

Impact of
Higher Education Institutions
on **Regional Economies**
A Joint Research Initiative



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This research brief series is intended to provide overviews of different strands of research associated with the Impact of Higher Education Institutions on Regional Economies research initiative.

The initiative is a major research venture jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) together with the four UK Higher Education Funding Bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The initiative involves researchers from across the UK and is coordinated by the University of Strathclyde.

The initiative, which began in 2007, aims to promote better understanding of the key economic and social impacts generated by higher education institutions in the UK. There are nine projects, involving academics from across the UK, examining issues of:

- higher education institutions and regional competitiveness
- influence of students and graduates on regions
- knowledge exchange between University and Industry
- universities and community engagement

For further information about the initiative and related research, please see:
<http://www.impact-hei.ac.uk>

R E S E A R C H B R I E F S E R I E S

No. 7

Can universities help integrate
excluded communities into the new
knowledge economy?

N O V E M B E R 2 0 1 0

Can universities help integrate excluded communities into the new knowledge economy?

Universities have always had a social mission. But there is a tension between universities' pursuit of excellence and their desire for relevance within the local community. Today, as universities increasingly position themselves globally and compete for talented students and staff, some see their engagement with the community as conflicting with the pursuit of excellence. At the same time, however, there is a growing interest in universities' potential to make societal contributions – and not as only spin-off events from their core missions of teaching and research. Now, there is discussion of universities' role in helping shape the institutions, networks and systems that determine the effectiveness of societal and economic governance.

This research looks at the changing opportunities for engagement with excluded communities. It suggests that the new paradigm for systemic benefit means that universities, rather than just providing services, might be able play a role in addressing the governance of particular excluded communities. To explore whether this is possible, the study considers the barriers faced in engagement, how they might be overcome and what kinds of engagement could provide a solid footing for sustainable university-community engagement.

Key Findings

Universities see engagement as less important than teaching, research and commercialisation

Universities:

- Often prioritise engagement activities that produce immediate financial returns rather than longer-term social benefits.
- May not have the capacity to engage with excluded communities.
- Find easier ways of demonstrating community service, such as recruitment from poor communities.
- Cannot easily fit community engagement into business planning processes and, therefore, cannot be held to account for their lack of community engagement.

Excluded communities must overcome several barriers to engage with universities

Excluded communities are often:

- Insular, separated from external actors and lack of exposure to incoming influences and investments.
- Internally fragmented and incoherent, which prevents collective mobilisation that could take advantage of emerging opportunities.
- Inadequately prepared for the realities of dealing with universities. For example, they may find it hard to produce proposals that would interest a university.

- Inadequately prepared at the individual level: individuals may lack the skills, opportunities and social capital necessary to engage with universities.

Excluded communities must overcome several barriers to engage with universities

Engagement could help them:

- Change their systematic organisation.
- Improve their structural situations.
- Develop the social capital necessary to improve their wellbeing in the contemporary political economy.
- Develop the socialised community learning that could help integrate them more fully in the knowledge economy.

Universities can derive a range of positive outcomes from engaging with communities

- There will be flows of resources established between universities and the communities via the engagement, creating unique shared knowledge assets that will help the universities deliver their own core missions.
- Academics may seek to use communities as users for particular projects or engage with communities in undertaking particular activities.
- Universities may become aware of community needs through the presence of students in those communities as temporary or long-term residents.
- Strategic interactions may arise when universities attempt to use their relationships with communities to address particular governance issues within the universities themselves (such as generalised resistance to university expansion plans).
- Sharper community scrutiny can prevent universities from making short-sighted decisions and can contribute to their institutional success.

Implications

University – community engagement is not always appropriate. However, in particular circumstances, universities and communities might engage in ways that address the power asymmetry and which make excluded communities more salient to those universities.

Universities and communities can overcome barriers to engagement in several ways

- Universities could allow excluded communities to have rights of representation within decision-making processes. They could create a structure that would allow the university to be held accountable to the community.
- Appointments to management teams and oversight boards could actively draw from community organisations, particularly those with whom the university has had past successful collaborations.

- Providing excluded communities with influence over resource allocations can influence university strategies, as they seek to access those resources through community engagement activity.
- Effective engagement begins from a genuine partnership between universities and these communities, working together to build a shared understanding and platform for future co-operation and development.
- Small projects within a university can be scaled up over time and can help to transform the institutional culture.
- For universities, shared activities must be strategic and sufficiently central to the university's interests to command the attention of key decision-makers.
- For communities, an activity must provide resources to address issues facing the community and to allow them to benefit from shared infrastructure and knowledge inputs from the university.

Methodology

This was a literature review which surveyed the academic, policy and practitioner writings concerning university engagement with excluded communities. The report directly cites over eighty elements of research, and builds on two antecedent pieces of research, Arbo & Benneworth (2007) for the OECD and Benneworth et al. (2009) funded by Newcastle University's Pro Vice Chancellor (Engagement).

Further Information

The study was carried out by the Centre for Knowledge, Innovation, Technology & Enterprise (KITE) in the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne in partnership with the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands.

To contact the authors of this research:

Dr Paul Benneworth

Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS)

University of Twente

PO Box 217

7500AE Enschede

The Netherlands.

Tel. +31(0)53 489 3271

p.benneworth@utwente.nl

www.utwente.nl/cheps/