

The university community in a European community: investigating the notion of an engaged university

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Abstract

Watson and Temple explore the motives and impact of university engagement with society at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with particular emphases on the challenges raised for a European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Beginning with the Association of Commonwealth Universities' definition of engagement as "strenuous, thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world," they set this ambition in a context of the founding aims of university institutions from the late fourteenth to the twentieth centuries. They then offer a typology for the types of practical engagement entailed by universities as influential institutions in civil society, as partners in contractual arrangements with the state, business and commerce, and as voluntary communities in their own rights. The influence of "national" systems of funding and regulation is explored, as well the impact of pan-European and international initiatives such as the Magna Charta (1998) and the Talloires Declaration (2005).

Implications for the EHEA include developments in teaching and learning, in knowledge production and use, in response to globalisation, in institutional differentiation, and the expansion of "mode 2" approaches to include the "service" dimension of university missions. The outcomes include revised notions of higher education as a public good, changing relationships between European systems and those in the rest of the world, as well as a sharper focus on ethical issues.

The paper concludes with some lessons for policy and practice at the European, national and institutional levels, along with the proposition that high performance in this area can help to restore key values inherent in the system's historical legacy.