After coronavirus, universities must collaborate with communities to support social transition
18 June 2020, by Verity Firth, Jim Nyland

COVID-19 comes with a set of pressing social challenges. These include environmental catastrophes such as the Australian droughts and bushfires, and the impending crisis of global warming. Social and health issues—including debilitating poverty, racial and income inequality, and chronic diseases—also loom large.

In this turbulent environment, universities have an important role to play as anchor institutions that support communities in transition.

Rather than undertaking knowledge work on behalf of society, they must do so in collaboration with society. This means building relationships with business, industry, government and not-for-profit organizations, to name but a few.

**Out of the ivory tower**

Recent decisions by the federal government to change the JobKeeper legislation three times, in a way that makes university staff ineligible, has left many in the sector feeling undervalued.

Criticisms of universities stem from both sides of politics. For many people, universities remain institutions embodying past imperial practices.

The rise of the #RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa and the United Kingdom, and the growing movement in Australia to decolonise the curriculum, demonstrates black and First Nations' students' frustration at an institution they still see as predominantly elitist and white.

On the other side of the political spectrum, universities are seen as aloof and disconnected from the real-world concerns of businesses and ordinary people.

In 2017, then Vice-Chancellor of The University of Melbourne, Professor Glyn Davis, warned of a "rising tide of hostility" towards universities.

And the former president of the University of Pennsylvania argued that to ensure ongoing relevance, universities must engage with the real world, and move "out of the ivory tower and into the streets".

Universities have fared reasonably well compared to declining levels of trust in other institutions. But it's fair to say universities are built on an expert model that prizes academic knowledge and often de-legitimizes other forms of knowledge and learning.

This often gets in the way of constructive collaborations between universities and communities.

**Co-designed and collaborative knowledge**

COVID-19 has allowed for a brief re-emergence of public and government trust in expertise. University and medical institute researchers, public health
Officials and politicians have been working alongside each other on the same problem. Each have been able to contribute their expertise (and interests) at critical points in the decision-making process.

No consideration (such as opening the economy) has been given primacy over another (protecting Australian's health). Instead there has been a weighing of the evidence and difficult calls made along the way.

This engaged decision-making process has been a key component of creating public trust. For this trust to continue, universities need to learn from this period and create new processes.

This point was best made by French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist, Bruno Latour, when he argued the COVID-19 pandemic has given the public an opportunity to engage with scientific complexity, and debate with each other about statistics, experimentation and how diseases are spread.

He said, "if you want people to have some grasp of science, you must show how it is produced."

But it goes further than just transparency. It’s about respecting all types of knowledge in the search for answers. In relation to the science of climate change, Latour argued that far from being an elite endeavor, everyone can contribute to a conversation about the weather and its impact on their community.

Respect for, and engagement with, knowledge from outside the "academy" is critical both for driving trust in expertise and finding better solutions to the problems faced by the globe.

A new way forward for universities

Research partnerships between Indigenous elders and university academics are an excellent example of engaged research.

At the University of New England, researchers are working with the Banbai nation to better understand how to use Indigenous land management practices and science to apply fire strategically.

Extending this approach into the world of public policy, the Bushfire Royal Commission is looking to understand ways "the traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians could improve Australia's resilience to natural disasters."

Griffith University is involved in "Logan Together". This collective impact project, to support early childhood intervention in the Logan community, is a radical way for a university to embrace its role as an anchor institution.

The project deliberately empowers citizens and puts community members in leadership roles across the project. The goals and outcomes of this project are co-designed with community members, industry and government.

At the University of Technology Sydney, the Shopfront program helps deliver student community coursework projects for academic credit. Community organizations are paired with skilled student teams to deliver on a wide variety of community-led projects.

The students learn on the job, and not-for-profit partners benefit from the students' expertise.

But how do universities change?

University groups like the Talloires Network and Engagement Australia champion the unique role universities have to address today's global challenges through teaching, learning and research partnerships.

The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification (now being piloted in Australia by ten universities) has established a gold standard for engagement. This is based on the principle of reciprocity between universities and their partners in the community, government and industry.

It outlines a new era for universities, abandoning the expert model and embracing the concept of engaged research and teaching.
Outwardly focused, Carnegie promotes the "partnership of [...] university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to [...] address critical social issues and contribute to the public good."

Universities complete an accreditation process to receive the Carnegie classification. The classification acknowledges the old adage that an organization values what it measures.

Traditional university ranking systems mainly rely on indicators around research—mainly reputation, citations and funding. Although these are important metrics, they do not speak to the broader public benefit of the university and the role it plays through teaching, learning and research engagement.

The Carnegie classification rectifies this imbalance. It asks universities to provide evidence about their engagement activities, and demonstrate these are part of the university's core mission. It encourages universities to reflect on their relationships with industry, community and government and gain insights into how the university can improve its engagement practices.

Participating in the process provides universities with a roadmap to becoming a different type of university. It allows them to examine the culture of traditional academia and examine whether institutional practices stymie collaboration and relationships of trust with those outside the academy.

COVID-19 has shown how addressing the present crisis (and other big issues) as a multi-part player in the creation of new knowledge for a social purpose, has the capacity to renew the social license of universities.

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