Introduction
An international movement of ‘engaged universities’ is emerging. Barbara Holland, Director of the National Service Learning Clearinghouse in the United States, has defined the engaged university as being:

committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually-beneficial exchange, exploration, and application of knowledge, expertise, resources, and information. These interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity. The work of the engaged campus is responsive to (and respectful of) community-identified needs, opportunities, and goals in ways that are appropriate to the campus’ mission and academic strengths. The interaction also builds greater public understanding of the role of the campus as a knowledge asset and resource (2001, p.24).

These constituencies and communities are at once local and global – with the university acting as an interface between the two. Engaged universities such as the University of Pennsylvania aim to be a model of engagement with local communities
but with an international perspective and global reach. For instance, the University of Pennsylvania’s now widely known project in nutrition in the inner city schools of West Philadelphia is a source of expertise being that is being adopted and adapted in other places.

In this paper, I want to explore an implication of engagement in the broader senses in which it is being defined, namely governance. The ‘engaged university’ will partner with its constituencies and communities not only in the delivery of its core business but also by creating participatory and representative mechanisms through which community voices can be heard in its various forms of decision making and governance.

What do we mean when we speak of universities as being ‘engaged’ with their external environment? Engagement can be, and often is, place-based – universities are catalysts for the economic and social development of their local region. However, in the Australian higher education context, the relationship between the university and geographic site remains underdeveloped. “Region” or “place” continues to be seen as predominantly a concern for rural and regional universities or, at most, individual regional campuses of metropolitan based institutions.

In the US and United Kingdom higher education scenes, however, another type of region is gaining recognition – the ‘metro-region.’ In these contexts, the university can be a catalyst for urban renaissance. In the US, universities located in ‘rust belt’, old manufacturing regions and inner cities have grouped together to form the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) and are recognised as having the same sense of regional place as universities in rural areas. Member universities each have a mission to contribute to the economic development, social wellbeing and cultural vitality of the particular region they serve. Similarly, in the UK, Campaigning for Mainstream Universities (formerly the Coalition of Modern Universities) consists of higher education institutions incorporated since 1992, often with strong regional links through predecessor colleges and polytechnics. In the Australian higher education context, however, this sense of metropolitan-regional
‘place’ is not recognised or understood – Victoria University and the University of Western Sydney have this recognition in an international context as members of CUMU, but, as the ‘regional loading’ experience confirmed, must struggle for local recognition of their regional status. This is in spite of the fact of their very clear missions to address regional deficits such as socio-economic disadvantage and low educational participation. For Victoria University, to fulfil our mission to the western Melbourne region requires us to meet regional needs through offering programs of national and international standing, conduct research with real impacts for the region, and provide a bridge between the West and the world.

These ‘place-based’ forms of engagement are symptomatic of a new challenge for higher education: the university as ‘good neighbour.’ Some expressions of engagement use a weaker form of definition of ‘place’. Examples are those universities like Edith Cowan University (ECU) that recognise that they impact on ‘precincts’ or catchments without having quite the same identity or obligation to local development. ECU ‘precincts’ are intended to encourage each campus to build up mutually beneficial relationships with their local communities. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audit report for ECU, released in 2004, noted in particular the Joondalup Learning Precinct, a partnership between ECU, the Western Australian Police Academy and West Coast College of TAFE, with significant involvement from the City of Joondalup, and a second precinct emerging around ECU’s Mt Lawley campus in collaboration with the Mt Lawley Senior High School. In giving ECU a commendation for this work, AUQA praised the precincts concept as an “outstanding” one, which “gives strong and tangible support to the University’s partnerships with the communities it serves and with which it resides” (2004: 45).

Curtin University has taken the notion of ‘good neighbours’ further by mapping the network of local agencies and organisations with which the University has, or should have, interactions.

1 As part of the 2004 Nelson reforms to higher education, the Federal Government introduced a regional loading into the Commonwealth Grant Scheme. The regional loading is paid on the basis of proximity to a capital city and size of institution. Victoria University argued that we face challenges comparable to regional campuses in providing higher education to regions with traditionally low levels of participation. To date, the Federal Government has not accepted this argument and we remain ineligible for funding recognition for our regional mission.
In the UK, the contribution engaged universities make is now being recognised through ‘third stream’ funding, although for the main part this has focussed predominantly on university links with business rather than community and public sector engagement. Marilyn Wedgwood, Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Relations) at Manchester Metropolitan University, has pointed out that the tendency of third stream funding to focus on “the transfer of scientific intellectual assets to support the growth of the knowledge economy” (2002: 1) has resulted in ‘missed opportunities’ for recognising higher education contributions to the health, public, voluntary and community sectors.

Yet another dimension of engagement is being framed around the notion of the university as a ‘site of citizenship’, as a hub for political and public life, particularly in the US. It is not just universities with specific regional or neighbourly responsibilities that are responding to this call. Large, successful, metropolitan universities such as the University of Queensland in Australia and, in the US, the University of Pennsylvania, are also actively embracing the engagement agenda as a civic responsibility. Hand in hand with this notion has come the idea of universities as being uniquely charged with a responsibility to defend democratic values and to embody and foster these values in the broader community by demonstrating a culture of participation, consultation and civic responsibility. In the US, the links between education, civic participation and democracy that were so convincingly made in previous centuries by John Dewey and before him Thomas Jefferson, are now being invoked with a new urgency in the face of what is widely considered a decline in the public sector. Henry Giroux, one of America’s most influential proponents of critical pedagogy, describes working with communities to “allow people in a wide variety of public spheres to become more than what they are now, to question what it is they have become within existing institutional and social formations” (98) (italics mine). Giroux calls on us to “produce new theoretical tools – a new vocabulary and set of conceptual resources – for linking theory, critique, education and the discourse of…

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2 After the international research initiative ‘Universities as Sites of Citizenship’ being co-ordinated by the International Consortium on Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy.
possibility to the demands of a more fully realised democracy” (99). This is not solely a local project – rather, it requires an appreciation of the interaction between “local change” and “global structures”. Giroux poignantly invokes the concept of “educated hope” (103), which draws on Ruth Levitas’ argument that it is only through education that people can be informed about the limits of the present and the conditions needed for them to have a vision of hope for the future (265). Giroux describes it thus:

educated hope, in this instance, combines the pedagogical and political in ways that stress the contextual nature of learning, emphasizing that different contexts give rise to diverse questions, problems, and possibilities (102).

For critics such as Giroux education becomes the crucial battleground for resisting the assault on existing public spheres by creating new spaces for discussion and critical exchanges.

This is in many ways symptomatic of broader changes in civic society, which has seen a reaction against both ‘big government’ and an unfettered market. The public sector is being rethought in ways that focus on the citizen and on the intricate set of connections that sustain a society. Often referred to as ‘network governance’, this model, in the words of Terry Moran, Secretary to the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet, is premised on a recognition of “the need for a new settlement – a reconfiguration of the relationship between the state, market and civil society” (2005: 2).

In the Australian context, I would argue, the ‘heroic’ or ‘nation building’ debate about the public role and responsibility of the university has to a certain extent been obscured by the Nelson agenda. However, it is the responsibility of engaged universities such as Victoria University to make sure that the debate happens and that our own role in putting the ‘public’ back in ‘public universities’ is recognised. This conference on governance is thus timely, both in terms of broader concerns about the nature of civic society and because it coincides with national and international debates about universities. In Australia, we are now in the midst of the ‘second round’ of
Nelson reforms. Research funding, industrial reform and voluntary student unionism are all on the agenda. The National Protocols for Higher Education and Approval Processes, established by the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs in 2000, are being revisited, with a view to changing the definition of ‘university.’ The university, as currently defined, must engage in teaching, scholarship and research. Nelson has, however, flagged the possibility that the definition be changed in the name of increasing ‘diversity’ in the sector to allow ‘teaching-only’ institutions to use the title ‘university’. Meanwhile, the National Governance Protocols for Higher Education Providers (“the National Governance Protocols”) have been introduced and are being enforced via funding incentives. While at first glance, this may seem a disparate set of issues, for Victoria University, they all converge on the issue of engagement and this in turn has implications for decision-making and governance.

Victoria University and Regional Engagement

Victoria University takes seriously its role in positioning the West to be competitive in the global knowledge economy. The University encourages regional development by contributing education, research, training and consultancy as well as community capacity building and social and cultural wellbeing. In the past, our approach to engagement has been very much based on a deficit model, founded on the assumption that the community is disadvantaged and therefore the role of the educator is to step into the breach and provide the solution. This remains a significant role for a university in a region such as ours, which is undeniably marked by some appalling inequalities, including low levels of educational attainment; a lack of access to cultural and recreational resources; low public infrastructure investment; and high levels of financial hardship. However, in order to achieve a balance towards a more proactive approach, we are also adding a dividends model. This means recognising that our region is also the site of abundant knowledge, cultural capital and resourcefulness in its own right. The West is a rich social, economic, and environmental context for knowledge – it is a resource to be mined and a laboratory to be tested as long as we work with the community as willing partners.
At Victoria University, the engagement agenda extends to actively taking part in ongoing research to construct an evidence base and theoretical framework around university-community engagement strategies. We have also recognised the need for a practical framework built on a set of guiding principles for engagement. In looking back over the previous 12 years since becoming a single institution, we could see a wealth of good intentions – an enormous commitment to the western Melbourne region that has led to lasting connections and loyalties – but limited coherence. Some of our relationships, such as that with the Footscray Community Arts Centre, extend back to the early seventies. Particularly through our TAFE activities, we have had strong industry and community connections, while on the higher education side, the focus on access through the Portfolio Partnership Program (and its predecessor, the Personalised Access and Study Policy) has lead to strong relationships with seventy local schools. For the main part, however, our past engagements have been ad hoc and dependent on individual champions within the institution. They were an ‘add on’ rather than an integrated part of our identity.

We have now started to take a more strategic and planned approach to external engagement generally, and specifically to our partnerships, whether they are in teaching, research, administration, or local and international engagement. Our External Engagement Plan embeds a coherent, university-wide approach to engagement. The Engagement Plan recognises – and puts forward strategies and measures for – the wide range of ways in which we create links between the staff and students of the University and our region. These include advocacy; the provision of pathways to education and training; the development of strong relationships with culturally diverse communities; the promotion of regional learning collaborations; and, ultimately, the construction of a strong knowledge base to underpin regional development. In short, the Plan sets out the ways in which we will work together with the western Melbourne region to create a link between the West and the world.

Engagement and The National Governance Protocols
Governance structures in Australian universities are stipulated by their enabling legislation, which is a State and Territory responsibility. However, by tying Federal
funding to compliance with the National Governance Protocols, the Federal Government has also staked a claim over university governance. The National Governance Protocols seek to make universities more ‘business like’ by requiring that university governing bodies include at least two members with financial experience and one with commercial. They also stipulate that the number of members cannot exceed 22 in total. This is indicative of the more interventionist approach to universities that has been taken by the Federal Government through the Nelson reforms. The Building Better Foundations paper has since flagged the possibility of the Federal Government assuming responsibility for the State and Territory Acts governing universities. While this has the potential benefit of reducing some of the inconsistencies between university legislation across jurisdictions, it may be at the cost of valuable alliances between State governments and their universities.

Engagement is a case in point. Engagement, in a broader sense than commercial expertise, has been a ‘blind spot’ in Nelson’s higher education reform package, largely absent or granted only lip service in Federal Government policy papers on future funding and accreditation arrangements for higher education. The Backing Australia’s Future package and its subsequent reforms do not engage with engagement beyond some minor concessions for rural and regional campuses. By contrast, the Victorian State Government has been strong in its support for university engagement activities and has recently funded the report Beyond Rhetoric: University-Community Engagement in Victoria. This is a timely document in the context of the Nelson agenda because it emphasises the educational, social and economic benefits that would be lost to the community if engaged universities were unable to continue their work under revised funding regimes. Within the context of current Australian debates around the nature of the University, Victoria University holds to the principle that the very definition of the term ‘university’ should reflect research, teaching and engagement activities (in whatever mix appropriate to the specific institution) across a range of fields. Historically, these three sets of activities have been ‘siloed’ from one another, with engagement taking the form of ‘community service’.
However, Victoria University’s sense of engagement suggests a much more integrated model, which should extend even to governance arrangements. Engagement is absent from the Federal Government’s understanding of university governance. ‘Accountability’ in the National Governance Protocols stops at financial and commercial accountability and does not extend to broader principles of public service and external engagement, not only with industry but also with communities and the professions. The implicit, and explicit, message underpinning this reform is that if, like businesses, universities are to manage multi-million dollar budgets, then they must behave like good ‘corporate citizens’. The message is not without validity - faced with a decline in overall public higher education expenditure, Australian universities are now embracing free market capitalism increasingly as they try to raise sufficient income to survive. However, the ‘corporate citizenship’ model is not enough. Public universities are not just businesses. Few businesses make the kind and level of contribution to economic, educational and community development made by the higher education sector, and few businesses are subject to comparably extensive public accountability for their performance and outcomes from two levels of government. Moreover, increasingly, the community is demanding a say in how universities operate.

Changing Public Sector: The Shift to ‘Network Governance’

The National Governance Protocols are symptomatic of the double bind in which Australian universities have been caught under the Nelson reforms – required to function in an increasingly deregulated market but at the same time being called on to respond to increasing government accountability requirements. Universities are now expected to find innovative survival strategies within a competitive, user pays market for higher education while at the same time their profiles are now being shaped to an unprecedented degree by the Federal Government.

There is, however, a competing model of the public sector offered by the Victorian State Government and building on the UK experience. This is a model driven by a deeper comprehension of the nature of social capital and community development; the emerging role of social entrepreneurs; and successful public-private partnerships with
regional communities. This model suggests that the way forward will neither be through bureaucratic control, nor a totally free market, but through ‘network governance’, that is, rethinking the public sector to focus on the citizen and the intricate set of connections that sustain a society. Blair’s “New Labour” was intended to create a vibrant, knowledge-based economy with government as an enabler, not commander, and the market used to work for community benefit (although critics argue that the reality has not lived up to the rhetoric). Popularised as the “Third Way”, the approach has been attacked by the Left for its acquiescence to the market and its feeble defence of egalitarianism.

Regardless of what one thinks of the ‘Third Way’, it is symptomatic of the loosening grip of economic rationalism over social policy in the UK. By embracing an adapted Third Way, the Victorian Government has signalled a willingness to recognise and heed the call for, amongst other things, more decentralised models of decision-making and governance based on local networks. Moran predicts a new era in public policy, based on a recognition that fundamentals such as community wellbeing and social cohesion will be delivered neither by bureaucratic control nor a free market, but rather through an approach to governance based on partnerships and shared intelligence.

Implications of Change for Higher Education

Moran’s advice to the public sector generally is particularly relevant to the engaged university:

For those of us at the delivery end…the days of simplistic solutions are over. The ‘one size fits all’ approach has given way to customised approaches better suited to the needs of particular individuals and communities. The challenge lies in the creation of workable processes and institutions that will enable this to happen. We need to tap into what already exists and transform it. (2005, p.17).

For Moran, and for the Victorian Government, this comes down to forming strong new partnerships with community groups, local government and industry.
Wider debates about the nature of the public sector have significant implications for public education, which must also start to find a ‘third way’ beyond the logic of the bureaucrat or the free marketeer by looking to work through more effective links with community and industry. This third way for universities translates into an increased community and industry involvement in the life of the university. In the US, universities are being called on to be ‘stewards of place’ and innovative arrangements are emerging as a result – for example, Alverno College is proving a national leader in engaging with industry and community right through to curricula and team assessment. Through its President’s Community Council, Alverno’s local communities have the opportunity to work with staff to enable the College to focus on issues of significance within the community. Doug Henton has described such approaches as effecting a shift from the ‘ivory tower’ silos of teaching, research and service to the ‘steward of place’ circle of learning, networks and innovation.

Conclusion: Implications for University Governance

While the governing board of a university may be likened to a corporate board of directors, below this level the similarities disappear. There is an additional layer of academic governance below the governing body, drawn from the tradition of the university as a community of self-governing scholars. The Academic Board or Senate (or equivalent body) has responsibility for academic matters such as the recommendation of course changes to the governing body. However, in spite of this reporting relationship, it is the Academic Board which is the credible authority underpinning the university’s status as a self-accrediting institution. For this reason, it wields a great deal of power within the university governance structure.

The Alverno experience suggests that for university-community engagement to be meaningful there must be an interface between the regional community around the University and the collegial community of scholars within the bounds of its campuses. Academics are quick to invoke the importance of democratic participation when it comes to debates around the relative powers of academic or collegial boards,
governing Councils and ‘management’, but it seems this has yet to extend to direct community participation in academic decision making. Yet, this may be our best hope for aligning academic strengths with external opportunities and demands and responding to the pressures of network governance. Increasingly, the community is participating in and collaborating with higher education – for instance, Victoria University has just received funding from the Collaboration and Structural Reform fund, a Federal fund that has the specific purpose of fostering such collaborations. The $299,000 Victoria University has received will in part go towards establishing a Problem Based Learning program in Engineering, which is being developed, and will be delivered, in partnership with industry.

However, while industry and the community become increasingly involved through individual collaborations, it seems unlikely they will yet be welcomed into academic boards. Nevertheless, it is clear that research, learning and teaching are being reinvented around collaborative approaches as the knowledge economy calls for more flexible forms of knowledge than those associated with the traditional disciplines. The university as a ‘community of self-governing scholars’ needs to reassert its role as a site of knowledge, but can only do so by reinventing itself. This includes reinventing the academic board to handle these trends and to move away from ‘old battles’ against managerialism, which are often a side agenda in many boards.

I am suggesting here that truly accommodating engagement within university governance arrangements will necessitate changes far more radical than those proposed by the National Governance Protocols. It must include rethinking how universities and communities relate to university governance structures, including the governing Council or Senate, the academic or collegial boards and the equivalent faculty boards. Councils require not only members with commercial or financial expertise - they also need to be more reflective of the community. Academic and faculty boards have tended to be the closed preserve of academics, with small concessions made to allow a general staff presence. The community and industry have so far been kept at bay – relegated either to low levels of representations on Councils or to ‘toothless tigers’ such as industry advisory committees, which are often
prevented structurally from adding real value. It is a view of the university that is, I would suggest, out of step with the reality of the contemporary university and its role in the global knowledge economy.

The engaged university is increasingly called upon to act as an agent, mediator and focal point for Mode 2 knowledge, that is knowledge which is problem, issue and team based; transdisciplinary; and built through networks. Such ‘applied’ knowledge can no longer be on the margins of university activity, while course delivery continues to be shaped predominantly by the personal and professional interests of academics. True community involvement in governance and academic decision-making may well be central to breaking with the paternalistic assumption that as universities, we can make decisions for the regions we serve, rather than with them.

References