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Community Engagement in a Field Still Taking Shape: Insights from Australia's Early Carnegie Applications

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Abstract

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement has become one of the most influential frameworks for recognising and advancing community engagement in higher education. While previous scholarship has examined its role in supporting institutionalisation in the United States and explored its adoption and adaptation in international contexts, less attention has been given to what institutional applications reveal about community engagement during the early stages of classification activity.

This article examines how universities represented arrangements and practices associated with institutionalisation in applications submitted during Australia's pilot and inaugural Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement cycles. It focuses on four domains: coordinating infrastructure, academic and professional staff development, community-engaged learning and institutional reflections on the application process.

Drawing on qualitative document analysis of 11 institutional applications, the study examines how participating universities represented and evidenced community engagement. The applications provide evidence of institutional self-representations rather than how deeply or durably the reported arrangements were embedded in institutional practice. The findings indicate clear institutional commitment among participating universities through dedicated infrastructure, staff development, community-connected curriculum and institutional reflection. However, considerable variation remained in organisational arrangements, staff support, definitions of community-engaged learning and approaches to assessing student outcomes. While community-connected learning

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was widely evident, there was less agreement about how community-engaged learning should be defined and distinguished from work-integrated learning. Taken together, the findings suggest that shared institutional commitment to community engagement may precede convergence in definitions, organisational arrangements and evidentiary practices.

The applications also highlight the significance of the Carnegie process itself. Participants frequently described the application process as making engagement activity more visible, improving coordination and supporting organisational learning and sense-making.

Rather than determining whether community engagement has become institutionally embedded across Australian higher education, this article provides baseline evidence of how early Carnegie participants represented institutional supports, structures and practices related to engagement during a formative period in the Australian initiative.

Keywords

Carnegie Community Engagement Classification; Community Engagement; Institutionalisation; Community-Engaged Learning; Organisational Learning; Australian Higher Education

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement (the CE Classification) has become one of the most influential frameworks for recognising and advancing community engagement in higher education (Driscoll 2014; Saltmarsh & Johnson 2020). Originally developed in the United States, the CE Classification was designed as a voluntary process of institutional self-assessment intended to strengthen the integration of community engagement across university mission, governance, curriculum, partnerships and culture. Beyond recognising existing practice, the framework has been associated with institutional reflection, organisational change and the broader institutionalisation of community engagement within participating universities.

In recent years, interest in the CE Classification has extended beyond the United States. Efforts in countries such as Ireland, Canada and Australia have explored whether a framework developed within an American higher education context can be successfully adapted to different national traditions, policy environments and understandings of university–community engagement. These developments raise important questions regarding both the transferability of Carnegie's underlying assumptions and the role that classification frameworks may play in strengthening community engagement internationally.

The experiences of Ireland and Australia are particularly important because they represent some of the earliest efforts to adapt Carnegie beyond the United States. While the Irish initiative demonstrated the feasibility of translating the framework into a new national context (McIlrath et al. 2021), Australia's progression beyond a pilot phase into an inaugural classification cycle and subsequent rounds of activity offers a rare opportunity to examine how sustained engagement with the CE Classification may contribute to institutional learning and development over time. This distinction shifts attention from the question of whether Carnegie can be adopted and adapted internationally to what may occur when participation is sustained beyond an initial exploratory phase.

In 2020, Australian universities participated in a national pilot of the CE Classification, followed by the country's first classification cycle in 2023 using a nationally contextualised application framework. While previous scholarship and practice articles have documented the process of adapting and assessing the CE Classification within Australia, including reflections on the pilot experience, reviewer learning, definitional debates and evidentiary expectations (Firth 2019; Gusheh 2020; Johnson 2019; Malone 2025), less attention has been given to the applications themselves and what they reveal about how participating institutions represented community engagement during these early cycles. The present study adds to this

foundation, examining the applications themselves to explore how participating universities represented and supported community engagement during Australia's pilot and inaugural Carnegie cycles.

This article draws on institutional applications submitted as part of those cycles and asks four questions:

1. How did participating Australian universities coordinate and support community engagement institutionally?
2. How did they build staff capability and support participation in community-engaged work?
3. How did they define, embed and assess community-engaged learning institutionally?
4. What did preparing a Carnegie application reveal about institutional engagement practices and systems?

In addressing these questions, the article examines how a small group of early Australian Carnegie participants represented institutional supports, structures, and practices related to engagement during a period that may, in hindsight, prove formative for community engagement in Australian higher education. Particular attention is given to coordinating infrastructure, staff development, curricular engagement and institutional reflections on the application process. The study does not assess whether the arrangements described were effective, deeply embedded or sustained over time, nor does it seek to provide a comprehensive account of community engagement across Australian higher education. Rather, it offers insight into how participating institutions understood and represented engagement institutionally at a time when common language, evidence systems and expectations were still evolving. The analysis further considers what these institutional self-representations may suggest about the conditions surrounding community engagement within a field that remains in formation.

Carnegie, Institutionalisation and Field Formation

CARNEGIE AND INSTITUTIONALISATION

Since its introduction in 2006, the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement has become one of the most influential frameworks for advancing community engagement within US higher education institutions. Conceived as a voluntary process of institutional self-assessment rather than a ranking system, the CE Classification was designed to recognise and strengthen institutional commitments to reciprocal partnerships, engaged teaching and learning, community-engaged research, and the public purposes of higher education.

The Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement defines community engagement as 'the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national and global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity' (University of San Diego 2026). In the Australian adaptation, this definition was retained with a slight modification referring to the 'creation and exchange' of knowledge and resources (Engagement Australia 2025). This definition has remained foundational to the CE Classification and has shaped both its assessment framework and the subsequent scholarship examining institutional engagement.

Beyond defining the process of engagement, Carnegie also articulates its purpose. 'Community engagement is described as a partnership of knowledge and resources between universities and the public and private sectors that seeks to enrich scholarship, research and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated and engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good' (University of San Diego 2026).

Importantly, this formulation positions community engagement not as an ancillary activity of the university, but as a means through which teaching, learning, research, and service are connected to broader societal purposes. It also provides a useful lens through which to interpret the Australian applications, particularly in relation to how institutions described the purposes of community-engaged learning, staff development and organisational infrastructure.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the CE Classification's role in supporting the institutionalisation of community engagement within participating universities. Early studies of Carnegie-classified institutions identified a range of characteristics commonly associated with strong institutional commitment, including leadership support, strategic integration, dedicated infrastructure, professional development, reward and recognition systems and the embedding of engagement within teaching, learning and research (Holland 2009; Welch & Saltmarsh 2013).

Importantly, the CE Classification has been generally understood as more than a recognition mechanism. Scholars have argued that it functions as a catalyst for critical self-study and organisational learning, prompting institutions to identify gaps, strengthen structures, develop evidence systems and clarify how community engagement is understood and enacted across the university (Driscoll 2014; Saltmarsh & Johnson 2020). In this sense, Carnegie has been frequently associated with processes of institutional change and the broader institutionalisation of engaged practice.

INTERNATIONALISING CARNEGIE

As interest in university–community engagement has expanded globally, increasing attention has been given to whether the CE Classification can be adapted beyond its original American context. Internationalisation raises questions not only about transferability but also about cultural translation. Concepts such as reciprocity, partnership, public purpose, civic education and community engagement may hold broad appeal, yet their practical expression is shaped by different histories, policy environments, funding structures and institutional traditions.

The Irish Carnegie experience represented one of the earliest efforts to explore this challenge. Through a collaborative community-of-practice approach, Irish universities worked collectively to examine the applicability of Carnegie concepts and documentation processes within their own context (McIlrath et al. 2021). The Irish pilot demonstrated that the CE Classification could stimulate reflection, dialogue and learning beyond the United States, while highlighting the importance of contextual adaptation rather than direct transfer.

The Australian experience shares many of these concerns regarding adaptation and translation. However, it also introduces a different dimension. While the Irish initiative demonstrated the feasibility of international adoption, Australia progressed beyond a pilot phase into an inaugural classification cycle and a subsequent round of activity. This continuity provides the potential to examine not simply the adaptation of a framework but the consequences of its sustained use within a national higher education system outside the United States.

FROM INSTITUTIONALISATION TO POSSIBLE FIELD FORMATION

Much of the existing Carnegie literature has focused on institutional-level impacts. Questions of leadership, curriculum, assessment, infrastructure and organisational change have been understandably central because the CE Classification is awarded to individual institutions. Yet internationalisation raises an additional set of questions that operate at a broader level.

Community engagement does not develop solely within individual universities. It also develops through fields of practice and scholarship that encompass institutions, professional networks, standards, shared

terminology and communities of practitioners. Emerging fields require opportunities for collective learning, mechanisms for recognition and spaces in which ideas about quality, legitimacy and effective practice can be debated and refined.

From this perspective, the significance of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement may extend beyond institutional self-assessment. The process of preparing applications, participating in professional development, engaging in sector-wide dialogue, refining definitions, discussing evidence and revising frameworks may contribute to the development of shared understandings across a national community engagement ecosystem. In other words, the CE Classification may function not only as a mechanism of institutionalisation but also as a mechanism of field formation.

This possibility is particularly relevant in Australia. While community engagement practices have existed for decades across Australian universities, the field itself remains comparatively young, with limited sector-wide standards, inconsistent terminology, and varied approaches to assessment and evidence. Australia's pilot and inaugural Carnegie applications therefore provide an opportunity to examine how institutions represent community engagement at a potentially formative moment, and what these representations reveal about the gradual emergence of a shared field.

That said, this study does not directly assess field formation, which would require systematic examination of sector-wide networks, shared standards, professional communities and collective learning. Instead, field formation is retained as a cautious interpretive proposition. The institutional applications provide evidence of conditions that may be consistent with an emerging field, including attention to shared terminology, institutional supports, evidentiary expectations and the boundaries of community-engaged practice.

Australian Context and Methodology

AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Community engagement has a long, though uneven, history within Australian higher education. Universities have engaged with communities through service-learning, work-integrated learning, widening participation initiatives, community-based research, Indigenous engagement, professional placements and a wide range of partnership activities. However, unlike some international contexts, community engagement has generally occupied a relatively marginal position within national higher education policy and has lacked the extensive infrastructure, shared frameworks and sector-wide accountability mechanisms that characterise more established fields.

Recent policy developments may signal a changing environment for community engagement in Australian higher education. Australia's National Tertiary Education Objective explicitly recognises 'the public-focused mission of higher education' and the role of tertiary education in generating knowledge and critical inquiry for the benefit of society [Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Act 2026 (Cth), s. 1.3(h)]. While the objective does not explicitly reference community engagement, its emphasis on the public-focused mission of higher education and societal benefit aligns closely with many of the aims underpinning the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement.

Against this backdrop, the introduction of the CE Classification represented a significant milestone. From 2018–2020, 10 Australian universities participated in a national pilot of the CE Classification, while additional institutions participated as observers. Following a period of adaptation, sector consultation, training and framework development, Australia conducted its first nationally contextualised classification cycle in 2023. The process involved collaboration between participating institutions, Engagement Australia, the national advisory committee and the Carnegie Foundation.

Compared with the United States, where hundreds of institutions have participated in Carnegie CE Classification cycles, Australia's university sector is comparatively small. With fewer than 50 universities nationally and participation initially concentrated among a smaller number of institutions, the Australian community engagement field remains characterised by relatively limited sector-wide infrastructure, shared standards and coordinated mechanisms for documenting engagement. These conditions make Australia a useful setting in which to examine how community engagement is articulated and institutionalised during an early phase of classification activity.

The Australian experience is also distinctive because it extends beyond a single pilot exercise. While international initiatives have often focused on testing the adaptability of the Carnegie framework, Australia progressed to a formal classification cycle and subsequent rounds of activity. This continuity provides an opportunity to examine not only how Carnegie was translated into a new context, but also how an ongoing classification process may contribute to the development of a national community engagement ecosystem.

Importantly, this study does not assume the existence of a mature Australian community engagement field. Rather, it approaches the applications as artefacts generated during a formative period in which institutions, practitioners and sector leaders were still actively negotiating definitions, expectations, evidence systems and understandings of quality.

DATA SOURCES

The study draws on documentary evidence from Australia's pilot and inaugural CE Classification cycles. The pilot dataset comprises seven institutional applications submitted as part of the Australian pilot round. The inaugural dataset comprises four institutional applications submitted as part of Australia's first nationally contextualised classification cycle. The participating institutions differ in mission, geography, size, institutional history and approaches to community engagement, although they do not constitute a sample of the Australian higher education sector. Two universities were represented in both the pilot and inaugural datasets.

The applications are particularly valuable because they constitute institutional self-representations. Recent methodological scholarship has also highlighted the potential of Carnegie Elective Classification data as a resource for community engagement research (Pearl et al. 2025). They require universities to document and explain how community engagement is understood, supported, embedded, evaluated and evidenced across the institution. As such, they provide access not only to reported activities but also to the narratives, assumptions, priorities and organisational logics through which institutions make sense of community engagement.

Although the applications were made available for research with institutional consent, institutions were not named in the findings. This decision reflects the study's focus on cross-institutional patterns rather than comparison or evaluation of individual universities. The Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (2026-3878x) granted ethical approval for this study.

The analysis also drew on relevant literature from the United States and Ireland to situate the findings within broader discussions of community engagement, institutionalisation and the internationalisation of the Carnegie framework.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

A qualitative document analysis was undertaken across both the pilot and inaugural application datasets. This was a selective analysis rather than an assessment of institutions against the complete Carnegie framework. The four domains examined were selected for two reasons. First, each was represented across both the pilot and inaugural application instruments, enabling comparison across the two

cycles. Second, they aligned with domains that featured prominently in early analyses of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement in the United States, particularly studies examining institutionalisation through coordinating infrastructure, faculty development, curricular engagement and assessment (Driscoll 2009, 2014; Holland 2009; Welch & Saltmarsh 2013). The selected domains therefore provided a means of situating the Australian experience alongside foundational Carnegie scholarship while maintaining comparability across the available datasets. The study did not seek to assess institutions against the full range of Carnegie dimensions, which also encompass mission, leadership, resourcing, recognition and reward and community partnerships.

The coding framework was organised around four domains: (1) coordinating infrastructure for community engagement; (2) academic and professional staff development; (3) curricular engagement, including the definition, identification and assessment of community-engaged learning; and (4) institutional reflections on the process of preparing the Carnegie application.

The primary units of analysis were institutional responses to application questions relating to the four selected domains, with each institutional application also treated as a case for cross-application comparison. All applications were coded by the author. An initial deductive coding framework was developed from the four selected domains and applied across all applications. Within coordinating infrastructure, coding focused on the institutional organisation and support of community engagement, including the location of leadership responsibility. For academic and professional staff development, attention was given to capability-building, professional learning, and support mechanisms. Community-engaged learning (CEL) coding focused on how CEL was defined and designated, and how its learning outcomes were assessed. Application reflections were coded for references to how applicants described visibility and coordination, together with organisational learning and reflection on future priorities.

Analytical notes and comparative matrices were used to record recurring patterns, areas of variation, cross-cycle observations, and alternative interpretations. Evidence that complicated or qualified emerging patterns was retained rather than treated as anomalous. The analysis proceeded in two stages. The first involved close reading and coding of responses within each domain. The second involved comparison across applications to identify recurring themes, areas of convergence and sources of variation. Comparisons were conducted first within each cycle and then across the pilot and inaugural datasets. Because the application instruments and participating cohorts differed, cross-cycle observations are reported as differences in institutional representations rather than evidence of longitudinal change.

Finally, reflections on the application process were analysed as a distinct area of inquiry. These responses provided insight into the Carnegie application as a form of institutional self-study, revealing how institutions mapped engagement activity, gathered evidence, clarified definitions, identified gaps and reflected on future priorities. This dimension of the analysis offered an opportunity to examine not only what institutions reported, but also what the process of documenting engagement appeared to make visible within participating universities.

The analysis does not seek to assess whether institutional claims were accurate, nor does it evaluate the quality of individual institutions' community engagement activities. Rather, the applications are treated as institutional self-representations through which universities describe, organise and evidence community engagement. The focus, therefore, is on how participating institutions represented and evidenced institutional supports, structures and practices related to community engagement, rather than on determining whether those arrangements were effective, durable or deeply embedded.

STUDY SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported institutional documentation and therefore reflects how universities chose to present their engagement activities. Second,

the pilot and inaugural applications employed different frameworks and involved different institutional cohorts, limiting the potential for direct longitudinal comparison. Finally, the application data accessed for this study provided insight into institutional representations of engagement rather than the perspectives of community partners, students or other stakeholders.

The applications analysed in this study do not represent the full Australian higher education sector. Rather, they represent a subset of institutions that elected to participate in the pilot and inaugural Carnegie cycles. As such, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of how community engagement was being articulated and organised among early participants in the Australian Carnegie initiative, rather than as a comprehensive account of community engagement across Australian higher education.

Despite these limitations, the applications offer a rich source of evidence regarding how Australian universities understood and articulated community engagement during a significant period in the development of the Australian Carnegie initiative. Taken together, they provide a valuable window into the evolving character of a field still in formation.

Institutional Arrangements for Community Engagement: Insights from Australia's Early Carnegie Participants

COORDINATING ENGAGEMENT: COMMON COMMITMENT, DIFFERENT ORGANISATIONAL MODELS

All participating universities reported some form of dedicated infrastructure to coordinate community engagement. However, the applications revealed no dominant organisational model. Institutions described specialist engagement offices, executive portfolios, distributed networks of staff and campus representatives and multi-centred structures spanning several organisational units. Community engagement was variously positioned alongside mission and identity, research, industry engagement, social justice, Indigenous engagement, regional development, advancement and equity portfolios. The applications therefore suggest broad agreement that community engagement requires formal institutional support, alongside continuing diversity in how that support was organised.

Across both cycles, central coordination was commonly combined with distributed responsibility. Rather than locating engagement within a single organisational unit, institutions commonly described central structures whose primary function was coordination. These units provided leadership, support and institutional visibility, while engagement activity remained distributed across the university. One pilot institution described community engagement as 'business as usual' that was 'not owned by any single entity within the University but spread across everything we do', while noting that a central engagement office acted as 'the thread that links the many initiatives'. Another applicant characterised its engagement portfolio as focused on 'connecting and collaborating' through service, partnerships, research and innovation, while an inaugural applicant described engagement infrastructure as supporting the 'co-production of solutions' through institution-wide governance and partnership frameworks. Together, these accounts position engagement coordination as relational and boundary-spanning work, requiring structures capable of connecting organisational units, external partners and communities.

Differences between the pilot and inaugural datasets were less evident in the reported presence of infrastructure than in how institutions represented its purpose. Within the pilot dataset, responses more often foregrounded organisational units, staffing and operational responsibilities, whereas inaugural responses more often foregrounded governance, strategic alignment, reporting and accountability. Because the application instruments and institutional cohorts differed, and only two universities appeared in both datasets, these contrasts cannot be attributed to temporal development or increasing institutional maturity.

Taken together, the applications indicate broad agreement among participating institutions about the need for dedicated coordination and institutional support. Considerable variation remained, however, in the location, purpose and configuration of that infrastructure. Shared commitment to coordination therefore appeared to precede convergence around a dominant organisational form.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT: SHARED INVESTMENT, DIVERSE APPROACHES

Across both the pilot and inaugural applications, universities reported providing support for staff involved in community engagement, highlighting professional learning as a component of their institutional approaches to community engagement. However, the nature and specificity of that support varied considerably. Some institutions described dedicated development opportunities focused on community-engaged pedagogy, partnership, research and practices. However, others drew more heavily on broader, more general, professional development, cultural capability initiatives or formal study support. The applications, then, suggest some attention to the development of engagement-related knowledge and skills, but no consensus yet on whether engaged staff require bespoke training and support.

Where development activities were described in detail, they emphasised relationship-building as much as technical capability. Partnership development, co-design, community-engaged teaching, facilitation and evaluation were commonly presented as skills required to work effectively across university and community contexts. Engagement capability was therefore represented not simply as disciplinary expertise, but as the ability to build and sustain collaborative relationships.

A notable feature across both cycles was the prominence of communities of practice, staff networks, forums and peer-learning activities. One pilot institution described communities of practice as spaces through which staff could 'exchange knowledge, address challenges and develop plans to enhance practice'. Similar approaches appeared across multiple applications, suggesting that engagement capability was often understood as something developed collaboratively rather than solely through formal training. Communities of practice, staff networks and engagement forums functioned as mechanisms through which staff shared knowledge, connected across organisational boundaries and developed common approaches to engagement. Responsibility for staff development was likewise distributed, with engagement offices, teaching and learning centres, research portfolios, Indigenous engagement units and external networks all contributing to capability-building efforts. Collectively, these responses suggest broad agreement that developing staff capability is an important institutional support for engagement, even where institutions differed in how that capability was understood and cultivated.

Differences were also evident in how staff development was represented in the two cycles. Pilot responses more often described individual initiatives or development embedded within broader programs, whereas inaugural responses more often described recurring communities of practice, specialist workshops, mentoring and strategically coordinated programs. These differences are reported as contrasts between two datasets rather than evidence of developmental progression.

Cumulatively, the applications presented professional learning as a visible component of institutional approaches to community engagement. However, considerable variation remained in how engagement capabilities were conceptualised, organised and supported. The findings suggest broad agreement that staff capability is important to community engagement, but less agreement about the specific knowledge, skills and organisational supports required to develop it.

COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING: BROAD COMMITMENT, CONTESTED BOUNDARIES

Regarding engaged learning and teaching, institutions reported a strong commitment to community-based and experiential learning. However, there was considerable variation in how community-engaged learning was defined and designated. Some applicants described community-engaged learning through concepts

closely aligned with the Carnegie definition and framework, emphasising reciprocity, mutual benefit, community partnership, critical reflection and contributions to the public good. In these applications, community-engaged learning was presented as a distinctive form of learning that connected academic study with collaborative engagement in communities and broader social purposes.

Some applications identified community-engaged learning primarily through WIL, workplace learning, placements or professional experience, while others used concepts more closely aligned with the Carnegie framework. The relationship between the two was not consistently understood, and several applicants reported that institution-wide definitions or designation processes had not yet been established.

A particularly notable source of variation concerned the relationship between community-engaged learning and work-integrated learning (WIL). Some applications understood community-engaged learning primarily through existing WIL frameworks. One pilot participant explicitly stated that it 'defines community-engaged courses as WIL (work-integrated learning)', while another noted 'considerable overlap' between community-engaged subjects and work-integrated learning subjects. In these applications, engagement was often framed through placements, internships, professional experience and workplace learning.

By contrast, other institutions defined community-engaged learning through concepts more closely aligned with the Carnegie framework, emphasising the reciprocal and public-purpose dimensions of engagement. One institution defined community engagement as activities that 'build capacity and affirm human dignity through sustainable and reciprocal collaborations with communities who experience disadvantage or marginalisation', while another described community-engaged learning as 'a collaborative process that connects the University with communities of all scales in a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge, expertise and experience in the context of partnership, trust, respect and reciprocity'.

This unstable boundary is analytically important because it reveals how Carnegie concepts were translated through established Australian educational structures. Where engagement was understood primarily through WIL, the organising emphasis tended to fall on professional preparation, practice settings and employability. Where accounts aligned more closely with the Carnegie framework, reciprocal partnerships, critical reflection and public-purpose goals were more prominent. In these applications, community-engaged learning was not only presented as a mechanism for preparing students for professional practice, but also as a means of connecting learning to broader societal challenges, community priorities, civic responsibility and contributions to the public good. The distinction was not absolute, and some applications combined both orientations.

Rather than being adopted as a fixed set of concepts, Carnegie ideas were interpreted through existing curriculum structures, particularly those associated with professional accreditation and WIL. Internationalisation therefore involved adaptation and translation as much as transfer, with institutions integrating Carnegie concepts into established educational traditions.

Variation was also evident in the institutional learning outcomes associated with community-engaged learning. Many applicants linked these experiences to graduate attributes concerned with citizenship, social responsibility, ethical practice, engagement with diverse communities and contribution to the common good. Community-engaged learning was often presented as supporting students' understanding of complex social issues, their capacity to work respectfully with diverse communities, and their development as socially responsible graduates. These contrasting emphases suggest that institutions were not only negotiating different pedagogical approaches, but also different understandings of the purposes of higher education. Some accounts positioned engagement primarily as a vehicle for professional preparation, whereas others presented it as a means through which universities contribute to civic, social and public purposes beyond workforce development.

At the same time, professional preparation remained a prominent orientation. Graduate capabilities associated with employability, workplace readiness, communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving and professional practice frequently appeared alongside civic, ethical and community-oriented outcomes. Rather than representing competing purposes, many applications presented community-engaged learning as contributing simultaneously to professional formation and broader social or community goals. However, there was no common institutional framework for determining which of these purposes should be central.

Overall, the applications revealed greater consistency in the value attributed to community-connected learning than in the definitions, designation processes or learning outcomes used to characterise it. Participating institutions shared an interest in connecting learning with communities but continued to negotiate how community-engaged learning should be distinguished from WIL and understood within Australian higher education.

APPLICATION PREPARATION: VISIBILITY, LEARNING AND SENSE-MAKING

The pilot application included an optional reflection on the application process, while the inaugural framework required institutions to describe how they developed their applications and provided a further opportunity for optional reflection. The depth of reflective material, therefore, varied across the dataset. The available reflections frequently described the Carnegie process as an opportunity to identify, document and bring together engagement activities dispersed across faculties, schools, centres and portfolios. Applicants often characterised the process as a comprehensive inventory exercise that revealed the breadth of community engagement occurring across the institution and highlighted activities that had not been previously captured through a single framework. In this sense, the process appeared to function both as a mechanism for taking stock of existing approaches and as an opportunity to increase the visibility of community engagement within participating institutions.

Applicants also commonly commented on the extensive consultation and collaboration across organisational boundaries required to prepare an application. The process frequently involved academic and professional staff, senior leaders, faculties, administrative units and community engagement practitioners working together to gather evidence, identify examples of practice and review responses. These accounts suggest that preparing an application often created opportunities for coordination around community engagement that extended beyond existing reporting or governance arrangements. Rather than simply documenting institutional activity, the process appeared to encourage internal collaboration and dialogue.

Many reflections described the application process as a form of organisational learning. Applicants reported gaining a clearer understanding of institutional strengths, identifying areas requiring further development, recognising inconsistencies in definitions or practices and highlighting gaps in evidence collection and reporting systems. The process was frequently presented as prompting reflection on both the scope of engagement activity and the institutional mechanisms used to support it. These observations suggest that participation encouraged institutions to examine their practices in a systematic and structured manner, in some cases, for the first time.

A further pattern was the extent to which institutions presented the application process as contributing to institutional sense-making. Institutions reported increased awareness of engagement activity, stronger internal conversations about engagement and greater capacity to articulate engagement within their own contexts. In several cases, the framework appeared to provide a common reference point through which previously disconnected activities could be interpreted and communicated. Across the applications, the accounts suggested a recurring sequence through which engagement became institutionally intelligible: activities were made visible through mapping and evidence gathering, connected across organisational boundaries, discussed through a shared language of engagement and incorporated into reflection about institutional priorities, responsibilities and future directions.

Inaugural reflections more often represented community engagement as an institutional responsibility and strategic priority, whereas pilot reflections more often discussed programs, activities and the work of documenting them. This contrast may reflect differences in the application instruments, institutional cohorts or the period between cycles; the data do not allow these explanations to be separated.

Overall, the reflections indicate that the Carnegie process functioned as more than a mechanism for documentation and classification. For participating institutions, preparing an application was described as part of the work through which dispersed engagement activity became visible, connected, discussable and institutionally meaningful. Although these accounts do not establish organisational transformation, they suggest that the application process created a structured occasion for institutional learning and sense-making.

CONCLUDING SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

Taken together, the applications positioned community engagement as a visible and institutionally supported area of university activity while also revealing continuing diversity in how engagement was defined, organised, assessed and interpreted. Participating institutions reported investments in coordinating infrastructure, staff development, community-connected curriculum and institutional reflection, suggesting broad agreement that community engagement warrants intentional institutional attention. Yet less consistency was evident in the organisational forms, definitions and evidentiary practices through which that commitment was enacted.

Therefore, the principal finding is that shared institutional commitment to community engagement appeared to precede convergence in definitions, organisational arrangements and evidentiary practices. Across the applications, institutions broadly agreed on the importance of engagement while continuing to negotiate how it should be organised, distinguished from adjacent practices such as WIL and evidenced institutionally.

A second pattern concerned the application process itself. Institutions frequently described a sequence through which engagement became institutionally intelligible: dispersed activity was made visible through mapping and evidence gathering, connected across organisational boundaries, discussed through a shared language of engagement and incorporated into institutional reflection and planning. These findings provide the basis for the discussion that follows.

Discussion

Across the four domains, a consistent analytical pattern emerged: institutional commitment to community engagement was more evident than convergence around its definitions, organisational forms or evidentiary practices. Table 1 summarises this relationship between emerging convergence and continuing variation and identifies the implications developed in the discussion that follows.

SHARED COMMITMENT MAY PRECEDE SHARED INSTITUTIONAL FORM

Across the four domains, the applications suggest broad agreement that community engagement warrants intentional institutional support. Participating institutions reported dedicated coordinating structures, staff development opportunities, community-connected curriculum and processes for documenting and reflecting on engagement. These arrangements correspond with indicators commonly associated with institutionalisation, including coordinating infrastructure, professional development, curriculum integration and assessment (Driscoll 2009; Holland 2009). However, the applications provide evidence of reported institutional supports rather than evidence that those supports were deeply embedded, effective or durable.

Table 1. Emerging convergence, continuing variation and analytical implications across the four domains

Domain	Emerging convergence	Continuing variation	Analytical implication
Coordinating infrastructure	Engagement was represented as requiring dedicated coordination, institutional support and boundary-spanning functions	Organisational location, governance, staffing and the balance between central and distributed responsibility	Shared commitment to coordination was evident despite the absence of convergence around a dominant organisational form
Staff development	Institutions represented capability-building, peer learning and relational skills as important supports	Specialisation, continuity, access, practical enablement and formal recognition differed	Agreement about the need for staff capability coexisted with variation in how that capability was understood and supported
Community-engaged learning	Institutions valued learning connected with communities and linked it with graduate outcomes	Definitions, designation systems, relationship with WIL, reciprocity and the balance between professional and public-purpose outcomes varied	Carnegie concepts were translated through established Australian traditions of professional preparation and experiential learning
Application preparation	Applicants described mapping, evidence gathering, consultation and identification of gaps	The depth of reflection, shared language and reported organisational response varied	The application process may support sense-making by making activity visible, connecting dispersed work and enabling institutional reflection

This broad commitment did not produce convergence around a single institutional model. Engagement was located across a range of portfolios, supported through different combinations of central coordination and distributed responsibility and accompanied by varied approaches to staff capability and curricular designation. Greater consistency was therefore evident in the importance attributed to engagement than in the organisational forms through which it was supported.

This pattern suggests that institutional support for community engagement may develop alongside, rather than after, processes of conceptual and organisational alignment. Participating institutions had invested in infrastructure, staff capability and community-connected curriculum despite continuing variation in how engagement was defined, organised and evidenced. Institutionalisation may not need to begin with standardisation. It may begin when engagement becomes sufficiently recognised to warrant organisational attention and investment, even while its meanings, boundaries and supporting systems remain unsettled. Diversity of institutional form should not automatically be read as deficiency, but it leaves unresolved how institutions and the wider sector establish consistent expectations concerning quality, reciprocity and evidence.

NEGOTIATING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING AND WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

The most consequential area of conceptual variation concerned the relationship between community-engaged learning (CEL) and work-integrated learning (WIL). Some applications described CEL through reciprocity, mutual benefit, partnership, critical reflection and public purpose, while others identified it primarily through placements, workplace learning and professional experience. These were not wholly separate orientations, and several institutions combined professional, civic and community purposes. Nevertheless, the distinction reveals how Carnegie concepts were interpreted through Australia's established traditions of professional accreditation, placement-based learning and graduate employability.

The boundary matters because definitions shape what institutions identify, support and evidence as community-engaged learning. Where CEL was identified primarily through WIL, professional preparation and student learning tended to provide the principal organising logic, while reciprocity, community benefit and public purpose were less consistently explicit. Where WIL was understood as one possible form within a broader CEL framework, these relational and societal commitments were more visible. The issue is therefore not simply whether WIL can be community-engaged, but which characteristics make a WIL experience community-engaged and which educational purposes are privileged in making that determination.

The applications suggest that the boundary is shaped not only by questions of pedagogy and partnership, but also by differing conceptions of higher education itself. Some accounts foregrounded professional preparation and employability, while others emphasised civic responsibility, community benefit and contribution to the public good. These purposes need not be mutually exclusive. The analytical distinction concerns whether professional learning is also structured around reciprocal partnership, community-defined benefit and wider public purposes.

This distinction also has institutional consequences. Without clear criteria for the relational and public-purpose dimensions of community-engaged learning, existing WIL designation systems may offer an administratively convenient proxy for CEL but may not distinguish between learning that occurs in community settings and learning developed through reciprocal community partnership for mutual and public benefit. Conversely, definitions that treat CEL too narrowly may exclude professionally oriented experiences that genuinely create mutual benefit and respond to community priorities. The Australian applications therefore expose a productive but unresolved tension between contextual adaptation and conceptual coherence.

For international adoption, this finding suggests that Carnegie concepts do not enter an empty institutional space. They are interpreted through existing curriculum structures, policy priorities and educational traditions. Adaptation may make the framework locally intelligible and operationally feasible, but it may also reconfigure which elements of community engagement receive greatest emphasis. The significance of this boundary cannot be established through institutional documentation alone. Research incorporating community-partner perspectives is needed to examine who defines the purposes of CEL, how mutual benefit is negotiated and whether public-purpose commitments are realised in practice.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS AS INSTITUTIONAL SENSE-MAKING AND ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

The application reflections suggest that one of Carnegie's most significant contributions may lie not in classification itself, but in the institutional work required to prepare an application. Organisational sense-making refers to the processes through which organisations interpret complex situations, construct shared understandings and develop frameworks for future action (Weick 1995). From this perspective, the

significance of the Carnegie process lies not only in the evidence produced, but also in the conversations required to identify, connect and interpret engagement activity.

Institutions frequently described the process as increasing the visibility of engagement activity, fostering collaboration across organisational boundaries and revealing previously disconnected initiatives. Preparing an application often required staff and institutional leaders to work collectively to document existing activity, identify gaps and develop a shared understanding of engagement. These observations align with Carnegie scholarship that characterises the CE Classification as a form of institutional self-study and organisational learning (Driscoll 2009, 2014; Saltmarsh & Johnson 2020).

Viewed as a sense-making process, these accounts suggest more than improved information collection. Mapping made dispersed activity visible; cross-institutional consultation connected work that had been previously organisationally separated; the Carnegie framework supplied a shared language through which that activity could be discussed; and the completed account provided a basis for reflection on institutional priorities and responsibilities. The application process thereby offered a structured occasion through which engagement could become institutionally intelligible, although the data cannot establish whether this translated into sustained organisational change.

The representational differences between the pilot and inaugural datasets are also consistent with this interpretation, although they cannot be treated as evidence of longitudinal change. Inaugural applications more frequently described engagement through the language of governance, accountability, strategic alignment and institutional responsibility. This contrast may reflect differences in the application instruments, institutional cohorts or the wider context in which the applications were prepared. Learning generated through the pilot, including reviewer feedback and subsequent discussions concerning definitions, evidence and institutional arrangements, offers one further possible explanation.

Viewed through a sense-making lens, the institutional accounts suggest that the Carnegie framework provided a shared reference point through which engagement became more visible, discussable and institutionally intelligible. According to applicants' accounts, preparing an application formed part of the institutional work of making connections across dispersed activity and developing a more coherent institutional account of engagement, extending the value of the process beyond external recognition alone.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONALISATION AND AN EMERGING FIELD

The relationship between the three principal findings offers a broader insight into the Australian Carnegie experience. Institutional commitment, conceptual translation and organisational sense-making developed alongside one another during Australia's early engagement with the framework. Institutions invested in supporting engagement before reaching an agreement on how it should be conceptualised or translated into institutional systems, while application preparation contributed to the language through which these questions could be discussed. The Australian experience therefore suggests that institutional recognition may precede standardisation, with the work of clarifying engagement and developing the systems needed to support and evidence it continuing alongside institutional investment.

The CEL–WIL boundary illustrates how this process is shaped by context. Carnegie concepts were interpreted through established Australian traditions of professional preparation and experiential learning, producing locally intelligible approaches but also uncertainty about reciprocity, community benefit and public purpose. Application preparation, in turn, provided a structured opportunity for these uncertainties to be surfaced and debated. Classification therefore operated not simply as an assessment of existing arrangements but, according to applicants' accounts, as part of the institutional work through which engagement was interpreted, articulated and made meaningful.

These patterns do not establish field formation. They do, however, identify conditions that may be consistent with an emerging field: shared recognition of the importance of engagement, investment in

supporting structures, debate over conceptual boundaries and the circulation of common language and evidentiary expectations. The pilot and inaugural applications consequently provide a baseline for examining whether later cycles produce deeper embedding, continuing institutional diversity or greater convergence around the purposes and practices of community engagement.

Conclusion

This study provides one of the first analyses of Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification application data and offers an early account of how participating institutions represented community engagement during the pilot and inaugural classification cycles. Across the domains examined, institutions reported a range of organisational supports associated with community engagement, including coordinating infrastructure, staff development, community-connected curriculum and institutional reflection.

The findings suggest that participating institutions broadly agreed on the importance of community engagement, yet less convergence was evident in how engagement was defined, organised and evidenced. Shared commitment therefore appeared to precede convergence in definitions, organisational arrangements and evidentiary practices. The contested boundary between community-engaged learning and work-integrated learning further suggests that Carnegie concepts were translated through established Australian traditions of professional preparation and experiential learning rather than adopted as a uniform framework.

The study also highlights the significance of the Carnegie process itself. Participating institutions described preparing an application as increasing the visibility of engagement activity, fostering coordination across organisational boundaries and supporting organisational learning and sense-making. In this respect, the value of the framework appeared to extend beyond classification outcomes alone.

Twenty years after the introduction of the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification in the United States, Australia remains at the beginning of its own Carnegie journey. The applications analysed here suggest that community engagement in Australia is not yet a settled or fully institutionalised endeavour, but one whose meanings, practices and expectations continue to be negotiated. In this sense, the significance of these applications lies not simply in what they reveal about individual institutions, but in what they reveal about a field still taking shape. Future classification cycles and complementary institutional research will enable examination of whether these early signs of commitment develop into more widely shared understandings, organisational forms and evidentiary practices. What this study provides is a benchmark against which future continuity, divergence and convergence in those developments can be understood.

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AI Use Disclosure

Microsoft Copilot was used to brainstorm possible themes, concepts and lines of inquiry relevant to the study, and to clarify background information regarding the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement and its internationalisation. All decisions regarding study design, literature selection, coding, analysis, interpretation of findings, manuscript writing and preparation for publication were undertaken by the author.

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