

# Get out and join the city life

US universities are part of the fabric of their communities. Robin Hambleton says UK institutions should emulate them

Earlier this year I was invited to speak at a national conference on local government. I knew from press reports that central Government was considering some radical changes to metropolitan reform. So I went online to access the minutes of the Cabinet.

Within a couple of minutes, I discovered that in April, the Prime Minister had chaired a lively Cabinet debate. The Minister for Local Government presented four main options for reform, and the minutes record 49 specific decisions. You will not be surprised to discover that these events did not unfold in this country. It was in New Zealand. Here, access to Cabinet minutes requires a 30-year wait.

Viewed from abroad, UK governmental practice can seem somewhat out of date. But are UK universities vulnerable to similar criticism?

Current higher education debates about public engagement might give pause for thought. Indeed, international observers may argue that we are about 150 years off the pace.

## Universities must encourage academics – through training and public-service programmes – to develop skills as civic leaders

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln signed into law the Morrill Act. This heralded not just an expansion of higher education in the US, but also a reframing of the purpose of a university.

The Act, later called the Land Grant College Act, provided grants of federal land to the states for the creation of public universities and colleges.

This was a breathtaking innovation that led to the establishment of a distinctively American kind of university in every state, one that attempted to fuse scholarly inspiration with a strong commitment to practical application. Almost 150 years later, the US continues to benefit from the foresight shown by Justin Smith Morrill, as the vision he espoused was of an “engaged university”, not an ivory tower.

Ernest Boyer, in his insightful book *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990), built on the land-grant tradition to articulate a more rounded view of the nature of modern scholarship than the one that is still prevalent in the UK today. His vision distinguishes four kinds of

scholarship: discovery, integration, application and teaching. He argues that the teaching and public-service contributions of academics are just as important as research and publications.

We can learn much from the US.

An American publication – the *Metropolitan Universities Journal* – focuses specifically on the changing role of urban universities. There is a federally funded programme, operated by the Office of University Partnerships, with the very purpose of encouraging and expanding collaboration between universities and their communities.

For five years, I was, as dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), heavily involved in the UIC Great Cities Commitment.

I offer four suggestions drawn from my experience in Chicago. First, research questions should be identified in partnership with users. Co-production of the research agenda is vital.

Second, university leaders should change promotion and reward systems to give substantial weight to public engagement – it should be just as important as teaching and research. Frankly, it is unconvincing for vice-chancellors to wax lyrical about how engaged their university is if public engagement is not at the heart of the performance-evaluation framework.

Third, encourage academics – through training, secondments and public-service programmes – to develop their skills as civic leaders.

Fourth, build a high level of “public experience” into the students’ courses.

There is good practice in relation to engaged scholarship within the UK. And the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement has a great website for academics interested in making a local impact.

It is also encouraging that the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Nesta) is taking an interest in this agenda. A Nesta report published on 1 October, *Reinventing the Civic University*, provides a helpful map of the terrain.

Universities have a marvellous opportunity to contribute to civic leadership in their localities. We do not have to wait 30 years.

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