

Public Engagement in Higher Education (0030)

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Universities across the world are increasingly challenged to (re)consider and (re)calibrate their relationship with their local, national and international communities and in fulfilment of what is variously and interchangeably designated ‘third mission’; ‘innovation and engagement’; ‘community outreach’; ‘stakeholder engagement’; and ‘public engagement’ activity (cf. Bond & Patterson 2005; Laredo 2007; Marhl & Pausits 2011). A focus on universities’ societal interface is, whilst no new phenomena, increasingly prominent if not omnipresent in a policy discourse of Higher Education (HE) management and governance, where it is evoked as a formalised and performance-based academic expectation (Watermeyer 2011, 2012a,b, 2013, 2015a,b).

Slowly, and somewhat tentatively, a body of empirical and conceptually oriented research is emerging and responding to the prominence of what we refer to rather blandly, if not explicitly, as ‘Public Engagement in Higher Education’ (PE-HE). However, despite growing interest (or concern), a critical discourse of PE-HE remains largely elusive as does a ‘whole-campus’ or pan-sectorial focus. Studies of PE-HE tend instead to fixate on specific disciplinary and experiential accounts and, as is predominantly the case, PE in STEM domains. For instance, much of what is written about PE-HE is habitually aligned or conflated with, or subsumed within, research into the public understanding of science (cf. Bauer et al. 2007); science communication (cf. Holliman et al. 2009); science policy (cf. Bucchi 2009); and sometimes also science education (cf. Osborne & Dillon 2008). Whilst a consideration of PE in such contexts is useful, it fails to capture a more nuanced, composite and complex account of PE activity as it occurs – typically with ideological asymmetry – across the Academy or the impact of PE-HE at an individual, institutional, sectorial, national and international level. Furthermore, much of what has been, and is written about PE-HE is limited to methodological and practice-based concerns with less or little focus on how a PE agenda is, in a variety of ways, affecting and in many instances altering the nature of academic praxis and identity. Our argument has and continues to be, therefore, that a more pronounced focus in understanding the sociological and philosophical dimensions of PE-HE, particularly as an aspect of academic labour and determinant of academic identity, is exigent and over-due.

In this presentation we provide a review of the ‘state of the art’ but also call attention to the distinctly ‘wicked’ (Rittel & Webber 1973) personality of PE-HE and point to unconsidered aspects, challenges and contradictions, where it is configured as a new professional (and performance-based) obligation; especially where PE-HE relates to fluctuation and change in the identity and role of the university and its academic constituencies. Indeed, whilst we take stock of existing literatures of PE-HE, our intention is to be purposely disruptive by challenging the limitations of these and therein what we perceive to be an abundance of normative and essentialist readings that contribute to the perpetuation of PE-HE as a ‘wicked problem’.

Our historiographical and sociological account is predominantly UK-focused and discussed from the point-of-view of policy changes, both in the general context of science governance and more specifically in the embrace by universities of new public management technologies. We, therefore,

consider the current brand of PE-HE, recognised and operationalised by the UK HE sector, as directly descendant from policy changes in the governance of science in the UK that occurred in the mid-1980s and a shift from an idea of science occurring in isolation, disconnected from and disinvested in the public, to an ideal of science as a process of participatory and democratic knowledge-making. Unsurprisingly, therefore, our discussion focuses on how PE-HE continues, some thirty-years after the emergence of a public understanding of science 'movement', as a politically oriented, arranged and obligated facet of institutional life that continues to challenge the organisational rubric of science and questions what it means to be both a university and academic.

Central to our discussion and our location of the state-of-the-art of PE-HE, is a problematization of the interface of higher education policy with institutional and individual practice. We document how a public engagement agenda for higher education has 'played out' through a series of sectorial experiments in the shape of a pan-UK public engagement network – the Beacons for Public Engagement – and subsequent culture-change programmes (cf. Connected Communities; Public Engagement with Research Catalysts). We consider the ways with which academics have both bought-into and resisted a 'prescribed' public interface and the various competing rationalizations they promulgate for the further inculcation or avoidance of PE-HE across academic working-cultures. We, furthermore, consider how a PE-HE agenda has interacted with, and ostensibly been changed or subjugated by other higher education policies and developments, such as for instance, the treatment of the socio-economic impact of academic research as a core determinant, and evaluative criterion (with the UK's evaluative performance-based funding system, the REF) of research excellence. In this latter context especially we argue that the increasing dominance of a fiscal rationalization of higher education and the pervasiveness of NPM and neoliberal ideology across UK (and global) universities, is ultimately corruptive to an ambition of PE-HE, not only as it is politically and instrumentally configured, but where it offers a conduit towards, and custodianship of the public intellectual and public university.

Ultimately, we apply a *critical* sociological, philosophical and historical lens; appropriate cognate discourses of scientific citizenship, responsibility and accountability and democratic agency; and unpack PE-HE through reference to various epistemic traditions, to dismantle highly normative and unproblematic constructions of public engagement as an inherently 'good thing' and unambiguous and consensual component of academic labour – and therefore to *honestly* locate a state-of-the-art.