



Expert advice: Developing a socially engaged curriculum as a crucial component of employABILITY thinking

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Citizen scholar / noun

*A student who cares not only about gaining information and generating knowledge but one that is rooted in the reality of their context, problem oriented and interested in applying their knowledge for the betterment of society.
(Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016, p. 1)*

Why is a socially engaged curriculum important?

Learning discipline-based knowledge and skills is an essential part of any university education, and educators and their institutions are often highly effective at teaching them. However, unless educators also enable students to connect their disciplinary knowledge and skills with the world around them, students can be left unsure about the relevance of their learning to their own lives and the lives of others.

When a tertiary curriculum offers students opportunities to develop their social, moral, and ethical values alongside disciplinary knowledge and skills, students more readily grasp the potential usefulness of their learning. They are empowered and mobilised to put their knowledge and skills to the benefit of people's lives, including their own. They become a force for social good.

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Universities are increasingly recognising the importance—to graduates, communities, and universities themselves—of a socially engaged tertiary education. Many universities now aspire to graduate citizen scholars: people with the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills that enable them to become agents of positive social change.

EmployABILITY is the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan.

EmployABILITY thinking engages students in their cognitive and social development as capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens.

(Bennett, 2017)

How does this relate to employABILITY?

A socially engaged curriculum encourages and empowers students to reflect critically on contemporary local and global society, as well as their own social roles and responsibilities as individuals and experts in their field.

Research shows that participating in socially engaged learning activities as a part of university studies can strengthen and expand students' personal and professional identities, develop their personal and professional confidence, and grow their sense of social responsibility (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2016; Ayers, Quinn & Stovall, 2009).

A socially engaged education therefore develops employABILITY as students cultivate in practical and concrete ways the skills, values, and attitudes that will enable them to forge meaningful, socially productive, and responsible lives and careers.

Top tips

Educators and their institutions could consider:

1. embedding socially engaged learning activities into the core curriculum. This way, all students—not only those with existing social awareness—will be encouraged and enabled to develop as social citizens;
2. expanding the breadth of socially engaged learning activities available to students. Students bring to their learning diverse life experiences, ethical and moral perspectives, and social values. Offering scaffolded learning activities will maximise the potential for student engagement and learning;
3. ensuring that students have opportunities to expand their understandings of the ways their discipline area can contribute to social good, as well as their own possible contributions as individuals and professionals; and
4. in their educational practices and processes, embracing and exemplifying values, attitudes and behaviours that are critically reflective, ethically sound, and socially responsible.



The author (far right) with her undergraduate music students and 'The Allstars', a group of recently arrived migrant and refugee students, during a socially engaged intercultural learning activity. See [Grant & Learning Futures 2018](#).

Things to remember

Designing and implementing a socially engaged curriculum can be challenging. Socially engaged learning activities may take some time to prepare and community settings can be unpredictable learning contexts. Assessing student learning may also require innovative approaches (see Bachen et al, 2015).

Educators can do many things to ensure the success of socially engaged learning activities. These include:

- carefully establishing expectations with students, exploring with them possible cultural sensitivities and/or social differences they may encounter, and emphasising the need for respect for others always;
- actively facilitating students' learning and supporting them through any unexpected challenges;
- providing students with structured opportunities to debrief, reflect on their experiences, and process their learning. You can find examples of critical reflection employABILITY resources [here](#).

Socially engaged learning activities often involve community groups and other external partners. These reminders may be useful:

- it is best to reach a shared understanding about aims and intended outcomes before activities begin;
- the needs of the community partners and the students' learning needs are equally important;
- relationship-building with community partners is an essential part of collaboration and it takes time.

Further reading and resources

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Contributed by [Dr Catherine Grant](#), Griffith University, September 2018