

# NCCPE Open House – Civic/Public Engagement – Short personal reflection on the importance of engagement to universities 23/11/09

Thank you for inviting me to share a few reflections on public engagement with you, on what I'm sure has been a very stimulating day so far. You've heard from a number of engaging speakers, each sharing their perspectives and insights on what is an exceptionally prominent and important issue in higher education today. As you will be aware, the role of universities is under a great deal of scrutiny at the moment.

At a time when public funding is being significantly constrained, the public, businesses, and the government, are rightly asking what it is that they get from the investment in higher education. What value does this investment have, as opposed to directing further funds into health or schools? What impact does the research undertaken by universities have? What role are universities playing in their local and regional communities?

As the student is having to pay increasingly more for their university education to counter the reduction in government funding, they are also rightly demanding more from their experience: in terms of information in their selection process – so they can make a better informed choice about where to study; in terms of the quality of their learning experience, the facilities they have to use, and their personal development opportunities; and they are also demanding that universities place more attention on the student's employment prospects after graduation.

The demands placed on universities come from a variety of users; and they ask institutions to distribute their resources in what are often competing ways.

At UWE we take our civic leadership role and responsibilities very seriously, which is why I have spoken on this topic on several occasions. I am very proud to be VC of a university where this is such a core part of our value base.

We must however pause to question and reflect on how we approach this; this will be key to our success. There are many ways to go about public and civic engagement. Often this is seen as an add-on to a university's core activities of teaching and learning, and research. Seeing public and civic engagement as a 'third stream' activity puts it in an exceptionally vulnerable position, at a time of reduced public funding for universities. If this stream of activity is separated from core activities, the student, who is paying more and more for their university education, will rightly ask, why isn't this money being put into enhancing my student experience?

Whilst the government's new HE Framework clearly identifies civic engagement as a highly important role of universities, they offer no additional source of funding for this activity. We therefore have to be realistic in our approach, in order to do justice to these valuable activities.

To do so, engagement and breaking down barriers must be embedded and integrated with teaching, learning, and research, in order to avoid vulnerability. This means, user-led research that engages with the needs of society, and draws on the public's experiences in order to drive innovation, co-identify problems and co-create solutions. Engagement works to the benefit of both users, and researchers or practitioners. Engagement can also be built into the curriculum, to enhance the relevance of the student experience, their personal development, application of knowledge, and their graduate prospects.

At UWE, this is the approach that we are adopting. Our mission is to make a positive difference to our students, business and society. One way we are striving to do this is by making public engagement thrive throughout the university, making it an integral part of our core activities. This will enable us to fulfil our mission, in a way that can be resourced and is sustainable. Integration, joining up and connecting activities is key as we drive this agenda forward.

I'm sure you will continue to have very stimulating discussions about these issues this afternoon, and I hope Sophie will keep me informed of the outcomes of your discussions on this very valuable topic. And I will continue to speak out on this agenda, where the opportunities arise.

*Thank you.*