

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. 8
Universities and excluded
communities; routes toward
collective learning

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Universities and excluded communities: routes towards collective learning

In recent years, there has been increasing pressure for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to improve their contributions to society. This is partly due to the growing competitiveness of the global marketplace and to the perceived importance of universities in finding solutions to the 'grand challenges' of the 21st century: ageing, climate change, resource scarcity and urban exclusion. However, HEI contribution to society still is defined largely in business terms: profitable innovations, licenses and spin-off companies. Given that the 'grand challenges' require many kinds of knowledge that will need to be put at the service of society in different ways, a broader definition of engagement is becoming increasingly important.

This research project explores the various ways in which universities in the North East, North West and Scotland currently engage with society. In particular it focuses on how universities engage with excluded communities as exemplifying a non-traditional group for universities whose problems are nevertheless increasingly urgent in the context of the knowledge society. It looks at the problems and limits to engagement with these communities, what can be done to stimulate it, and ultimately identifies the benefits that might be reaped through engagement with a wide range of societal partners.

Key Findings

All universities undertake many community engagement activities

- Engagement includes community access to facilities, volunteering, tailoring existing activity to fit with community needs and involving communities in decision-making by the university.
- Although the newer, more teaching-intensive institutions have a particular engagement mission, many research universities have a diverse range of engagement activities.
- There are many members of staff within universities that are committed to engagement.

Community engagement nonetheless remains peripheral to universities

- Universities have found it difficult to make community engagement a substantive institutional mission, unlike business engagement.
- Universities are under a significant external pressures. This makes community engagement a lower priority and encourages a symbolic rather than substantive approach.

- Universities fail to involve communities wholeheartedly in their institutional governance in the ways that they have involved business and corporate stakeholders.

The management of university-community engagement is problematic for universities

- Universities struggle to develop a management strategy that can fit community engagement within the complex institutional demands of today's environment.
- Effective management of engagement involves creating a situation where empowered staff and students can easily engage rather than trying to micro-manage and stimulate engagement with communities.
- Community engagement is vulnerable to unintended consequences from other policy changes, because it often lives in the 'empty spaces' of the university, such as empty rooms in the evening, continuing development programmes or consultancy work.

Implications

In order to be effective, engagement opportunities will be shaped by university policy and cultures at all levels

In effective engagement:

- Universities build up a vision for engagement centrally that is related to the kinds of education and research that they are involved in.
- Community engagement will then, in turn, influence policies and structures for education and research.
- Community engagement activities can take place at a variety of scales and should be loosely connected to a more tightly managed core.
- Staff can develop concrete engagement activities. Peripheral elements of the university then help to sustain shared community learning forums.
- Communities learn in those forums through socialised processes. What flows back into the university feeds more directly into those core teaching and research processes than the learning activities themselves.
- Communities, therefore, contribute to teaching and research, strengthening institutional profile, enhancing the learning experience and allowing the university to meet the demands of the societal compact.

To become effectively engaged universities need to balance the tensions in engagement

- External societal actors are not the only stakeholders to whom universities are accountable. Multiple internal groups within the university must be satisfied by 'engagement'.
- Universities can control strategies and staffing policies, but they have less control over what their students do in

the course of placements and volunteering, although they remain liable for them.

- External pressures and shocks will influence what can successfully be achieved, and engagement is a peripheral activity that is often abandoned when the going gets tough.

It is important to find ways of managing the business of engagement

- Community engagement is hard to measure quantitatively and for excluded communities it is hard to develop profitable models for engagement.
- If universities are going to take community engagement seriously, then they need to face pressure from their key partners & funders to engage in earnest.
- Universities need to find a way to understand how engagement matters to them, and to understand how their current activities relate to their history as well as to the 'idea of a university'.

Methodology

This working paper maps out the environment for Community Engagement by universities and seeks to understand the relationships between engagement activities, institutional rationales and the external pressures to which universities are subject. It is based on the findings of a survey of all 33 higher education institutions in the North East, North West and Scotland in 2008. The 'survey' was based on interviews with staff members from each institution, covering senior managers, academic staff, engagement officers and volunteering officers, supplemented with secondary evidence. A total of 113 people were interviewed for this survey.

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.

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