

“There is virtually no part of the world where the quality of Scotland’s students, academics and universities does not reach – almost nothing else does more to put Scotland on the world stage. But universities are not only an important part of Scotland; they are important and active parts of their local communities.”

It's What We Do (2010) Universities Scotland

Realising the full potential of Scottish Universities

15 June 2011

Scotland's Futures Forum, The Edinburgh Beltane Beacon for Public Engagement and Universities Scotland held an event on 15 June 2011 focussing on 'Realising the Full Potential of Scottish Universities'. The event, part of the 'Big Ideas for Society' day of UK Universities Week 2011, brought together MSPs, parliamentary researchers and University Principals and Vice Principals, to explore the concept of 'an engaged university' and to consider how to support meaningful engagement between the university sector, the Scottish Parliament and the public, to benefit society both here in Scotland and internationally.

Key Learning

- Scotland's universities are a force for positive social change. Alongside producing high-calibre graduates and research, they contribute £6bn to the Scottish economy, provide 150 000 jobs, and add £315 million of expertise to the public and voluntary sector through knowledge exchange.
- Stronger partnerships between universities, the Scottish Parliament, and the public will help to position Scotland as a modern, innovative, hi-tech country with a thriving knowledge-driven economy.
- The university sector in Scotland is keen to work more closely with the Scottish Parliament – academics can help to answer questions arising from MSP surgeries or committee meetings; contribute to consultations; and take part in policy debates.
- University students have a role to play too. Thousands of students are active in volunteering, student societies, and other projects, all of which make valuable contributions to communities both here in Scotland and internationally.
- We need to recognise the diversity of communities and connect the right groups to the right information. A tailored approach is required to do this successfully; 'one size does not fit all'.
- Engagement is about people connecting with people and is an ongoing long-term process. Sharing our expertise and collaborating with communities is more effective than giving instructions.

Introduction

Futures Forum Board Member John Park MSP opened the session, which was chaired by Professor Sir Timothy O'Shea, Acting Convener of Universities Scotland and Principal of the University of Edinburgh.

Professor Mary Bownes, Vice Principal (External Engagement) of the University of Edinburgh summarised the contribution that the university sector currently makes, to Scotland, and towards securing a strong future for the country. Alongside producing high-calibre graduates and research, they contribute £6bn to the Scottish economy, provide 150,000 jobs, and add £315 million of expertise to the public and voluntary sector through knowledge exchange.

Professor Bownes said that, *“Universities take their public service remit seriously and can contribute significantly to realising a greener, more sustainable, economically vibrant Scotland”*. She emphasised the need for universities to work together across institutions, across disciplines, and in partnership with practitioners, policymakers, and the public, to tackle global issues.

Scotland's universities are committed to developing and building these partnerships. Senior academics from 17 of Scotland's 20 universities attended a workshop earlier on 15 June to discuss strategies for meaningful engagement with diverse communities. Professor Steve Chapman, Principal of Heriot Watt University, said, *“Engagement is about people connecting with people. Sharing our expertise and collaborating with communities is more effective than giving instructions. To build trust, we need to build relationships.”*

Many university staff and students are already actively involved in public engagement, but if it is to be a priority for the sector, it must be included in the staff development strategy – from recruitment to promotion prospects. Pooling public engagement between institutions, which was successful with the research pools model, is another strategy to consider.

There was a sense that universities need to be more proactive in engaging people with new technology: *“We can't wait until a crisis hits, we need to be transparent about the research that is happening, make an effort to correct misinformation, and listen to people's concerns.”* There was also consideration of the practical ways that universities could support the Scottish Parliament, for example by taking part in policy debates.

Key learning from the Q&A session:

Benefits of actively engaging with communities

World leading research is happening in Scotland's universities, but Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, Principal of Robert Gordon University, questioned how well the higher education sector as a whole communicated with those outside the academic community, while Professor David Littlejohn from the University of Strathclyde was concerned that, *"There is a fundamental lack of understanding in the wider community of the role of a university"*.

Effective public engagement can help to build partnerships. One example is Oban's Festival of the Sea. The festival was developed in partnership with the Scottish Association for Marine Science, and local schools and businesses, and helped to embed the research centre in the local community.

The European Marine Centre in Orkney is another example: *"A cluster of activity generated from Heriot-Watt University had impacted on unrelated sectors such as tourism"* said Liam McArthur MSP.

Ben Dipper from the Scottish Government challenged universities to dig deeper than the "usual suspects" of highly visible platforms, such as festivals and science centres, to find ways to connect more deeply with communities. While there is willingness to do so, reaching these groups is not always straightforward. MSPs, who represent the voice of their constituency, could facilitate new partnerships.

Engagement is an ongoing process and persistence is crucial. Michael Rayner, Dean of Research at the University of the Highlands and Islands said, *"Research takes place over academic timescales, which can be longer than is understood or required by the public: Universities need to maintain effort and keep the public interested with progress and outcomes."*

Supporting partnerships between universities, the Scottish Parliament, and local communities also has the potential to boost Scotland's international profile. Dr Jim McGeorge, University Secretary at the University of Dundee said, *"The public engagement agenda must go beyond Scotland: We should tell a positive story about Scottish Higher Education on a global scale, and position Scotland as a modern, innovative, hi-tech country."*

Role of universities in stimulating public policy debate

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) puts increasing pressure on academics to demonstrate the impact of their research, and there is a need for clear, focussed communication. However, it can be difficult to have a clear sense of what politicians and policymakers want to know. Academics are also keen to present evidence at the point at which policy issues are being discussed, not just in crisis situations. More dialogue between MSPs and universities could help to improve this process. It was noted that The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) has a system for registering experts as regular advisers to the various subject committees; this is something that could be more heavily promoted within individual institutions.

Murdo Fraser MSP noted the lack of think-tanks and other vehicles for public policy research in Holyrood, compared to Westminster, and queried whether there was a bigger role for universities in stimulating debate about public policy, and bringing research and new ideas to the fore. This suggestion was well received and is an area for further discussion.



Increasing the impact of student engagement

Professor David Littlejohn, University of Strathclyde, said, *“There needs to be a more concerted effort to maximise the benefit of the student body engaging with local communities.”* Research shows that two thirds of undergraduates volunteered at some point during their university career and, of those, 95% want to make a difference to their local communities. Many students also volunteer abroad. Professor Sir Timothy O’Shea, University of Edinburgh added, *“Student volunteering is regarded by many prospective students, particularly those from overseas, as an integral part of the student experience.”*

Undergraduate dissertations increasingly generate high quality research, but Liam Burns from the National Union of Students (NUS) noted that there was little incentive for students to approach local agencies to ask what research would be helpful to them.

‘Science / Knowledge Shops’, an EU Science and Society initiative is one area which could be explored. Professor Gerry McCormac, Principal of Stirling University said, *“The aim is to connect undergraduate research with real needs within communities. The research is usually exploratory and seeds further work in the area, rather than providing direct solutions.”*

Another participant added *“A common obstacle is that potential areas of research identified by communities are often inter-disciplinary, which is difficult in the ‘subject conscious’ university environment. This can be overcome by encouraging students and teaching staff to consider more inter-disciplinary options.”*

Dr Siobhán Jordan, Director of Interface, raised the important point that *“expectations of communities and businesses need to be carefully managed regarding the scope of what can realistically be achieved through engagement of this type”*. However, there is best practice emerging for undergraduate dissertation projects, and thus there is potential for a national forum where universities can share best practice and theory more widely.

Liz Smith MSP asked if careers guidance for secondary school pupils could be improved, to allow young people to navigate their way through what are increasingly complex choices with regard to their higher education. Several Principals outlined how their institutions are working closely with careers services and schools, and emphasised that degree courses aim to develop transferable skills in graduates which they can apply to different careers.

Next steps

Following the session, a number of representatives requested a follow up event to explore these themes further. Accordingly, an event is being planned before the end of 2011 at the Parliament. Please contact the Edinburgh Beltane directly at info@edinburghbeltane.net if you have specific ideas for the agenda.

Acknowledgements

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