense of civic engagement • Institutionalised faculty engagement • More ‘grounded’ research

TABLE 1 Continued

Dimension of public engagement	Examples of engagement	Possible higher-level outcomes
5. Widening participation (equalities and diversity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of policies that reward social engagement • Research helpdesk/advisory boards • Public lectures • Alumni services • Improving recruitment and success rate of students from non-traditional backgrounds through innovative initiatives e.g. access courses, financial assistance, peer mentoring • A publicly available strategy for encouraging access by students with disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved recruitment and retention of undergraduates, especially from excluded communities
6. Encouraging economic regeneration and enterprise in social engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research collaboration and technology transfer • Meeting regional skills needs and supporting SMEs • Initiatives to expand innovation and design e.g. bringing together staff, students and community members to design, develop and test Assistive Technology for people with disabilities • Business advisory services offering support for community–university collaborations e.g. social enterprises • Prizes for entrepreneurial projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local/regional economic regeneration • Social and economic benefit to the community

TABLE 1 Continued

Dimension of public engagement	Examples of engagement	Possible higher-level outcomes
7. Institutional relationship and partnership building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University division or office for community engagement • Collaborative community-based research programmes responsive to community-identified needs • Community–university networks for learning/ dissemination/knowledge exchange • Community members on board of governance • Public ceremonies, awards, competitions and events • Website with community pages • Policies on equalities, recruitment, procurement of goods and services, environmental responsibility • International links • Conferences with public access and public concerns • Helpdesk facility • Corporate social responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More effective strategic investment of resources • Conservation of natural resources and reduced environmental footprint • Expanded and effective community partnerships • Social and economic benefit to the community

Conclusion

The history of the University of Brighton’s community partnership work has been one of back-and-forth dialogue between practitioners, researchers and community members, as well as close scrutiny of approaches developed by colleagues elsewhere. In the process, all of those involved in audit and evaluation have learned as much from what went wrong as from successes.

From the experience gained in assessing the usefulness of specific tools some key questions to clarify are:

- Is it intended to capture change over time or is this a one-off exercise?
- Is it intended to establish a set of targets, and then measure whether they have been completed?
- Is it intended to compare what is being done at the University of Brighton with what others are doing?
- Is it necessary to seek external verification, or can this be an internal exercise?
- Is it necessary to measure what the whole institution is doing?
- Is it necessary to understand what is happening at the individual project level?
- Is it of interest to find out how individual faculty members and their community partners best collaborate for mutual benefit?
- Is it necessary to measure engagement from a community perspective?

As the University of Brighton's experience illustrates, it is the answers to these questions that will determine which tools are relevant to the task.

While this is still work in progress it is possible to set out some of the lessons learned so far since these are an essential part of the reflective practice required in consolidating audit and evaluative tools.

The first is to think carefully about what question it is that requires an answer. Ultimately the aim should be to measure *impact* and *change*, not just activity. Bearing in mind the different interests involved and the funding sources supporting this work, including intangibles such as contributing 'value in kind' (providing facilities or personnel without charge), audit instruments need to be tied as closely as possible to the specific function under scrutiny.

Do not expect to get it perfect. An important early decision is the acceptable balance between completing the task and being as comprehensive as possible. Those involved in evaluation work need to include pragmatists, not just perfectionists.

It is vital to collect basic statistics from the start. The statistics the University of Brighton has built up through the helpdesk, for example, have enabled the university to monitor closely helpdesk use and to understand trends over time. Before embarking on audit, evaluation or benchmarking it is also helpful to know what other models have been successful for other institutions. Advice from colleagues in other universities who have overcome similar challenges, in particular meeting them in person, is invaluable.

Staff and community stakeholders implementing audit and evaluation need to motivate colleagues to understand the importance of collecting meaningful data. For example, actively chasing up heads of schools and

departments; sharing examples of what is being done; and supporting academics involved in evaluating community–university partnerships whose subject specialism may not give them the expertise to evaluate in this specific way.

Similarly, community partners need encouragement and support to sign up to evaluation and to understand its worth if meaningful data are to be collated. Many of them are understandably focused on the practical outcomes they wish to achieve and mapping the detail of community–university collaboration does not always seem relevant.

In all of this, support from senior management is vital. In the case of the University of Brighton, the deputy vice-chancellor is part of the audit working group and there is recognition at institutional level for the full range of the university’s community partnership work.

A final lesson is that it is important that there is transparency regarding procedures, methodology and findings. Ways of achieving this could include establishing a community of practice on audit and evaluation to allow staff space to reflect on their evaluative work; involving community partners in audit and evaluation groups; and giving them incentives, including payment, to take part.

Some broader conclusions can also be drawn. The first is that many different sets of indicators are being developed, in particular at the institutional level. In weighing up the potential uses of each it is essential that universities are clear about the purposes to which they wish to apply them; there is no single approach to audit and evaluation that can be taken ‘off the shelf’ and applied to a university and its partners. Some of the less tangible impacts of community engagement are inherently more difficult to measure: evaluative analysis is therefore likely to be context driven.

Second, there have already been various attempts to develop benchmarking systems, with work by the Russell Group and by HEFCE, most notable in the UK context. The more HEFCE sees community and public engagement as part of the core work of universities, the more the development of cross-university benchmarking in this arena will be seen.

Third, rigorously and comprehensively incorporating community perspectives in audit and benchmarking is almost entirely absent across the sector, both within the UK and beyond, although some initiatives have consulted community partners in developing their frameworks. Furthermore, where the university sets out institutional aims and objectives that measure and evaluate its public engagement activity, for example through its corporate plan, the development of audit tools

that meet corporate, faculty and departmental requirements may dominate the process. To avoid this it is important that those undertaking monitoring and evaluation should work towards integrating public and community perceptions of their engagement with the university.

Fourth, for those who do seek to include community perspectives, there is as yet little published material specific to the audit and evaluation of public perspectives on community–university engagement. However, a start has been made in the development of analytical models that can be adapted for this purpose, with REAP standing out as the most comprehensive contribution in the UK context so far (Pearce *et al.*, 2007).

Fifth, comprehensive inclusion of economic dimensions in audit, benchmarking and evaluation, as well as impact on community well-being, are dimensions that merit further development across the sector if universities are to demonstrate successfully the worth of community and public engagement. Examples from other sectors are worth drawing on, for example co-production models of ‘public value’ and ‘cultural capital’ such as those developed by the Heritage sector.

Sixth, there is much relevant international work in auditing, benchmarking and evaluating university public engagement, and UK universities would be wise to consider joining wider networks such as Talloires (Tufts University, 2010), both to include their own data as part of the international scene setting and to learn from the good practice of others.

Given the current range of initiatives, this article has stopped short of recommending specific tools or techniques over others. It is to be hoped that others will join us in debating the issues, and in pooling knowledge and experience as part of an audit and evaluation community of practice in this area.

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