

The geographies of universities: exploring how place matters

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1. Introduction

In the past it has often been taken for granted that while universities are located 'in' particular places or regions they are somehow not 'of' their regions, because their focus is on the delivery of education to students (who may come from anywhere), on activities of national significance or somehow not really placed at all (in blue skies research). Craig Calhoun acerbically summarises the traditional view in the following terms: 'Professors tend to think universities exist naturally, or as a gift of history, in order to employ them' (Calhoun 2006, p. 34). Academic publications have tended to focus on the internal lives of universities, on the quality of teaching or on management development. Clearly these are important concerns, but in this paper we seek to highlight the importance of understanding the geographies of higher education – the ways in which universities contribute to making up places and the extent to which places influence what is possible for universities.

In some respects, the old assumptions have been eroded by a different set of concerns. As Alan Scott and Alan Harding note: 'the combined effects of globalization, greater demand for inputs of knowledge into the productive process and the massification of the HE sector have been to sharpen the questions asked about the relevance of the services universities provide' (Scott and Harding 2007, p. 10). The OECD graphically summarises some of the pressures:

'universities are located in a global environment and face growing competitive pressure due to ranking and internationalisation. Also, universities need to diversify income sources and one of the channels is through the commercialisation of research (...) There is a growing expectation on the part of industry and business that universities will meet some of their immediate needs, and external stakeholders are increasing their voice in university activities' (OECD, 2006).

It is this that seems to open up a more regional dimension. On the basis of a review of publicly available documents produced by a range of British universities, for example, Scott and Harding note that most of them 'claim to produce eminently useful knowledge that can be utilized by a huge range of 'communities' but is especially valuable to those living, metaphorically speaking, on the university's doorstep' (Scott and Harding 2007, p. 2).

2. Policy contexts

Since the 1970s processes of globalisation have undermined economic models focused on the existence of national economic space. Instead there has been an increased recognition not only of the significance of networks that cut across national boundaries, but also of sub-national (regional or city regional) activity spaces in what have been identified as new geographies of capitalist development (see, e.g., Scott 2001, Storper 1997). And as national economies have become more regionalised, universities have been expected to play an important role in regional networking and capacity building (see, e.g., Goddard and Chatterton 2003, OECD 2007). It has even been suggested that these shifts have deepened 'the reliance of the bulk of institutions upon local and regional consumers and clients' (Scott & Harding, 2007, p. 10).

In recent years the role of universities in the development of disadvantaged regions and in the promotion of 'learning' regions has been given greater prominence in public policy documents. They are expected to help transform 'lagging' regions and help make them 'competitive', at the same time as supporting 'leading' regions in maintaining their strengths and competitive advantages. An OECD report on higher education and regions goes further in identifying multiple roles that higher education institutions might play in their regions: through knowledge creation and transfer, as well as cultural and community development, which create 'the conditions where innovation thrives' (OECD 2007).

An explicit linkage is often made between these regional economic agendas and other forms of community engagement, which have less of a direct economic impact although they may be seen as providing the necessary underpinning to the building of trust and social capital. So, for example, the OECD report goes on to argue that:

Regional development is not only about helping business thrive: wider forms of development both serve economic goals and are ends in themselves. HEIs have long seen service to the community as part of their role, yet this function is often underdeveloped.' (OECD 2007).

Since the late 1990s higher education policy in England has been framed within the broader political agenda associated with new Labour, as an emphasis on economic priorities in a globalised knowledge economy has been associated with a more explicit social agenda, with the promise of widening participation and the reduction of social exclusion through the opening up of higher education to wider sections of society. Emphasis has been placed on developing a national (and regional) skills base capable of generating and underpinning competitiveness, within the labour market, as well as driving business and technological innovation, even if this has been pursued alongside a continuing sympathy for the elite institutions, seeking to position them at higher levels in global academic hierarchies (see, e.g., DfES 2003, DIUS 2008, BIS 2009).

The policy debates have tended to move between broad concerns (posed in terms of national requirements for higher level skills, the maintenance and development of a strong research base in key areas likely to generate potential business opportunities, increasing and widening participation etc.) and more regionalised or localised ones (posed in terms of community engagement, regional competitiveness, partnerships with business etc.).

From this perspective (echoing the points made in the OECD report referred to above) the involvement of higher education institutions in local and regional development is seen to deliver on more than just narrow economic goals.

...institutions should increasingly be embedded in their regional economies (...) The nature of the role will depend upon each institution's missions and skills (...) in all cases, universities and colleges are key drivers for their regions, both economically and in terms of the social and cultural contribution they make to their communities. (DfES, 2003, p. 36).

And, although the regional emphasis may be slightly less strong, these concerns remain apparent in more recent policy documents:

Universities have a vital role in our collective life, both shaping our communities and how we engage with the rest of Europe and the wider world. They play a huge role in our communities through the provision of cultural and sporting amenities and in passing on and preserving a set of shared societal values, including tolerance, freedom of expression and civic engagement (BIS 2009a, p. 18)...

All universities are major contributors to the regions where they are located. They are large employers and the students they attract bring revenue to local businesses. Many universities also see themselves as important civic institutions in their city and region: this role is to be praised and should be enhanced. The Government welcomes the role that universities play in engaging their local business community and strengthening the quality of local civic leadership (...) Their building programmes can be integral to wider regeneration programmes. (BIS 2009a p. 19).

The increased emphasis on the social and economic 'impact' of universities as reflected in discussions about the regional role of universities, effectively involves a significant reframing of their geography, and, following a discussion of the wider historical context, it is on this that the later sections of the paper focus.

3. Longer histories

Historically there have always been links of various sorts between universities and their communities. What has changed over time is the way in which those relationships have been shaped. Many UK universities have their foundations grounded in a wider civic and social role. For example, the universities founded in the nineteenth century emerged from the demands of a rapidly industrialising society and the new social relations associated with it (see Watson, 2008, Goddard 2010). As Harold Silver has noted, the 'Histories of the nineteenth century foundations [of universities] place their beginnings in community and wider contexts' (Silver, 2007). However, since this period, the relationship between university, regional context and local community has become rather more uncertain, as institutions have come to develop their own academic identities, often locating themselves within wider national and even global academic and educational networks.

Historically, much of the literature on higher education's relationship with society concentrates on its links with industry and the economy. Indeed, during the nineteenth century shipping, cotton, wool, heavy industry and finance provided the basis for the founding of the civic universities that sprang up around the country. Thus, these universities were linked with the industries (and the associated business elites) that defined the regions and localities in which they found themselves, and this helped to mark them out in clear contrast to Oxford and Cambridge, which were connected to rather different (national) elites.

So, for example, the University of Manchester has its origins in the Manchester Mechanics' Institute (founded in 1824) and Owens College (founded in 1851). The Mechanics' Institute was founded by Manchester businessmen and industrialists, and John Owens was a textile merchant in the cotton trade. Owens College was subsequently granted a Royal Charter in 1880 becoming England's first civic university. However, having roots in the manufacturing and heavy industries of the time was not the sole preserve of the civic universities. An expanding Middlesbrough, the iron and steel-making capital of the time, had been described as an 'infant Hercules' by the Prime Minister William

Gladstone on a visit in the 1862. But the town and its region had to wait until 1930 when Constantine College was founded by a local shipping magnate, Joseph Constantine, with the aim of meeting the needs of the local industry. The college was one of the first institutions to become a polytechnic in 1969 and then a university in the 1990s (Fraser, 1999). Similar histories underpin the foundations of other universities in the towns associated with the growing industrialisation and financial wealth of the country (eg Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield), as Stewart (1989) states

In all cases civic pride and business affluence in shipping, cotton, wool, heavy industry and finance had provided the base for a university named after each city (p 13).

Traditionally some universities have taken on an identifiable 'civic' role particularly in major cities outside London where the university has been seen as a key institution – acting as a 'symbol of continuity and influence' and in 'disseminating culture' (Hardy, 1996, p 12). However, while memberships of governing bodies and statutory agencies, and various partnership opportunities tend to be 'normal business' for many universities, as Mohan (1996) notes, such 'community links can easily reduce to symbolic gestures and talking shops which salve more consciences than they solve social problems' (p 102). More recently John Goddard has revisited the notion of the 'civic university' to set out an agenda in which such institutions 'should be strongly connected to people and place. They should be committed to generating prosperity and well-being and balancing economic and cultural values' (Goddard 2010, p. 6).

4. Practising regionalism

If the regional role of universities has been given an increased salience in the language of global and national public policy, it has also been celebrated by the universities themselves in a series of publication produced both by collective agencies (see, e.g., Universities UK 2000) and by individual universities (as case

studies are reported and 'best practice' shared). But the nature of the regional role in practice is rather more elusive, and it is to this that we now turn, with the help of evidence drawn from the ESRC funded HEART (Higher Education and Regional Social Transformation) project.

The project asks what the role of universities may be in helping to shape and redefine the economic and social experience of the regions in which they are located, and particularly sets out to consider their engagement with forms of social disadvantage in their surrounding regions. The project is structured around four case study institutions and their regions. The universities are located in three different urban regions in England and one in Scotland, and cover a range of types, ranging from the elite end to the more vocationally based. In other words, we have been able to consider both how the different missions of particular universities may affect their regional engagement and how differences in regional context may shape what is possible. Interviews have been conducted with key players in the universities and with a range of stakeholders, including community based interests, local government, schools and other public agencies and business, as well as other locally based universities.

Rather than drawing on economic perspectives (which have been the focus of much existing research) (including much of the work being undertaken by other teams in the IMPACT initiative of which our project is just one part), the project has a socio-cultural starting point, although it is evident that the social, cultural and economic are closely interconnected in practice.

Universities influence what is possible within their regions and vice versa. Social mobility opportunities will be affected by economic developments, which may also help define the 'aspirations' of young people locally because of the opportunities available, But economic developments will in turn also be affected by 'aspirations', 'confidence' and 'identity'. So, for example, it is impossible to ignore the complex dance of 'image and cultural attractiveness' – for both a region and the universities that occupy its space. Universities draw on the images of the area in which they are located in the promotional process

and the opportunities that they have are shaped, at least in part, by that location; while the (city)regions in which they are based usually attempt to use higher education as a means of defining/redefining themselves in different ways.

Compared to most other institutions which serve wider national and even global markets, universities are 'rooted' in place and necessarily have a relationship with their regions (city, city-region, sub-region, government region). Although there are examples of institutions with distributed campuses (for example to enter new educational markets, often overseas) and still more examples where campuses inherited through merger have been closed and rationalised (in several of our cases with the help of state funding channelled through regional agencies), it is rare (even if not entirely unknown) for them to relocate across any significant distance. Despite their wider ambitions (relating to research and teaching), which in principle appear to have little relationship to place, they are effectively, to use the term introduced by Kevin Cox (Cox and Mair 1989), locally dependent.

Despite the rhetoric to be found in many university mission statements, which often seem to imply that universities have some sort of disinterested commitment to regional and community development, in practice the driving force of university business strategies is generally much more instrumental. This is not to dismiss the significance of university statements and the well-meaning phrases contained in them, merely to confirm that universities (like other businesses) are above all committed to finding ways of ensuring their own survival and reproduction. The drivers that determine university strategy relate to the search for ways of generating income, whether from students, alumni, state bodies, charitable trusts and foundations or elsewhere. Some (a very small number of) institutions do, of course, have other significant income streams (from property or investment activity) but that does not seem to have exempted them from the drive to find new ways of generating income from their teaching activities (see, e.g., Chris Patten, Chancellor of the University of

Oxford, in his active campaigning to be permitted to levy higher fees on undergraduate students).

However, this does not mean that universities are somehow detached from the regions in which they are located. On the contrary, it was clear in all the cases we considered that there was a close and continuing set of relationships. In part these relationships can be seen as a direct expression of the business priorities of the universities: local and regional agencies may be sources of funding or, equally important, regulators whose decisions can open up or restrict opportunities for them. So for example, in three of the cases universities drew directly on financial support from regional and local agencies (regional development agencies and more localised development agencies) to develop new campuses, launch new areas of curriculum and research development, or support mergers. In all of them, to a lesser or greater extent, major property development initiatives relied on planning permission and, in at least three of the cases, the commitment of local agencies to the university's plans, as part of a wider strategic programme. In other words one strong driver of university involvement in broader regional issues is that they can get something out of it.

But this is to underplay the nature of the entanglements between universities and their regions - to fail to understand what it means to see universities as placed; that is making up the places within which they are located as well as finding themselves defined by them. This finds one expression in the ways in which universities more or less effectively play the regional game. In formal terms they are all involved in various networks (for example, through regional development agencies in England or through a range of regional representative bodies), and these bodies are often important sources of income in one way or another (particularly in support of particular projects or capital schemes). However, it is clear that universities rarely identify themselves with the broader government regions. Their relationship is almost entirely instrumental and formal. This does not mean that such relationships are irrelevant: on the

contrary they can generate and support major initiatives. But in the interviews we conducted, there was a clear distinction between the requirements of regional politics, relating to regional institutions and networks, that is those associated with the formal structures of government administrative regions, and the day to day relationships of place – that is the taken for granted daily or weekly sets of interactions with communities, street level bureaucrats (concerned with planning) and local elites. Within the wider regional networks universities position themselves to achieve particular ends, to perform a ‘citizenship’ role that was expected of them as regional players, and to avoid being bypassed by some initiative or other. Their closer identification (represented in promotional materials as well a direct impacts of one sort or another) is more likely to be with city regions or even more narrowly drawn urban spaces – in one case (in London) a part of the city, in another a dispersed urban area made up of a network of smaller cities, in two more explicitly the city in which they were located.

The sets of relationships involved at this level are more elusive, in the sense that they are often informal, yet also more intensive. Universities have significant impact as businesses in their own right. They are major employers. They are businesses with their own property strategies, and the presence and spending power of students and staff bring activity to a local economy. Other unintended impacts such as studentification (the transformation of whole areas into student dormitories), car parking congestion and so on are equally significant, and call forth community campaigns, local government action and university responses.

Image and cultural attractiveness is a common discourse running through the case studies. It is significant for both a university and a region and each is mutually reinforcing in that the cultural attractiveness of region/university will influence inward investment and mobility. Universities can be symbols as well as drivers of cultural change through their knowledge transfer/exchange activities, property strategies, involvement in cultural ventures, the presence of

students and staff, and involvement in wider cultural regeneration, innovation and attitudinal change.

What is also striking is the extent to which there often seems to be a congruence between the claimed interests of places, as expressed through councils etc. and those of the universities – in almost a parallel set of strategies. So, in one case, there was a shared drive towards ‘world’ or ‘global’ status – within a strategic framework which sought to make a world class university in a world city; in another the drive towards new digital industry was associated with the ambition to develop a new digital curriculum (each rebranding the other); in a third it was the contribution of the university to developing a cultural centre that was both seen to be transforming the city and transforming the image of the university; in a fourth the university was deeply embedded in strategies aimed at transforming a declining area through forms of iconic development. The ‘region’ is not only the area within which they find themselves, but also the place which they help to shape and by which they are in turn shaped.

5. Moving beyond ‘engagement’

In other words, it becomes necessary to move beyond the debate which poses the question of the extent to which universities are ‘in’ rather than ‘of’ the region, because they are necessarily both. However much they might wish to present themselves as somehow disengaged (and today, of course, no university would actively seek to do that) they cannot be – in a sense, they are always necessarily embedded. The notion of ‘engagement’ as currently expressed in public policy relating to universities (for example in the Beacons initiative or the ESRC’s new obsession with ‘impact’) continues to assume a clear distinction between university and public or community, assuming that one discrete and bounded entity must find ways of engaging with another. Matters are more complicated in practice, because there is always some form of engagement, interaction and connection. But this does not mean that the

relationship is always the same, nor does it mean that it is always positive. This is apparent across several dimensions.

First, it is clear that the *nature of the 'region'* with which universities engage varies significantly with the activities on which they are focused and the nature of the institution. This is apparent in a number of ways. In English regions outside London there is usually formal engagement with regional development agencies on a range of issues, but the identification with the official region in other ways is less significant – where the regional development agency is a source of potential funding, then universities focus their attention on it, but otherwise this wider region is not generally significant. Despite involvement in formal regional structures (regional committees etc.), in practice the focus is much more directly on the city region, and often a more narrowly defined version of the city - the area most directly affected by a wide range of university decisions. This seems to be the case in both England and Scotland. In London, of course, matters are more complicated because of the wide range of institutions and complex governance structures within the city, but here too emphasis is placed on a part of the city (or on a slice of the urban region) rather than the whole metropolitan region.

Second, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that the *institutional missions* of the various universities have a substantial impact on the way in which they see themselves influencing and shaping their regions. There are clear differences between the universities on which we focused. Some of them explicitly define themselves as serving their region, in terms of student recruitment, delivering new industrial opportunities, up-grading workforce skills to fit regional needs and so on. Others present themselves more directly as positioning at elite level nationally and possibly even globally. One of our case study institutions (a major Russell group university) is identified by stakeholders, and identifies itself, as having the task of bringing the world into the city region (a world class university in a world class city region) and also has a major direct contribution to make to the development of the city through major collaborative development of property with other local HEIs. Another stresses its contribution in building

internationally significant digital media facilities locally, but the scale is very different and it is another university with a stake in that region which makes the claim to 'draw in the world'.

One of the emphases in national policy documents is on the role of universities in up-skilling and re-skilling local workforces, but regionally it is especially in the public sector (e.g., health, local government) and in the professions (law, accountancy etc.) that such direct impact takes place. Despite the rhetoric, it is less clear that the impact is quite so strong in areas of the new economy, or in highly professionalised or skilled areas, where employers are more likely to draw on a national pool (e.g. in one case from universities across the North of England rather than sub-regionally). The differences are significant, but can be exaggerated – those with global and national ambitions also draw extensively on a regional pool, even if also from a wider one. And they also supply labour to the local and regional economy. In one of our cases this was particularly apparent – despite the claims (following the expectation that 'new' universities have more of a regional focus) of one institution to be the locally rooted one, in practice the other (supposedly more nationally and internationally focused institution) whose alumni were to be found in a wide range of positions within local public sector and government agencies. Similarly, although in another a claim was made that it was the new university that supplied the basic labour in terms of white collar professionals, actually a more complex situation was apparent as students from one institution moved to the other for the final professional aspects of training. In other words, in this context, it may be important to think about universities not simply as individual and discrete entities, but as operating as a system, in which there are implicit as well as explicit divisions of labour at regional/urban level.

Third, in terms of *community engagement and widening participation* the approaches are also very different. For three of the case study universities community engagement and widening participation go hand in hand – the one is intended to lead to the other at least in the longer term, and widening participation is seen as a significant source of students. For the other

institution, the main source of students is more traditional, with specific targeting intended to bring in a small number of highly qualified students from lower socio economic groups. All of the universities are, however, developing other forms of community engagement, too, less directly focused on student recruitment and more on the wider social contribution that can be made through volunteering and in other ways. So, for example, it was suggested in several cases that even if collaboration with a particular school might not directly increase participation in HE, it might raise the ‘aspirations’ of children in other ways that help them to recognise the value of education and skills development. In this context it may also be important to acknowledge the dominance of an ‘aspirations’ discourse, although some of those we interviewed emphasised that there was little point in raising ‘aspirations’ if there were no appropriate local employment opportunities (stressing structural rather than ‘cultural’ obstacles).

Fourth, if institutional mission is significant, however, it is also important to acknowledge the *wider (including historical) context* in terms of shaping what is possible and how that influences strategy and practice. Institutional missions are themselves the product of what is possible, so that those institutions which place a greater emphasis on skills development both for regional populations and in response to perceived (regional) employer demand are also those for whom the recruitment of local students is the norm. Universities are all embedded in their regions in particular ways, with long histories that underpin the relationships between regional and local stakeholders and this is reflected in the strategies they adopt and the ways in which they interact with local communities.

5. Conclusions

Too often a simple distinction is made between those (generally less prestigious) institutions that are expected to play a regional role and those (generally more prestigious) whose role is seen as national or even global. But place matters, not just for those universities that are more or less explicitly allocated regional roles, but also for those that seek to play a more explicitly

global or national role. The specific details will vary from place to place but if the social role of universities is to be adequately understood (and not merely in terms of the rhetoric handed down by government, funding councils, their own representative bodies and communications departments) then it is always necessary to explore the complex relationships between place and institution, as each helps to shape and define the other.

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