

Impact of Higher Education Institutions on Regional Economies
Joint Research Initiative
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Universities' role in regional transformation depends on local context

Do universities have a 'cultural presence' in disadvantaged communities? To what extent do universities play both a civic role and an employment role? This project explores the impacts of universities on the social and cultural lives of the communities of which they are a part, including the alleviation of various forms of social disadvantage. It looks at the ways in which universities operate to benefit, or further disadvantage, members of socially disadvantaged groups. It also tries to understand conditions under which higher education institutions can maximise the benefits they provide to these communities. Furthermore, it assesses the extent to which costs and benefits to members of socially disadvantaged groups vary according to university and regional characteristics and the relationships between them.

The study finds that different regions and universities present different contexts, depending on the local history, geography, socio-economic features and university type. Not only do economic factors have implications for opportunities, aspirations and social mobility, but social and cultural factors also have implications for economic developments. A university can affect, and is affected by, the 'image' and the perceived attractiveness of its region.

All the universities studied had taken special initiatives to improve their local community relationships and impact, including on socially disadvantaged groups. Ultimately, however, the core functions of teaching and research are still the most powerful way in which a university will affect the local community.

Key Findings

Universities play a varying role in economic development and regeneration

They:

- Have a strategic impact on their regions through partnership and development opportunities with agencies concerned with regional regeneration.
- Develop business strategies that are often aligned with local and regional development priorities.
- Operate as businesses in their own right and are significant regional employers.
- Play an important part in up-skilling and re-skilling local workforces.
- Have physical impact on their immediate environments, for example through university buildings and car parking.
- Are involved in cultural ventures, both in high and popular culture, but they have little impact on cultural innovation and attitudinal change.

Change can be driven by concern for a university's or a region's image

- Universities reinforce the dominant discourse around widening participation and 'low aspirations' by justifying engagement activities in these terms.
- How each institution engages with this discourse varies and is heavily dependant upon its competitive position.

Universities' engagement and promotion of active citizenship varies according to the shape of the local higher education market

- Developing active citizenship often forms an element of universities' public engagement strategies along with leadership and co-ordination.
- Some universities in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation develop a holistic rhetoric of engagement, associated with community support, civic engagement, cultural regeneration and active citizenship.

The role of universities in tackling social inequalities and relative disadvantage is not straightforward

- In sub-regions with several higher education providers, a social stratification of institutions may reinforce wider patterns of inequality.
- By its contribution to regional economic development, a local university may bring advantages to all, including members of socially disadvantaged groups.
- The university's role in tackling inequalities and disadvantage may be very long term and inter-generational.

Implications

- The economic impact of universities is often more apparent in the public sector than in the private sector.
- In some institutions, there appears to be a tension between reaching out to socially disadvantaged groups and building a positive image of the university.
- The aspirations of many local residents, especially from socially disadvantaged groups, do not align with those valued by policy makers and educational institutions.
- While opportunities for social mobility are being provided, class reproduction and status confirmation may still be the dominant story.
- All universities develop a rhetoric of public engagement but those explicitly positioning themselves on a global market show a more instrumental or institutionalised approach.
- Widening participation activities tend to provide social mobility opportunities for the few without necessarily altering patterns of inequality and social disadvantage affecting the many.

Methodology

The project adopted a case study approach that focused on four contrasting universities and regions. In each case study, the views of various stakeholders were obtained. They included local businesses, schools and colleges, health and other public sector services, and community groups. These were compared and contrasted with the views of university staff, and with formal university mission statements and strategic objectives.

The case study data were supplemented by statistical data on admissions, employment and mobility of students, research and consultancy relationships between the university and local organisations, labour force and economic data for the area.

Further Information

The study was carried out by a research team led by Professor John Brennan at the Open University and the University of East Anglia

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