Strengthening Community University Research Partnerships

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I think I can speak on behalf of all my fellow presidents and heads of higher education institutions in Ireland when I say what a pleasure it is to sign this charter. With this charter, we recognise the huge importance of campus civic and community engagement – the importance, that is, both to our own and our students’ development, and to the communities in which our campuses are embedded. (Prendergast, 2014)

This was articulated by the Provost of Trinity College Dublin in June 2014 at a gathering of the twenty-two Presidents of Irish higher education institutions, with the then Minister for Education, as they signed the Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement. Campus Engage was established in 2007 by Irish higher education institutions to provide a national platform for the enhancement and co-ordination of civic and community engagement across the higher education sector, and to support the development of community-based research and potential partnerships.

The Campus Engage ten-point charter compels these institutions to underscore their commitment to community-based research and partnerships. Principle Three of the Charter states that leadership “...will promote civic and community engagement through a variety of community-based learning, community-based research, public scholarship and volunteering activities and seek to align these with the overall teaching, research and outreach missions of our institutions” (Campus Engage, 2014, p. 2). At this landmark event hosted by Dublin Castle, each President in turn signed the Charter. This historic moment for the advancement of the community-based research and partnerships agenda arose from a series of complex, multifaceted and overlapping series of avocations, institutional and national practices, funding opportunities and resource allocations, new policy directions and the enactment of legislation for at least two decades at local institutional and national levels.

Within the context of Ireland, civic engagement and community-based research both as a prevailing ethos and practice reside at a crossroads in terms of enabling further development. The fall of the Celtic Tiger, (the name given to the
Irish economic boom during the late 90’s to early 2000’s), into a profound fiscal recession brings both opportunities and challenges in terms of further activities and practices. The Irish higher education landscape is in flux due to a variety of challenges, including a move from the Celtic Tiger era to one of economic recession, a sense of structural growth and arising incoherency, mission drift, massification, growing competition, governance issues related to institutional autonomy and a centralised governments desire to regulate the sector, to mention a few (Coate & MacLabhrainn, 2009). The purpose of this chapter will be to explore the mechanisms and environments for embedding community-based research and research partnerships through mission, practice, policy and legislation, resources allocation and infrastructure in Ireland at institutional and national levels with a view towards the roads to be taken.

Policy at Local Levels

We know from elsewhere in this book, and within the literature, that the idea of civic and community engagement within higher education aligns with the historic foundations and missions of many universities internationally. However, as Gonzales-Perez et al. (2007) note:

...the current political climate in much of the world today places considerably greater emphasis on the economic role, rather than the civic (or indeed, the cultural), purpose and many universities’ focus of endeavour is on the national and international stage: competing in the ‘global marketplace’ both for students and ‘high quality’ researchers who, in turn, it is hoped, will improve the reputation of the institution in ‘league tables’. (2007, p. 188)

However, a recent study of Irish higher education mission statements is significant. The study of twenty-four Irish HEIs reports that within the context of Ireland:

...all the institutions describe their mission in terms of their contribution to society and the ‘external world’. The particular aspects of this, which they choose to highlight, however, vary. We can identify six broad categories of such contributions: (a) a stated social/civic commitment; (b) explicit mention of the development of intellectual capabilities and critical thinking (hence forming an ‘educated public’); (c) continuation of historical contribution and maintenance of tradition; (d) an explicit reference to the ethical and moral development of students/graduates; (e) contribution to the economic well-being of the local or national community; (f) ‘cultural’ contribution. (Gonzales-Perez et al., 2007, p. 191)

To varying degrees, these align with community-based research principles, and while the authors recognize that the purpose or function of mission statements is hotly debated, they conclude that while “economically-focused commitments are very common, the social, civic and cultural dimensions are even more strongly
emphasised, particularly in the universities. This suggests that there is recognition that the civic purpose of institutions does need to be publicly espoused and that, in theory at least, such values have not yet been completely abandoned by an economistic focus” (Gonzales-Perez et al., 2007, p. 195). This overarching community or civic-centred mission in addition dovetails with practice excavated through another national Irish study of twenty-four HEIs conducted between 2010 and 2011.

Lyons and McIlrath (2011) note that this was the first time a survey of this nature has been carried out in Ireland. The findings were both extensive and enlightening with 75% of institutional responses positively stating that there existed “moderate to substantial” acknowledgement of civic engagement activities with reference to this work within “strategic plans, mission statements, websites, publications, composition of governing bodies/authorities, awards, access initiatives, outreach and public addresses by senior management” (2011, p. 7). For the purpose of the survey ‘community engaged research’ was the adopted term and defined as “research that is primarily concerned with engagement with community and uses participatory approaches in carrying out research, e.g., action research, participatory action research, community-based research, community-based scholarship” (Lyons & McIlrath 2011, p. 14). In the survey, 50% of respondents indicated that Community Engaged Research (CER) is included within the research strategy of their institution. Few data are provided on strategy whereas a selection of practices and thematic areas are provided as evidence to support this response. A diverse range of community partners were also identified but, worryingly, 60% of responses indicated that that current promotion policies did not make provision for civic and community engagement practices. In addition,

…evidence offered in some cases suggests explicit support for community engaged research while in others it is implicit, being articulated through the thematic areas of research to which the institution is committed…community-engaged research activity is facilitated through a range of institutes, fora, centres and projects. Thus while there may not be explicit reference to community-engaged research in strategic documents, community-engaged research is being carried out in a devolved way through centres, etc. (2011, p. 26)

In addition, Lyons and McIlrath (2011) articulate that almost 50% of respondents claimed moderate or substantial collaboration by community partners in establishing research priorities of institutions and just over 25% reported either no or little collaboration. In certain institutions there are centres or units that facilitate the work of collaboration, as do particular teaching programmes. In other cases “the research interests and research approaches of individual staff members can create an ethos and environment conducive to working collaboratively” (2011, p. 27). These findings are particularly interesting, as we will see in the next section, because while there is reference to civic and community engagement in national policy, policy vision and legislation, there is little reference to community-based research and partnerships.
Policy and Legislation at National Levels

We know internationally that “government policies can have a substantial impact on civic engagement through mandates and through incentives and exhortation” (Watson, 2011, p. 250). However, we also know, from this book and elsewhere, that direct policy and legislation for civic engagement and community-based research are not the mainstream and tend to be the exception rather than the norm. Within Ireland there are seven universities with just over 110 thousand registered students and these are governed by the Universities Act of 1997.

The language and vision espoused within the Universities Act 1997 aligns with both the ethos and practices of community-based research and partnership. For example, in Object and Functions Chapter One, the Act references that universities exist “to promote the cultural and social life of society,” “disseminate the outcomes of its research in the general community,” “foster a capacity for critical thinking amongst its students,” and “contribute to the realization of national economic and social development” (1997). Under functions of a university, the Act states that higher education institutions “may collaborate with educational, business, professional, trade union, Irish language, cultural, artistic, community and other interests, both inside and outside the State, to further the objects of the university.” While there is not a total legislative vacuum, there is further scope for legislative development to frontload the concept of civic engagement and the manifestation of community-based research.

The current higher education policy vision in Ireland captures the centrality of engagement. The National Strategy of Higher Education to 2030, published in 2011 and most commonly referred to as the Hunt Report, endorses the civic mission of higher education and states that “engaging with the wider society” is “one of the three interconnected core roles of higher education” (DES, 2011, p. 75). Engagement partners have been identified as “business and industry, with the civic life of the community, with public policy and practice, with artistic, cultural and sporting life and with other educational providers in the community and region” (DES, 2011, p. 74). While the central role that research plays within the development of the knowledge economy/society and economic innovation is recognised, little if any attention is given to the potential role of community-based research and community-university research partnerships. The term ‘community based research’ is not mentioned, and the strongest statement is that “higher education research will need to connect to enterprise and society in new and imaginative ways to harness its potential for economic and social well-being, including a more effective approach to knowledge transfer and commercialization” (DES, 2011, p. 12). While Goddard’s work is quoted in that he supports the realization of the civic university through all functions of higher education, (teaching, research and service), this is as far as the Strategy goes in terms of any reference to methodologies related to community engaged research practices and methods. McIlrath et al. (2014) opportunistically note that
...while the Hunt report does not directly name CBR [community based research], we would argue that CBR is a core element of engagement as it presents a new and an extremely effective way to address the societal impact of research. Whilst the Hunt Report positions engagement on a par with research and teaching, there is much that remains to be done at the operational level, as currently there is no requirement on HEIs to implement an engagement mission. (2014, p. 111)

The report *Performance Evaluation In Higher Education* (2013), published to compliment policy vision articulated through the Hunt Report affords HEIs with autonomy to develop their own key indicators and deliverables drawing from mission and practice. Within the guiding framework, a section on engagement, including civic and community, is included whereby reference is made to international systems and tools that have been embedded elsewhere to capture and measure the concept and practice of the civic engagement. The responses from each higher education institution to the framework are not yet public. It will make for an interesting exercise to ascertain what, if any, institutions document indicators that align with community based research and partnerships.

**Funding and Resource Allocation**

There has been, over the last two decades, a mix of funding opportunities to drive growth of civic engagement and community-based research partnerships that can be categorised as statutory and philanthropic.

In the last decade the Irish government, through the Higher Education Authority (HEA), has awarded statutory funding to kick start developments in the areas of community-based research, as well as in other areas aligned with civic engagement. One such initiative has been Campus Engage, the platform to promote civic engagement broadly and in turn a range of manifestations including community based research and partnerships. Campus Engage was established in 2007. During phase one it was hosted by the National University of Ireland Galway (NUI Galway), after which it was mainstreamed nationally within the Irish Universities Association (IUA) where it now continues to both reside and thrive. McIlrath and Lyons (2009) note that “the network has been supported in the main by the HEA Strategic Innovation Fund 1 (SIF 1) which seeks to support innovation and creativity within the landscape of higher education in Ireland. Funds have been matched by five partner institutions and total 1.4m Euro. In the SIF 1 call for proposals, civic engagement was highlighted as a key area in terms of innovation within higher education, being described as “the development of individual students to attain their full capacity both in careers and as citizens in a democratic society facing profound change” (McIlrath & Lyons, 2009, p. 23). Another statutory funded example was funding offered to the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) by the Department of Community, Rural, and Gaeltacht Affairs. In 2005, DIT received €330,000 to develop the Community
Learning Programme (CLP) with the aim of spreading “community based learning” which promotes community-based research and partnerships between academics, community and students (McIlrath & Lyons, 2009, p. 25). More recently, the Irish Research Council (IRC), an agency of the Department of Education and Skills, has partnered with an umbrella organization that represents over 1000 community-based organizations called The Wheel on a new higher education and community funding scheme. ‘The Wheel’ is the support and representative body to connect community voluntary and charitable organizations in Ireland. Strand 1 of the New Foundations scheme entitled ‘Engaging Civic Society’ supports “small, discrete collaborative research projects between postdoctoral or senior researchers (acting as the applicant to the Council) and a community/voluntary group” (IRC, 2014). The main objectives of Strand 1 are to: “Develop networks between academia and societal groups in the community and voluntary sector; Encourage knowledge exchange between these groups; Develop expertise to support civic society within the higher education community; Develop capacity and routes for engagement with civic society on a longer term basis” with up to 10K per project funding (IRC, 2014). This is a very promising road towards progressing the ethos, principles and practice of community-based research and the forging of new research partnerships.

The availability of philanthropic funding, in particular that of Chuck Feeney’s Atlantic Philanthropies, has been particularly significant towards the enhancement of higher education in Ireland. It awarded 1.6 million Euro to establish the Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI) at the National University of Ireland, Galway in 2001. This was the first attempt in Ireland to create an institution-wide coordinating unit to develop deeper relationships between the university and communities, and to place communities at the centre of debate. The funding awarded has allowed for the mainstreaming of civic engagement at NUI Galway, and since 2008 the unit was core funded by the university. The members of the CKI teams are permanent members of staff, and the ethos and practice of engagement is firmly embedded in the strategic vision of the university. The Atlantic Philanthropies funding was fundamental in the case of NUI Galway, but there are few other philanthropists in Ireland and the culture of such is a new and evolving phenomenon.

We now stand at crossroads, as the future of national funding for civic engagement broadly and community-based research specifically is both unclear and uncertain. Atlantic Philanthropies plan to wind down in 2016 with all funds committed to existing projects, while higher education funding has been restricted to activities that are deemed to be at the core of operations. Thus the future is unclear. External to universities and within the community sector there are no particular agencies that act as advocates for community-based research presently, but the IRC New Foundations initiative may promote activity in the area of advocacy and perhaps future funding. However, despite this uncertain future, a number of institutional structures exist by operating on different
funded allocated modes. These centres continue to grow in terms of activity and significance at a national level. The following five case studies of actual practice in five higher education institutions highlight a commitment espoused by these institutions, some operating from a grassroots dimension and others from a top down direct mission and commitment.

**Higher Education Institutions**

**University of Limerick-The UL Practicum**

“At the University of Limerick, the UL Practicum supports applied research carried out at the invitation of a ‘community sponsor’ that is designed by faculty and carried out by students. One such project is the Ennis Hub Plan: People, Place, Potential where Ennis town council and elected officials invited the UL Practicum to facilitate all citizens/residents and visitors of Ennis town to participate in a series of events designed to give each and every person a voice in the future of the town. Supported by the UL Practicum, staff and students from the Department of Politics & Public Administration and Technical Communication undertook a series of visionary events that included focus groups, world café events and public space conversations (in shopping centres) and on line...to document views of residents. Students are currently collating all the information and will feed back what has been gathered to all parties involved. A second phase commenced in September 2011 focusing on more thematic strands derived from the visionary events.” From Survey of civic engagement activities in higher education in Ireland (p. 28), by Lyons, A. & McIlrath, L., 2011, Ireland: Campus Engage. Reprinted with permission.


**Queen’s University Belfast-Science Shop**

“The Science Shop at Queen’s University Belfast was established in 1988 based on models in the Netherlands where the name literally translates as ‘knowledge exchange’. The Science Shop works with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to develop research projects based on their research
needs which are suitable for students within the university to carry out as part of their degree programmes. Science Shop research projects are therefore examples of co-created research, with community organizations bringing their specific needs and knowledge, and students bringing their research training and skills. Organizations typically receive a piece of research that they do not have the resources to carry out, whilst students get the experience of doing a piece of research in a real life situation which benefits both their learning and their career development. The Science Shop is based within Academic and Student Affairs, and has 2.2 FTE staff. Since 2007, this Science Shop has been funded by the Department of Employment and Learning through the Higher Education Innovation Funding Scheme. It is funded by the Department, with the rationale that there was an “absence of a dedicated Higher Education Active Community Fund in Northern Ireland” and also that “the NI Science Shop…was widely regarded as an EU exemplar of best practice in Higher Education” (Department of Employment and Learning, 2010). During the last three years of HEIF funding, 320 projects were developed with 110 CSOs, of which 200 were completed. Over 400 students in total were involved in completing these research projects. A further round of funding for 2013-2016 was recently confirmed. Whilst the Science Shop works with students right across the university, in practice more projects take place in environmental and social science disciplines. To give an example, a group of undergraduate Social Policy students worked with the Forum for Action on Substance Abuse on potential links between substance abuse and suicide. Their report was brought to the Northern Ireland Assembly’s Inquiry into the Prevention of Suicide and Self-Harm.” (McIlrath et al., 2014, pp. 105-106)
the EC as part of the four-year PERARES project, which aims to increase the involvement of civil society in research...Community research ideas are framed as broad questions, categorised by disciplines, and advertised to students and academic staff through the SLWC website (www.dit.ie/ace/slwc) and in regular e-mail updates. Individual students can apply with the support of their supervisor to undertake research in response to these community research ideas. A three-way meeting between the academic, student and community partner is facilitated by SLWC staff to discuss and agrees the detail of the research question and approach. Academics can also decide to work with a cohort of students on research questions from one or more community partners. As an Institute of Technology, DIT has programmes in many applied subject areas, and students’ research projects with communities can lead to a product concept or a design as much as a traditional thesis or research report. Since 2008, over 140 research projects have been undertaken by DIT students in response to questions from community partners. One example of a CBR project in DIT is a PhD project in Product Design, jointly supervised with Enable Ireland, to research and develop a design framework for user-centred collaboration by designing an alternative computer input device for people with disabilities. Another example is two Master’s thesis projects in Higher Education and Child, Family and Community Development in collaboration with AONTAS (the national adult learning organization), which investigated supports needed by community and adult learners in order to access Higher Education.” (McIlrath et al., 2014, pp. 106-107)

**University College Cork (UCC) - Community-Academic Research Links (CARL)**

“CARL was established at UCC in 2006 and commenced student and community project work in 2010. CARL is based on the Science Shop community-based research methodology. This initiative began as an academic-led volunteer initiative largely within the School of Applied Social Studies. CARL is now part of the University’s strategic plan (University College Cork, 2013) and work has begun to translate CARL into a university-wide community-based research initiative. As CARL is a volunteer initiative with only a very small number of paid co-ordination hours, it has a limited capacity to undertake projects. Since 2010, CARL has completed research studies with 19 community and voluntary groups and 28 students, with 12 more projects on-going. CARL began its life as a Science Shop with the aim of meeting the research needs of
community and voluntary groups, principally through student research dissertation work...[but] this term did not ‘translate’ well in the university...This misunderstanding arose due to the more restrictive English language meaning of the word ‘science’ as encompassing the physical and life sciences, compared to the more liberal German meaning of wissenschaft, which comprises all domains of knowledge and knowledge production. Thus the name was changed to Community-Academic Research Links. CARL is an interesting case study for the establishment of a CBR initiative in a period of fiscal crisis with a concomitant retrenchment of government investment in higher education. With a committed group of individuals-community partners, academics and administrators-who believe in the principles of civic engagement, widening access to the resources of the university and promoting students’ critical engagement with the wider community beyond the campus, it is possible to begin small and do good work, even in the initial absence of a formal university mandate. Moreover, the support of the wider European Science Shop community, their resources and counsel, along with the advice of senior university policy makers, can offer opportunities for creativity in the design and running of a CBR initiative. One example of the contribution students can make to the community is illustrated by a CBR project between a Master of Social Work student and a cancer support charity (O’Connor, 2013). Cork ARC Cancer Support service sought to provide information and support through a blog. The student did a review of the research evidence to establish whether there was support for the efficacy of such a blog. Following this review, a blog was then created by the student in WordPress and evaluated. At the end of the pilot the blog had a 1,000 users a month, is still running and has had very positive feedback from users. CARL is now working with this group to further develop their use of technology through the research and development of a mobile app for evidence-informed diet plans for cancer patients.” (McIlrath et al., 2014, pp. 107-108)

Community Knowledge Exchange at Dublin City University

“Community Knowledge Exchange (CKE) is the title of the CBR facilitating unit or Science Shop at DCU, launched in 2012. CKE is cross-disciplinary and comprises a ‘Knowledge Broker’ who facilitates exchanges between academics, community partners and a management team of three DCU academics. CKE takes a theoretical and practical approach, influenced by thinking in contemporary science communication and Science
and Technology Studies, to facilitate co-construction of knowledge within the local community. By ‘match-making’ DCU researchers with local societal issues, CKE facilitates CBR activities and instils a culture of engagement within teaching and learning practice within DCU itself. CKE is now a vital part of the output of DCU in the community. There have been several community initiatives in recent years at DCU. However, the first that might be recognized as a science shop project was New Communities and Mental Health in Ireland. An analysis was published by DCU in 2008 in partnership with Cairde, a group that challenges inequalities in society for ethnic minorities. This project identified specific mental health issues and needs of Ireland’s migrant and ethnic communities. Since CKE’s official opening in 2012, two projects have been completed from the BA in Communication Studies—a study of volunteers from Volunteer Ireland and a report on mobility issues for the Dublin 12 Disability Mainstream Access Project. Further studies from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science and the BSc in Health and Society at DCU were due in 2014, and the target is to have twelve projects completed by the end of 2015. The central person in the relationships between Deans, Heads of Schools and Research Convenors on one side, and community partners on the other, is the Community Knowledge Broker. This person maintains links, facilitates social enterprises in formulating research questions and brokers relationships with suitable researchers, personnel and programmes. The job of the Knowledge Broker is to manage the relationship of academic assignment and local dissemination, and indeed, local activism. Up to this point, CKE has been relatively cost neutral, depending on a volunteer Knowledge Broker and a management team of DCU academics and NorDubCo. It now requires more buy-in centrally from DCU.” (McIlrath et al., 2014, pp. 108-109)

Engaging People in Communities (EPIC) at the National University of Ireland, Galway

“EPIC is part of the Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI) at NUI Galway and it co-ordinates the community-based research aspect of the work of CKI. Created in 2012, it is a relatively new area of activity within CKI, and follows on from initiatives in student volunteering (ALIVE programme) and service learning, which were established at the inception of CKI in the early 2000s...As well as co-ordinating community-based research, EPIC is also involved in the related areas of knowledge exchange and advocacy...EPIC is core-funded by the university,
employs one full time staff member and operates on a university-wide basis. It is an important point of contact for students and staff throughout the university who want to be involved in CBR. In addition, because EPIC is based in a centre for community engagement, it is ‘community-facing’ and functions as a vital first point of contact for community-based organizations that wish to engage in collaborative research with the university. EPIC strives to be an effective mediator of relationships within the university and between the wider community and the university. EPIC is guided in its work by the principles of community-based research exemplified by Ochocka et al. (2010, p. 3), who define this approach to research as being community-situated, collaborative and action-oriented. EPIC has been greatly influenced by the Science Shop model, and puts elements of its approach into practice through community-based research carried out by students for dissertation and/or course-work purposes. However, its activities are not restricted to students carrying out CBR, since EPIC also supports community-based research activities of staff. Further, through its co-ordination of public knowledge exchange events, EPIC provides a forum for sharing knowledge on community-based research and advocacy. In this context, EPIC has established strong links with individual staff members, teaching programmes and research centres within the university that are committed to advocacy, action and community-based approaches to research. These relationships are forming the basis on which EPIC is building collaborative partnerships within the university to support community-based research. EPIC has also been forging relationships with a number of CSOs. Projects concerning the rights of migrants and asylum seekers, biodiversity and land-use, design of space in urban environments and socially engaged arts, are currently underway.” (McIlrath et al., 2014, pp. 109-110)

Crossroads and Conclusion

While we are at a crossroads in terms of the future of community-based research, within a far from favourable economic climate, there continues to be great hope and momentum building for partnership. In the past, funding has been awarded from both statutory and philanthropic sources, but additional funding pathways are required. We know from the 2010-2011 national study that there is passion, practice and recognition of community-based research, but promotion policies are problematic. We can also strongly state that the civic or community engagement focus of higher education mission statements is as strongly espoused as the economic contribution. Significantly, the heads of twenty-two institutions of higher education, including all Presidents of universities in Ireland, have articu-
lated their commitment in a very public way through the signing and adoption of the Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement in 2014. Policy vision to 2030 is favourable towards research that contributes broadly to society, but community-based research could be named as a discourse and practice. Legislation through the Universities Act 1997 nuances the contribution that universities make to society and the contribution of knowledge to community, but additional opportunities exist. Campus Engage as the national platform continues to attract increasing national and international attention, with membership having increased from five founding higher education institutions to the inclusion of twenty-two presently. While challenges exist, opportunities abound. The time is here and the time is now. It is perhaps the current President of Ireland who can lend additional courage and inspiration at this developmental crossroads as he reminds us of the necessity of this work:

Universities are both apart from and a part of society. They are apart in the sense that they provide a critically important space for grasping the world as it is and – importantly – for re-imagining the world as it ought to be. The academic freedom to pursue the truth and let the chips fall where they may isn’t a luxury – in fact it is a vital necessity in any society that has the capability for self-renewal. But universities are also a part of our societies. What’s the point unless the accumulated knowledge, insight and vision are put at the service of the community? With the privilege to pursue knowledge comes the civic responsibility to engage and put that knowledge to work in the service of humanity. (Higgins, 2012)

References


