

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

No. 9
Making space for excluded
communities: community learning in
a Scottish University

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

Making space for excluded communities: community learning in a Scottish University

In the transition towards a knowledge-based economy and a learning society, universities are key learning and knowledge institutions. Given that one of the challenges for the knowledge economy is social exclusion, questions are being asked about whether universities can work with communities to help them re-engage in the contemporary world. In order to understand the contribution of higher education to driving processes of societal learning, it is necessary to explore in detail the dynamics of the way in which universities engage with excluded communities.

This working paper reports findings from a case study of a community arts project at a Scottish university. It shows that university engagement can lead to greater inclusion of these communities in contemporary society, by engaging them externally and mobilising them internally. But universities are not providers of services for excluded communities – what contributes to universities' scholarly activities is the experimental and incubation elements of these activities. Although the spinning-out process from the parent university can be traumatic for community groups, learning to stand on their own two feet is critical to embedding these activities in the original community and helping to contribute to social-capital building in these excluded communities.

Key Findings

Universities can be involved in activities that lead to the development of new learning communities

- The university played an initial role in helping to draw together groups of individuals from excluded communities.
- The university connected the community groups to various sources of potential help.
- The university's role was temporary. Over time, the groups became free-standing and developed their own capacity to bid for funds. Further groups developed independently from the university.

Excluded communities can learn important societal skills through university engagement

The community art groups:

- Developed a strong sense of group feeling and internal bonding.
- Learned to organise activities as a group and to develop procedures to ensure survival, drawing on trust and tacit knowledge between the workers.
- Developed a self-managing capacity. This was shown by developing rules for how to deal with non-attendance by participants, as well as a softer approach for those in

genuine need.

- Made external contacts, organised art exhibitions and sales, as well as links both to the Edinburgh Festival as well as the World Community Arts day, which validated what they were doing in a wider artists' community. This gave them legitimacy and an autonomous identity, and became an important component of the community learning activity.

Implications

Community engagement spaces can be sites of social learning

- The groups came together to study art but to give themselves space to study, they needed to undertake collective action. This drove collective learning as they learned to manage their learning environment.
- The social capital that they acquired in the process improved their standing in the local political economy.

Important learning outcomes for the community are not easily accredited

- For the community, learning the skills to organise exhibitions and sustain the life of the group beyond the university involvement was as important as learning artistic skills.
- For the university, the art skills were easily accredited and unlocked funding. The other skills, however, were only of interest when they were externally acknowledged.
- This created a tension between the desired learning of the participants and university goals.

Universities have difficulties articulating long-term support for community activities

- Universities need their engagement activities to be underpinned by a business plan with identifiable sources of funding. This makes it difficult to provide support for community learning, which is hard to quantify.
- It may be possible to create degrees in Combined Studies, open to communities, which would release fees and subsidies into the university, but this still means the university has different goals from the community.

University-community engagement activities are peripheral and temporary

- It is important to be realistic about what university-community engagement can achieve – in the current system, activities are inevitably temporary.
- Activities need to be peripheral to the university to give them the latitude to develop the collective social learning, otherwise they become purely individualistic activities.

Activities need to find a fit in the university but groups need to exist within it as a community

- By remaining peripheral, a group can achieve a degree of autonomy while still benefiting from incubation by the university.
- By being a group within the university, it can undertake collective activities that would not be feasible within the confines of accredited courses.

Universities can provide contacts for solving problems but the groups have to do the work themselves

- Community groups can draw on the wider social networks of university staff. But the agency of the group and individuals is an important part of the learning process.
- Resolving the tension between community groups and university leadership is central to delivering the temporary soft coupling necessary to allow community learning to thrive within the university structure.

Methodology

This report is based on a detailed case study at a new university in Scotland, which gained its status in June 1992. The focus of study was a community arts project initiated in 2001 and headed by a university lecture. In 2000, a community organisation contacted the university to suggest the development of a formal programme of university-community education in line with objectives to widen access. The aim was to extend access to higher education for individuals from disadvantaged communities in close proximity to the university.

Interviews were arranged with the principals in the community art group scheme. The interview arrangement followed a snowball pattern, and some non-participant observation and attendance at meetings was undertaken in order to solicit more evidence relating to the learning activities and the possible existence of a community of practice around the project. The participants have requested that the project remain anonymous and therefore names have been changed to ensure this anonymity.

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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