

The relationships between universities and their regions in alleviating social disadvantage in the UK

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The importance of universities in regional contexts

Universities are central to modern society. They are 'crucial national assets', being sources of new knowledge and innovative thinking, providers of skilled personnel and credible credentials, contributors to innovation, attractors of international (and national) talent and business investment into a region, agents of social justice and mobility, and contributors to social and cultural vitality (Boulton and Lucas, 2008).

In the context of the globalised knowledge economy, they are also increasingly vital in driving local and regional economic growth and social cohesion. As Brennan et al (2006) argue

...universities lie at the intersection of the global and the local. With the creation and transmission of universalistic knowledge as their central functions, they hold the potential for interchange between localised concerns and aspirations of the communities in which they are situated – and of the sub-groups within them – and the networks and drivers of the 'global knowledge economy'.

However, it should be noted that many universities in the UK (and elsewhere) have their foundations grounded in a wider civic and social role, although until the late 20th century the relationship between universities and their communities was more uncertain as many had developed their own identities - often located in the national and global academic networks. It is only within the last couple of decades that the local and regional roles of universities have been recognised for their social and economic impacts, and given greater emphasis in policy documents and directions.

This increased focus on and interest in the relevance of universities' regional roles has emerged with the growth of regionalism, the increased emphasis on global competitiveness, and further reinforced as a result of the moves towards mass in higher education. Thus, universities are seen to be important for their local and regional economies and societies because they are:

- central to building competitiveness by creating new knowledge and transferring and exchanging existing knowledge (through education, consultancy and other external links);
- contributors to transforming local populations (through the skilling and re-skilling of the workforce);
- significant drivers of economic development (as employers/businesses, and as producers of people with skills);
- sources of initiatives to challenge social disadvantage;
- powerful agents of cultural change (culminating from the effects of the above).

These factors, it is argued, all contribute to advancing social mobility (see, for example Calhoun, 2007 and Scott, 2009).

Perhaps we should not be surprised about the relationships between universities and their regions. Universities are relatively fixed in place. This means that they will always have a relationship with their region, although the nature and focus of that relationship will vary depending on the drivers. However, universities are different

and regions are different. Universities offer different things to their regions depending on their longer histories, the balance between their teaching and research functions, and the nature of their student bodies (who they are, where they have come from and why they are there). Regions are different and they provide very different environments for universities through the strengths and weaknesses of their boundaries and identities, their economic make-up, the social and ethnic mix of the population, mobility in and out, geography and communications, and the overall feel and image of a place. Thus, regions influence what is possible within their universities and vice versa.

In the UK, many universities have become increasingly embedded in their regions. Many are recruiters of local students and producers of local graduates and a skilled workforce. Universities are major employers with a significant impact on local employment opportunities. They are also managers of large estates and contributors to property developments, which sometimes have unintended and negative consequences. Many universities also play the role as 'honest broker' through their partnerships with local and regional development agencies, which often provide development and other funding opportunities. Policy developments and incentives have also made significant contributions to the regional focus of universities, through, for example, widening participation activities, business and community engagement, and the formalisation of networks of universities and other education providers. These have provided opportunities for universities but also challenges. These are explored below in more detail in the context of recent research into universities' roles in helping to alleviate social disadvantage.

The HEART¹ project

The project upon which this paper is based 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 universities and their regions, which are located in three different urban regions in England and one in Scotland, and cover a range of types, from the elite to the more vocationally based. This mix has helped us 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, public agencies (local government, regional development, health), business and industry representatives, education providers (schools, colleges) as well as other locally based universities. These have focused on the rhetorics, activities and impacts (indirect, unintended) of university-community relationships.

Rather than drawing on economic perspectives (which have been the focus of much existing and continuing research), the project has a socio-cultural focus. However, it is evident that the social, cultural and economic are closely interconnected in

¹ Higher Education and Regional Transformation: social and cultural perspectives – a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of a larger joint initiative on the 'Impact of higher education institutions on regional economies'.

practice. As already noted above, universities influence what is possible within their regions and vice versa. For example, aspirations, opportunities and social mobility will be affected by economic developments, and similarly economic developments will be affected by aspirations, confidence and identity.

Social disadvantage: universities and their regions

It is worth noting at this point that some commentators argue that the re-emergence of interest in university and local/regional links the UK has been driven by changes to the higher education system (expansion, competition for research funds) rather than 'adverse socio-economic conditions' (Mohan, 1996). Scott and Harding (2007, p9) reinforce this point by noting that the increase in the numbers of school leavers and adults in the workforce taking advantage of higher education, while not being driven by local and regional needs and demands, has however had the effect of providing 'greater incentives for interaction between universities and the local and regional consumers of their services'.

Nonetheless, where social disadvantage exists, regions, city-regions and local authorities are required by government policy to produce strategies for tackling inequality and deprivation. The current policy approach is to place skills development at the centre of these strategies to increase economic competitiveness and combat inequality and deprivation, and universities and other education providers are important partners in this process.

It is debateable the extent to which universities can ameliorate social disadvantage within their regions (see, for example, Williams, 2009). What is clear is that in partnership with other organisations universities can play an important role. However, the extent to which this role has an impact is a difficult question to address. Timescales can be very long (e.g. establishing relationships and partnerships necessary for impact). Impact can be indirect, unintended and sometimes negative; and how can these things be evaluated? However, through the data that have been gathered and the views of the people interviewed, the project has identified the functions universities perform that help alleviate social disadvantage. They include:

- raising and changing aspirations and attainment levels;
- creating new opportunities and routes to access existing HE provision;
- creating new provision to meet different needs and aspirations (of students, employers);
- increasing local employment and consumption levels;
- contributing to regional economic regeneration;
- raising awareness of and confidence in a region.

In the discussion below, we build on these functions by highlighting three themes that run through our case study universities and regions, and explore the ways in which these universities (along with other organisations) are shaping relationships with socially disadvantaged groups.

Widening participation

The notion of widening participation is important because of the way in which it brings together concerns of social equity with concerns to transform the labour force. In the former new opportunities are created for those previously excluded from higher education) by helping to raise aspirations especially among young people. In the latter universities are helping to produce a labour force more appropriate for the global market place and the emergent knowledge economy in particular by providing opportunities for local people to acquire (renew) knowledge, skills and qualifications, especially in public sector organisations. However, recruitment policies and reputational status within the higher education market will be a key determining factor of the extent to which a university will be engaged in activities to support the *local* community and economy.

Not surprisingly, widening participation is a major theme for all our case study universities. For three of our case studies, widening participation activities are part of the core business of these universities, being bound up in their longer histories and an important source of students. For the other university, the main source of students is more national and international. It badges itself as 'world class' but also acknowledges its roots as a civic university and recognises that it has a moral and social responsibility towards the local community. While its widening participation activities are, therefore, aimed at local level targeting intended to bring in a small number of highly qualified students from lower socio-economic groups, they are also aimed at inspiring children about higher education across the city-region, rather than recruiting students to the university.

The universities in our research are realistic about who can be reached and who cannot. In all of our cases, there were examples cited of communities who place little value on education and higher education was not part of their culture. The views expressed about higher education were that 'it is not for the likes of us' and young people's aspirations were to get a job rather than to go to university. Thus, even though the joint efforts of universities, colleges and schools might be successful in improving attainment levels, it does not guarantee that young people with good grades will want to enter a university environment. Nonetheless, while many people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds may hold the view that 'university is not for us', there is a recognition that the presence of a university is of importance to the locality through the benefits it can bring to the local culture and economy.

The research also highlighted that socially disadvantaged groups tend not to be very mobile and so universities recognise that they need to 'come to them'. This means reassessing the ways in which universities interact with their communities and prospective learners from socially disadvantaged groups. In one case study, poor public transport and low levels of car ownership mean that communities are very rooted in their local communities. Thus, relationships with schools, further education colleges and community organisations are pivotal to the university's widening participation strategy. To extend higher education opportunities to these communities, rather than expect potential students to travel to the university, satellite centres have been established in all the further education colleges in the sub-region.

Community and civic engagement

For all the case study universities community engagement and widening participation go hand in hand. For three case study universities the one is intended to lead to the other at least in the longer term and widening participation, as mentioned above, is seen as a significant source of students. All the universities are, however, beginning to develop other forms of community engagement, which is less directly focused on student recruitment and more on the wider social contribution that can be made. Thus, it was suggested in several cases that even if collaboration with a particular school might not directly increase participation in higher education, it might raise the aspirations of children and their families in other ways that help them to recognise the value of education and skills development.

The other forms of community engagement identified include volunteering by both staff and students. Staff are involved, for example, in local action groups and committees, and as school and college governors. Students take part in volunteering programmes, which link up with local groups and many of these programmes are credit-rated. Universities open up their facilities to community groups (often for free) for community-based activities. Universities also engage with communities through their links with museums, art galleries, music venues and theatres, and their sponsorship of festivals and so on. Other links will also be formed by bridging the gap between academic research and community practice; for example, one case study university has established a joint post with the local hospital and is involved in working with the local community on health-related issues. Another is working with its local authority and using its research capacity to bring an objective perspective on local regeneration and employment issues.

Universities also recognise the need to be a 'good neighbour' to their local communities and ameliorate the potentially negative effects of their presence (e.g. through concentrations of large student numbers and car parking problems around the local streets).

Community engagement, however, is not generally seen to be one of the core businesses of universities and there may be tensions with other university functions. One of our case study universities is attempting to address this tension by recognising and rewarding academic and social enterprise activities in the local community. However, it is also aware that to promote itself (and the region) in terms of excellence, attractiveness and status, it needs to develop niche areas and widen its geographic footprint. So even here, the need to maintain a balance between community engagement activities and its core business is crucial.

As well as engaging with communities, universities will also be engaged in formal and strategic partnerships involving local and regional organisations. An OECD (2007) report identifies three principal areas where these partnerships can be successful: in matching supply and demand in the local labour force; promoting local economic development; and contributing to regional systems of governance. Such relationships often produce important opportunities for universities through new campus developments and the development of new curricula, especially in niche areas (e.g. the digital industry, computer animation).

The importance of universities as actors in local and regional economies and their governance is recognised by the external stakeholders interviewed in our research. The case study universities also acknowledge the importance of this role. This is exemplified by one university that has rewritten its academic strategy so that it is consistent with the broader regional strategy; academic clusters have been organised to reflect the sectors of regional importance. In another university, secondments and placements have been secured in key regional organisations to cement the relationships and to help leverage funding opportunities.

Image and culture attractiveness

Our third theme of image and cultural attractiveness is one that is of great importance to both a university and its region. Research by the Work Foundation (Williams et al, 2008) has identified education institutions as one of the key drivers of 'place-shaping' and physical change in a city (e.g. through the presence of old and new buildings, numbers of students and growing demand for research and ideas), notwithstanding the sometimes negative effects that are produced, as noted above. It should also be noted that the cultural attractiveness of a city or a region will influence inward investment and mobility from new businesses and potential students and graduates. It will also help shape national and international perceptions of both the region and the universities occupying its space.

Our case studies have highlighted that universities themselves are symbols and drivers of cultural change through, for example, their knowledge transfer and exchange activities, property strategies and cultural ventures. Universities are also major employers and businesses in their right, and students and staff are potential sources of spending power, which will be of benefits to a local economy. As one of our cases study universities demonstrates, its broader mission is to become a world class university, which coincides with the city's aspiration to be a world city. The development strategy of the university and others in the vicinity is receiving large scale investment and having a significant effect at local level. This development aligns with the city's own plans for transformation as it moves away from traditional manufacturing industries. The downside to these developments is the negative impacts that are created from such developments and which the university, local authorities and communities are attempting to counter by working together.

Another case study university is fundamentally a regional university and the only one in the sub-region. Its students are largely drawn from the region, the focus of its wider activities is also local/regional, and it makes little claim to national or international excellence, except in a few niche areas. The university has had a significant direct impact in the city both physically, as the university has expanded and economically, as much of the retail and restaurant development draws on the university's proximity for business. These factors affect the ways in which it is engaged with economic development and regeneration, which are shaped by the broader local and regional plans and strategies developed by public agencies and partnership bodies to improve the area and look for ways of developing a new economic base. As such, regional and local agencies are important sources of finance for the university, particularly in terms of research and workforce development.

While there are important similarities between the two cases, the direct impact of students in the latter case, however, is substantially less because a far lower proportion of its student body is full-time and a high proportion is local.

Some conclusions

Much of what universities do is driven by national policy. However, responses to policy directions will tend to be determined by a combination of factors, including mission (driven by longer histories), reputational status, and funding incentives and opportunities. Community engagement competes with other more dominant university functions that command greater rewards (especially research) and, thus, universities will vary in the extent to which they engage in community activities.

Nonetheless, our research shows that universities, by engaging in community activities, can impact on social disadvantaged communities - often indirectly - as the table below demonstrates.

University impacts on socially disadvantaged groups		
	Positive	Negative
Monetary aspects	<p>Availability of university jobs</p> <p>Purchasing power of students and staff</p> <p>New facilities and cultural presence leading to an improved image of the region and inward investment</p>	<p>Increased competition for rented accommodation, car parking space, and part-time jobs</p>
Knowledge aspects	<p>Opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills, qualifications (leading to improved employment prospects)</p> <p>Upskilling of public sector workers (leading to improved community services)</p> <p>Use of university research and other knowledge transfer activities (to benefit local groups)</p> <p>Partnerships with schools and colleges (leading to improved attainment and aspirations)</p>	<p>Potential local students may be excluded from elite universities that require high entry grades</p> <p>A reputational hierarchy of universities in the higher education market will reproduce and legitimise existing social class divisions</p> <p>Those most excluded will not be reached because of poor/no attainment levels and/or low aspirations and values</p>
<p>(Note: impact will be dependent upon contextual features; for example the extent to which a university's student body is drawn from the local region or nationally and internationally.)</p>		

It also highlights the negative aspects of universities' impacts, including the impacts on those members of communities that do not participate in the above (which just helps to reinforce social inequalities) and competition for scarce resources. And,

indeed, as Williams (2009) notes 'the expansion of higher education has not increased social mobility. Instead it has cemented the domination of the middle classes' (p 640).

Undoubtedly, universities can bring advantages to many within their sub-regions by their contribution to regional economic development and by increasing local employment and consumption levels. However, through these impacts, universities may be changing who the 'winners' and 'losers' but without necessarily impacting on overall levels of inequality and relative disadvantage. In some cases they will be reinforced, especially where more than one university occupies the higher education market. This raises important questions, especially for government policy on social cohesion.

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