A report on the “Time to Talk” Engagement Event on 25th September 2019
The “Time to Talk” event took place at Heriot-Watt University’s new GRID building on Thursday 26th September 2019. It formed a part of the University’s ongoing community engagement efforts and, in particular, sought to explore what “an engaged University” might look like and to gather input into what the concept of a University as a community anchor organisation might mean in practice and how the University could move towards making such a concept a reality. It was recognised that this is not a one-way question; exploration of these issues is really all about how the University and local communities can best work together to their mutual benefit.

An initial invitation list was developed with the University which included the following categories of invitee: community (5 community councils and 2 further individuals known to have a particular interest in the community); local third sector (12 local organisations operating across a range of thematic issues); elected members (4 councillors and 2 MSPs); local government officers (11 invitees across a range of disciplines from City of Edinburgh Council and West Lothian Council); and, wider stakeholders (9 organisations including a mix of national third sector organisations and other significant organisations). Invitations were issued by email where possible (including the event flyer which is included as an appendix) and IBP’s team made telephone contact where no email address was available and also with those contacts that did not respond to the initial invitation. Invitees were also asked to “network” the invitation to colleagues and others that they considered may have an interest in the event.
There were fifteen participants on the day, drawn from across these sectors. A full list of participants is included as an appendix at the end of this document and the authors would like to express their appreciation to everyone for their active and constructive participation in the event.

This report has been produced for all of those participants and also for the local community generally, recognising that there were many people that were not able to attend the event on the day but expressed an interest in finding out about the outcomes of the discussions and more generally about the University’s future community engagement efforts.

The format of the event involved initial exploration of two key questions. Firstly, respondents were asked to describe Heriot Watt University as it is now. Then, they were asked to explore the question of “What makes a successful University?”

The remainder of the event took the form of a World Café. This is an approach to encourage reflective and creative discussion which involves participants circulating in groups across a number of separate tables, each of which is supported by a facilitator and which explores one aspect of the overall theme. The approach is designed to encourage participants to explore the common themes and linkages across these themes. In this case, participants explored how the University could develop its community engagement activities around the themes of:

- Research
- Learning
- The University’s wider assets.

A summary of the event format, the questions posed and the approach taken to analysis of these outputs is also included as an appendix at the end of the report.
As well as the facilitator’s notes, participants in the World Café are encouraged to write down their own thoughts on paper table cloths, which serve to illustrate the wider nature of the discussions. In addition, the proceedings were viewed by a specialist illustrator and the illustrations derived from this further help to articulate the key themes.

This report draws on all of the above outputs and seeks to summarise the key findings arising from the session.
HERIOT-WATT UNIVERSITY AS IT IS NOW

This theme was explored through a Post-It exercise and subsequent discussion.

People sometimes perceived of the University in terms of what they considered to be its subject specialisms (this most commonly related to science, engineering, technology and the STEM subjects as a whole, but not always - music and business were also mentioned).

It was a further reflection of these perceived subject specialisms that the University was quite commonly perceived to be an innovative one, this being reflected in the points expressed by some that it offered a modern learning environment, flexible course structures, had good links with industry and was an expanding institution. The University’s growing international presence was referenced by some participants.
The University was often conceived of in terms of its main Riccarton campus. This is not to say that people are not aware of its other physical locations in the UK and abroad and its online presence - they quite often are. However, when they think of the University their mental image is commonly of this main campus. The campus is seen as having really significant attributes in terms of its aesthetic appeal and calm, inviting, almost semi-rural environment. People also reference its outdoor sporting facilities when thinking about this. The flip side of these positive attributes is that the University is quite often seen as remote and disengaged - both physically and in terms of the depth of its connection to communities.
This reflects a wider issue of understanding of the University in the community and beyond. “Time to Talk” participants were amongst the more engaged people within local communities but even they felt that they could have a better understanding of how the University operates and what it hopes to achieve for the future; the view was that most others in the community would have less understanding and knowledge of this. The extent to which the University is known and recognised for its strengths and attributes more widely is seen as limited. One participant noted that the University was a “Pointless answer” referencing the popular game show and Heriot-Watt was not mentioned by any participants when they were given 100 seconds to name as many UK universities as they could.
WHAT MAKES FOR A SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITY?

Again, this theme was explored through a Post-It exercise and subsequent discussions.

A common theme of what makes a successful University is that it should be “forward looking”; this is articulated in a variety of different ways: “innovative”, “modern”, “progressive” “proactive”, “future-proofed”.

The theme of being “open and welcoming” was also key, this again being articulated in a variety of different ways: “inviting”, “accessible for all”, “inclusive”, “part of the community”, “outward facing”.

“Engagement with communities” was a key theme, this being seen broadly as including engagement with students, engagement with local communities and engagement with workplaces.

Specific, measurable measures of success identified in these discussions included:

- Student satisfaction
- Educational excellence
- Students moving into employment (and good quality employment specifically)
- Financial viability
- External reputation and respect.
There is, however, also a question of the “character” of the University which carries with it connotations of what makes a successful University. This may be harder to measure but, taken together, the observations made suggest that a successful University is one with a vibrant and “buzzing” atmosphere, where there is lots going on both in the academic and wider spheres, where people are sociable and welcoming and where the lines between “institution” and “wider community” are not necessarily obvious to the casual observer.
As was the case with respect to the other themes, a current lack of depth of knowledge was apparent under the theme of “research”. Local community participants felt that there was generally a significant separation between the University’s research agenda and the issues that were important to local people (or, at least, a lack of any demonstrable link between the two). This gap will take time to close.

At present, local communities have little understanding of the sorts of research that the University is undertaking. A “quick win” might be to institute a programme of communication locally about some of this research, particularly where it could be a source of interest (and even pride) within local communities.

However, it could be argued that the challenge here runs deeper in that there is only limited understanding of how the whole research system works in terms of thematic issues, funding and research capabilities. A better understanding of this whole process is needed.
A key challenge is for the University to be out in communities to **better understand the issues** that are important to them. This could apply across very many aspects of people’s lives (some of the examples noted in the discussions related to things like transport, housing, social policy issues, community cohesion, technology and other themes).

At the same time it needs to **develop relationships** within local communities to provide a meaningful basis for the development of potential research bids. A medium to long term approach is needed to this, where both University and community players put in the time to build an understanding of areas of common interest and build the trust to work together.
Such a better understanding, and enhanced relationships, would have an immediate benefit of helping researchers at the University to focus their activities but, moving forward, it was recognised that the identification of common issues and priorities, accompanied by broader and deeper relationships between the University and community players, could lead to much more of a culture of co-production of research, where University and community (including the third sector) developed and worked together on research propositions, from the very start of such projects. This could have significant mutual benefits, particularly in terms of strengthening funding applications (the increasing importance of community participation for many funders was noted).
An important issue under the “learning” theme was of Heriot-Watt not being seen as a learning provider in isolation but as part of a wider learning environment within the community; this highlighted the challenge of developing a holistic and integrated approach to learning alongside other local learning providers.

This is not just about traditional learning institutions. Knowledge and expertise reside in all sorts of places in the community and the challenge is to bring this together and to create the right environment and spaces for the sharing of this knowledge and expertise. This might involve, for example, building shared communities of interest - finding areas of commonality and shared interest within the community. This reflects the reality that local geographical communities are not homogenous entities but are comprised of various separate and sometimes interlocking communities of interest.

Nor should it be a one-way process; participants discussing the “learning” theme talked about getting community actors of all sorts into the University to share their experiences with students (one example suggested was about bringing carers in to share their real-life experiences but this principle could extend to many walks of life).

A number of themes emerged under this heading that related to overarching themes of inclusiveness and accessibility. These included:

- Recognising people’s different needs in relation to any disability they may have.
- Being mindful that people learn in different ways.
- Avoiding the unnecessary use of complex terminology or academic jargon - which sometimes serves to exclude rather than include.

There was a particular desire for the University to emphasise flexible and open approaches to learning. This would involve it questioning the way that it does things currently and considering, for example, whether it can make learning (of various sorts and at various levels) more responsive to local needs. There could be many targets for such flexible and open approaches; local trades people seeking to enhance their knowledge and careers; local businesses seeking to enhance their development; and, workplaces and other communities of interest.
There should be incentives for learning to be focused on communities; for example, students could gain additional credits by building community participation into their work.
As also identified under the other “Time to Talk” themes, the communications challenge was evident. Some participants suggested that currently there was no clear point of contact with the University and that it was hard to engage unless you were “in the know”. There was a real desire for the University to drive a process of making connections. This would involve getting into communities, building trust and breaking down the barrier of Universities being seen by some as an alien environment.

Key (related) elements of this, of particular relevance to the learning theme, would relate to building aspirations and managing transitions. Some people in local communities may see Universities (and Heriot-Watt specifically) as “ivory towers” and “not for them”; it was seen as important to be able to overcome that view. Some participants suggested that there was too clear and distinct a break between secondary school and University and that a more blended approach to such transitions would help to encourage people in the local community to be more inclined to maximise their potential, potentially at University. Interestingly, the physical links (or perceived lack of them) was seen as an issue here. The discussion on the University’s wider assets, which follows later, highlighted the importance of such physical links (including walking and cycling); under the “learning” theme the particular importance of this including such physical links between schools and the Riccarton campus was noted.
THE UNIVERSITY’S WIDER ASSETS

The scope of the University’s “wider assets” was felt to encompass both physical assets and people assets. Physical assets would include things like:

- Meeting rooms and indoor spaces, which could be of value for community use.
- Indoor and outdoor sports and activity spaces; there is a question as to the basis on which these could be accessed by local communities.
- The outdoor space of the main campus generally.

Participants highlighted the use of the campus for the Park Run as a good example of bringing the community onto campus. The attractiveness of the campus as a very attractive, reasonably accessible, semi-rural space, whose use could help to promote different aspects of health and wellbeing was noted. Participants also noted the potential of using these activities as part of Edinburgh’s Festivals as a means of opening up the campus. Unfortunately, at present, the campus can seem “closed” to many people.

Transport networks were seen as a challenge and one of the reasons for the campus being seen as more remote and inaccessible than it should be. This may, in part, be a challenge of communications (for example, about existing public transport routes) but safe cycling and walking routes, which link the campus in an open and porous way, can be seen as a key element of this “opening up”.

The University’s wider assets extend beyond these physical assets to include things like:

- Students - these are critical assets that can perform a variety of roles as mentors, ambassadors, employees and volunteers within local communities; both as individuals and through student clubs and societies.
- The research that the University conducts (as discussed previously) - this can be an asset for local community institutions and interested individuals; linking research on climate change into activities within local schools was highlighted as an example of this.
It was stressed that the University’s engagement with communities was not a one-way street. Communities also have assets, which the University can potentially draw on. Building this two-way engagement will require a proactive stance on the part of the University. A sustained commitment to this is needed. Some participants suggested that the University had sought to engage local communities previously but in a tokenistic and ineffective way; there is a perceived need for it to prove its seriousness.
Communications between the University and communities was again a key issue here although it was noted that this was about more than simple awareness raising. At present, there is little awareness or understanding of what the University’s wider assets actually are and, perhaps more importantly, very limited appreciations as to how people and groups within local communities can link into these assets - some people don’t know where to begin and some don’t even know that there is anything to begin! In terms of the specific communications channels through which such messages could be propagated, there was a recognition that multiple channels needed to be used; for example, social media (linking into existing online communities); local newspapers in some areas (which remain a very important communications mechanism within communities).

There is much that is “newsworthy” that happens within the University and sustained programme of communications through local channels such as those mentioned can not only help with sharing information about specific areas of work, or collaboration between local communities and the University, but can also amplify the over-arching message of the University being open to the community.
However, the most important dimension of communications between the University and local communities was seen to be personal contact. Outreach is important. It was felt that the University could have more of a presence in local communities through things like: attendance and stalls at local events; school visits; visits and presentations to local community groups; delivery of specific community-based outreach projects. From the community end of things, there is a desire for a clear point of contact for community connections with the University (whether relating to the “assets” question or the issues explored under the “research” and “learning” themes - there needs to be a clear route in!).

LONG TERM. THINKING ASSETS. INTERPRETATION.
HOW ARE THESE DISSEMINATED?
HOW IS THE ASSET VALUED (IN TEAMING)? SHARED (EXTERNALLY)
**KEY MESSAGES**

The commentary above has highlighted numerous and varied opportunities and challenges relating to effective engagement between Heriot-watt University and local communities across the inter-related themes of learning, research and the University’s wider assets. There are some common themes which emerge, however, which it is important to articulate.

The first of these, which is worth specifically stating, is that those people that took part in the “Time to talk” event were not only open to the idea of deepening engagement between the University and local communities but enthused by the prospect. They saw real benefits all round, where the University could be a greater asset to the local community and the local community can be a greater asset to the University. This manifests itself in many ways: the University enhancing learning experiences by integrating community participation into those experiences; the potential for co-creation of research projects; students being an asset not only to the University but to the local community; communities availing themselves of the University’s high quality indoor and outdoor spaces.

However, underpinning all of this was the key theme of openness, both from the University and from local communities.

The University’s sustained commitment to engaging with communities is crucial. There is some scepticism in local communities as to whether engagement is something that is “tokenistic” and not a genuine guiding value of the institution.
For participants in this event it was not only “Time to talk” but time to “walk the walk”!

Specific things that the University can do to achieve this include proactive and visible efforts to engage further with a variety of local players and to enhance its own understanding of those communities (and make sure this is shared within the University). At the same time it needs to not only communicate to those communities that it is “open for business” but to communicate to them what that might mean in practice and how they can engage with the University in practice.

A common theme in the discussions was that engagement is not something that the University should “do” to communities. Importantly, it should be about a sharing of ideas, experiences and capabilities between the University and communities. There is an onus on all parties to engage constructively to achieve this but that should not take away from the University’s leadership role. It is a significant, well-known institution with the credibility, presence and resources to drive forward this engagement process, helping to create the shared space that genuine community engagement implies.
Much of what has been discussed in this document is medium to long-term in nature, involving new relationships, new approaches and changes in culture and practice (amongst the University and others) there are specific projects that can start now. Some of these “quick wins” might include, for example:

- A programme of publicity locally about University research projects
- An enhanced programme of engagement with local schools
- Specific promotion of the outdoor space of the University as a resource for local community groups and organisations.

Meantime, the commentary set out above highlights various opportunities for specific projects to be taken forward, either by the University alone, or in partnership with others (an “active travel” project to open up the Riccarton campus would be a good example) and the identification of an initial “slate” of such projects, and then building the links necessary to take them forward, would be an appropriate way of building on the “Time to Talk” discussions.
**APPENDIX: EVENT FLYER**

**Time to Talk**
Building Our Engaged University

**Time to Talk** is a special stakeholder event that brings together the University’s partners in education, local government, the third sector and our local communities. It is all about making sure those with an interest in the University’s work can help set priorities for things such as University research and how we can make sure this work is shared for everyone’s benefit.

What should an engaged University look like?

Sign up online to take part at: is.gd/hwttt19

10am, Thursday 26th September, Heriot Watt University
## APPENDIX: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trevor Adams</td>
<td>Dementia Friendly Pentlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Archie Clark</td>
<td>Juniper Green &amp; Baberton Mains Community Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie Duncan</td>
<td>City of Edinburgh Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amanda Farquhar</td>
<td>Broomhouse Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neil Gardiner</td>
<td>Elected Member, City of Edinburgh Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ricky Henderson</td>
<td>Elected Member, City of Edinburgh Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gordon Lindhurst (Mr Lindhurst’s assistant also took part in the event)</td>
<td>MSP, Lothian Region</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neil Mackenzie</td>
<td>Currie Primary School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allister McKillop</td>
<td>Dementia Friendly Pentlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rob Melville</td>
<td>Currie &amp; Balerno News</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lynn Paterson</td>
<td>City of Edinburgh Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vic Stewart</td>
<td>Juniper Green &amp; Baberton Mains Community Council</td>
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<td>Hugh Thomson</td>
<td>Dementia Friendly Pentlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Susan Webber</td>
<td>Elected Member, City of Edinburgh Council</td>
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APPENDIX: EVENT FORMAT, QUESTIONS AND ANALYSIS

Overall Agenda

10am       Introductions
10.10am    Please use the yellow Post-Its provided to write down as many words or phrases you like to describe what would make for a successful University

Now, using the green Post-Its provided, please write down as many words or phrases as you can to describe Heriot-Watt University as it is now

10.25am    Key Facts about the University
10.30am    World Café table discussions (details below)
Noon       Feedback from World Café discussions
12.15pm    Round-up discussion, the University wants to be a “community anchor institution”. In the light of our discussions, what areas does it need to prioritise to be successful in this?
12.30pm    Lunch
World Café Discussions

The following questions were used as prompts for discussion at the World Café tables.

Overarching themes to consider in all groups (recognising the University's desire to be a community anchor institution)

Generation and dissemination of knowledge
Business and economy
Leisure, culture and sport
What changes are happening that will impact on communities?

Table 1: Learning

How can the University make its learning programme most accessible to people in local communities?

- Undergraduate
- Postgraduate
- Lifelong learning

What areas of learning would be of greatest value to local communities (individuals, organisations and groups)?
How can the University best communicate with local communities about this?

Table 2: Research

What potential aspects of University research would be of greatest value to local communities (individuals, organisations and groups)?
How can the University and local communities (individuals, organisations and groups) work together to identify priorities for research?
How can the University best share the content of its research programme with local communities?

Table 3: The University's wider assets

What assets does the University have that could be of potential value in working together with local communities?

- Tangible
- Intangible

How could local communities potentially benefit from these assets?

- Individuals
- Community groups

How should the University be communicating with local communities about this?
Event Outputs and Analysis

The Post-It notes on the question of “what would make for a successful University?” and the request to “describe Heriot-Watt University as it is now” were fully transcribed and reviewed to identify key themes. This, alongside scriber’s notes from the discussions on the day were used to populate this section of the report.

The outputs from each of the World Café tables included the following:

- The World Café “tablecloths” (which are included within the body of the text)
- Flipchart notes taken by Table Hosts / Facilitators at the changeover points for each session
- Further reflective notes from the Table Hosts.

In addition, scriber’s notes (along with illustrations) were taken on the day, including within the plenary discussions when participants came together to reflect on the issues emerging from their discussions.

Each of these elements has been reviewed for the production of this report.