

BUILDING STRONG
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
UNIVERSITIES AND
COMMUNITIES

YULIA NESTEROVA
University of Glasgow



Volume 5 · Number 2 · 2021 · Pages 439 - 454

Universities are critical for progress and development. With several exceptions where research and teaching are politicised and monitored by the state, universities conduct rigorous independent research to inform decision-making and shape policies and praxis and educate next generations of active, knowledgeable, and resilient citizens. Universities are also a place where freedom of speech is celebrated and where ideas flourish. With an increased and emboldened presence and visibility of far-right groups on campuses, far-right academics promoting scientific racism, and far-right people in positions of power in liberal democracies and beyond, however, academic independence, diversity, and freedom of speech at universities as well as rights and lives of minorities on and off campuses are under threat.

In this reality, it is imperative for universities to initiate and increase collaboration with diverse actors and stakeholders to communicate robust evidence to enable informed and rights-based decision-making and action and to leverage collective expertise to build just and peaceful

societies. However, as Waks (2019) rightly points out, universities tend to operate ‘at great remove from the “real life” of the community’ and ‘the pressing problems in the “real world”, which leads to the public and professionals not caring about and even rejecting university-based research and knowledge and embracing antiscientific ideologies. Waks maintains that universities should use effective and ‘concrete communication mechanisms’ to become involved in social activity beyond academia and collaborate closely with research users such as local communities and beyond at the agenda setting, knowledge creation, dissemination, and knowledge use stages to ensure that knowledge is used as well as is useful and valuable beyond academia.

In this paper, I highlight the need to reach out to and build relationships and trust with a wide range of audiences, including activists and the public. In particular, I discuss community and public engagement (C&PE) and knowledge exchange (KE), which are becoming prominent features in academia in the UK (e.g., Sweeney, 2018) and other countries (e.g., AUCEA, 2006) to help increase impact, value, and benefit of universities to society and to support

the efforts of non-academic actors towards justice. C&PE is described as utilising a myriad of formal and informal ways to create a 'bridge between the research community and the public, community groups, civil society organisations and any other groups or communities in the outside world where research gains its relevance' (Wellcome Trust, 2011, p. 4). KE is part of C&PE and includes sharing of ideas, research, expertise, skills, and experiences between universities and external actors and stakeholders to help generate real world impact for a mutual benefit of all actors involved.

As a service to society, C&PE and KE are not, what Waks (2019), drawing on Dewey, calls 'a kind of *noblesse oblige*, where scholars came bearing the gift of their superior knowledge'. These processes go beyond the promotion of research findings or getting community buy-in. It is a two-way process that involves building collaborative relationships that lead to productive partnerships that respond to real needs of local communities 'through provision of intellectual leadership in areas of community interest and concern, offering university resources and

facilities for community use and working with communities for mutually productive outcomes' (AUCEA, 2006). The benefits include gaining new insights and ideas, raising aspiration, being inspired, learning, acquiring new skills (National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, n/d), influencing public policy, advocacy, and community mobilisation, and making community activists more visible and outspoken (Wellcome Trust, 2011), with the aims to improve communities, enhance human and social capital, and support community members in becoming agents of change. The Wellcome Trust (2011) in particular stresses the need to strengthen critical consciousness of the public and academics through C&PE and KE so that we start asking hard questions and engage with each other about our beliefs, knowledge, and practice.

Who in the public and the community we engage with matters. Different communities – be they geographical (e.g., city, neighbourhood), communities of interest (e.g., faith groups, online communities), communities of circumstance (e.g., groups of people affected by the same crisis), communities of supporters (e.g., groups within

organisations) (Cabinet Office, 2011), or identity-based communities – have different power dynamics. As when doing fieldwork with different communities, for C&PE it is critical to understand who represents who in each community to reduce bias, include people with differing opinions (Wellcome Trust, 2011), and remove barriers to meaningful participation, including by supporting and providing needed resources to the most disenfranchised and vulnerable. It is also important to be mindful of how power plays out between academics and different community members so that academics do not reinforce it by, for example, controlling the whole process.

It also matters how we engage with the public and various communities. First, the model where communities are seen and treated as recipients of knowledge has proven not to work; it is thus important to approach them as partners who can frame and drive the engagement process. In particular, the *United Nations Brisbane Declaration on Community Engagement* (2005, henceforth *Brisbane Declaration*) stresses that communities' aspirations, concerns, needs, and values need to be incorporated at all

stages from initiation to completion and deliverables and that communities should be involved in all stages. The *Brisbane Declaration* thus proposes four core principles of C&PE: integrity (openness and honesty about the scope and purpose of engagement), inclusion (opportunities for diverse values and perspectives to be expressed and heard), deliberation (sufficient and credible information for dialogue, choice, and decisions, and space to develop common understandings), and influence (people have input in how they participate, and deliverables reflect their input). The caution here is not to fall into the so-called 'local trap' where it is assumed in leftist academia and activism that the local scale – a community – is 'inherently more democratic than other scales' (Purcell, 2006, p. 1921) at the neglect of multi-scalar and structural processes and practices (Cirolia & Scheba, 2019).

Second, the best methods to choose for C&PE are those that can be owned by the community, that is, where communities help to define goals, scope, and methods of research projects. Therefore, creative and participatory methodologies are particularly helpful to catalyse discussion

and subvert power (Wellcome Trust, 2011). This type of engagement often produces other types of outputs in addition to academic articles and book chapters, including events, reports, policy briefs, virtual exhibitions, data visualisation, and others. For KE, while activities academics might want to pursue are dependent on the objective, the audience, the research project, and the impact they seek to have, some relevant examples include events with external audiences such as symposia and (arts-based) workshops and webinars; communicating timely and accurate scientific information to the public by writing blogs and media articles, preparing podcasts, bite-size videos, and animations; and receiving feedback from communities, including through consultations.

Drawing on Dewey's work, Waks (2019) offers a model of what can be an effective engagement and knowledge co-production between universities and other (potential) research users. Waks provides an example of a collaborative project where through an online platform (MOOC) students created communities of inquiry to apply scientific knowledge to real-world problems to tackle

specific pressing issues. Their work proceeded in three stages that can be applied elsewhere to conduct C&PE and KE activities: (1) face-to-face *research* with stakeholders outside academia such as interviews and focus groups; (2) *ideas* stage where specific questions are posed to clarify problems and map potential solutions; and (3) *refinement* stage where big ideas are broken down and solutions are drafted to then be feedbacked and tested with stakeholders. A related example is a project¹ on youth-led peace I co-led with colleagues at the University of Glasgow, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account (ESRC IAA). We first conducted *research* (1), or what we called “online consultations”, with young peacebuilders from diverse contexts on the challenges they face, opportunities open to them, and the work they do to build peace in their contexts. Following that, we held an online symposium with these youth peacebuilders and representatives of international organisations working with youth in conflict and post-conflict environments (e.g.,

¹ More about the first stage of the project can be found here <https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/research/researchprojects/youth-ledpeaceinclusionofyouthinpeaceprocesses/#>.

UNESCO, UNDP, OSGEY, FCDO, and others) (2). The purpose of the symposium was to bring diverse actors together to discuss specific questions and issues and to share experiences as viewed by different actors. We then prepared a technical report based on these discussions (see Ozcelik et al., 2021) that outlined challenges, opportunities, and recommendations, which was then sent to the participants for their feedback and a media article (Nesterova & Ozcelik, 2021) to promote this co-produced knowledge among other research users (3). The current stage includes building on several of the recommendations in the report to strengthen capacities of diverse actors to more meaningfully and effectively engage and work with youth peacebuilders (3), with a follow-on grant from ESRC IAA, and developing a large research project based on the knowledge and ideas co-produced with the participants.

While C&PE approaches help foster relationships based on mutual understanding, trust, and respect (Brisbane Declaration, 2005) between the public, the third sector, activists, and universities to improve decision-making, share responsibilities, create more inclusive and just

communities, and to provide other socio-economic, environmental, and cultural benefits, they may serve two other critical objectives. First, improved relationships may increase the support and advocacy of non-academic actors for evidence-based and science-based decision-making that are not overshadowed by extremist propaganda. Second, they may lead to support and advocacy for academic freedom free from intolerance, hatred, and pseudo-science, especially in light of far-right attacks on universities and death and rape threats to academics (e.g., Fazackerley, 2020) and the misuse of the concept of free speech by the far-right to silence anti-fascist critique and continue to propagate hatred.

It is important to conclude by saying that while universities need to increase their collaboration with non-academic actors for collective action and knowledge sharing, a lot of work remains to be done on campuses to eradicate institutional racism. Racism firmly embedded in the structures of our universities opens space for far-right groups to gain a foothold on campuses and for far-right academics to influence science to justify racist and

xenophobic arguments, thus legitimising their views in the eyes and minds of the public.

References

- Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA). (2006). Position paper: Universities and community engagement.
https://www.universityworldnews.com/filemgmt_data/files/AUCEA%20Position%20Paper.pdf.
- Cabinet Office. (2011). Strategic national framework on community resilience. London: HM Government. <https://www2.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/sites/default/files/folders/documents/fireandpublicsafety/emergency/StrategicNationalFramework.pdf>
- Cirolia, L. R., & Scheba, S. (2019). Towards a multi-scalar reading of informality in Delft, South Africa: Weaving the 'everyday' with wider structural tracings. *Urban Studies*, 56(3), 594-611.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017753326>.

Fazackerley, A. (March 2020). 'McCarthyism in the UK':

Academics fear shaming for leftwing views. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/10/mccarthyism-uk-universities-academics-fear-shaming-for-leftwing-views>.

National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement.

(n/d). What is public engagement?

<https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/about-engagement/what-public-engagement>.

Nesterova, Y. & Ozcelik, A. (2021). Youth has a key role in peace processes. *Impakter*.

<https://impakter.com/youth-role-peace-processes/>.

Purcell, M. (2006). Urban democracy and the local

trap. *Urban Studies*, 43(11), 1921-1941.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980600897826>.

Ozcelik, A., Nesterova, Y., Young, G., & Maxwell, A.

(2021). *Youth-led peace: The role of youth in peace*

processes. Glasgow, UK: The University of Glasgow.

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3853760.

Sweeney, D. (April 2018). Shaping university research and

Knowledge exchange. *WonkHE*.

<https://wonkhe.com/blogs/research-england-shaping-university-research-and-knowledge-exchange/>.

United Nations Brisbane Declaration on Community

Engagement (2005)

http://www.ncdd.org/exchange/files/docs/brisbane_declaration.pdf.

Waks, L. J. (2019) Dewey and higher education. In

Fesmire, S. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey*.

New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190491192.013.15>.

Wellcome Trust. (2011). Community engagement - Under the microscope.

https://wellcome.org/sites/default/files/wtvm054326_0.pdf.