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The role of higher education in social and cultural transformation

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The role of higher education in social and cultural transformation

Allan Cochrane[7] and Ruth Williams[8]

The historical context

Many UK universities have their foundations grounded in a wider civic and social role. For example, the universities founded in the nineteenth century emerged from the demands of a rapidly industrialising society and the new social relations associated with it (see Watson, 2008). As Harold Silver has noted, the 'Histories of the nineteenth century foundations [of universities] place their beginnings in community and wider contexts' (Silver, 2007: 536). However, since this period, the relationship between university, regional context and local community has become rather more uncertain, as institutions have come to develop their own academic identities, often locating themselves within wider national and even global academic and educational networks.

Historically, much of the literature on higher education's relationship with society concentrates on its links with industry and the economy. Indeed, during the nineteenth century shipping, cotton, wool, heavy industry and finance provided the basis for the founding of the civic universities that sprang up around the country. Thus, these universities were linked with the industries (and the associated business elites) that defined the regions and localities in which they found themselves and this helped to mark them out, in clear contrast to Oxford and Cambridge which were connected to rather different elites.

After 1945, the role of higher education as a social instrument and agency became widely accepted. A recurring theme of the 1950s was equality of opportunity, and the succeeding decade of 'dramatic and extraordinary change' (Stewart, 1989: 95), which incorporated a significant expansion of the higher education system, was predicated on the ambition of moving towards a 'just and concerned society' (ibid: 144). The profile of universities as agents of social change was lower key in the 1970s and 1980s, with an emphasis on their infrastructural role in underpinning the economy and the expansion of the 1990s was also justified in terms that emphasised the need for higher level skills in an emerging globalised knowledge economy. As the decade progressed, however, this was combined with New Labour's more explicit social agenda, with the promise of widening participation and the reduction of social exclusion through the opening up of higher education to wider sections of society.

Until the late 1980s, of course, there were formal linkages between some higher education institutions and their communities because of

What's the impact of the 'local' university? Allan Cochrane and Ruth Williams are co-directors of CHERI's ESRC project, *Higher Education and Regional Transformation: social and cultural perspectives (HEART).* It is part of an ESRC initiative on 'Impact of higher education institutions on regional economies'. The project is exploring the regional impacts of universities, with particular emphasis on non-economic factors.

The HEART team: the project directors are John Brennan, Allan Cochrane, Yann Lebeau (University of East Anglia) and Ruth Williams. The researchers are Michael Amoah and Alice Bennion.

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[7] Allan Cochrane is Professor of Urban Studies, the Open University and an associate of CHERI.
[8] Ruth Williams is Principal Policy Analyst at CHERI, the Open University.

the role of local authorities in the oversight of regional (and local and area) colleges and polytechnics. When the polytechnics were made statutory corporations by the Education Reform Act of 1988 those formal linkages also ended. Policy agendas in higher education (including its expansion, the drive to quality assurance in teaching and excellence in research) were nationally driven and nationally focused, although the process of devolution meant that agendas might vary between the United Kingdom's component nations.

In recent years the role of universities in the development of disadvantaged regions has been given greater prominence in policy documents. For example, a 2007 OECD report identifies the multiple roles higher education institutions can play in their regions: through knowledge creation and transfer, and cultural and community development, which create 'the conditions where innovation thrives' (p. 1). It goes on to say that

> 'Regional development is not only about helping business thrive: wider forms of development both serve economic goals and are ends in themselves. HEIs have long seen service to the community as part of their role, yet this function is often underdeveloped.' (p. 5)

This quote usefully reminds us that the involvement of higher education institutions in local and regional development may deliver on more than just narrow economic goals, even if the community role is often not given the attention it deserves either by universities or government agencies. Recognition of this also informs a white paper on the future of higher education in England

> '… institutions should increasingly be embedded in their regional economies (…) The nature of the role will depend upon each institution's missions and skills (…) in all cases, universities and colleges are key drivers for their regions, both economically and in terms of the social and cultural contribution they make to their communities.' (DfES, 2003: 36)

Theoretical perspective

The social role of universities has recently been the subject of wider debate. Academics and university administrators have been criticised for making self-satisfied assumptions about their role as carriers of liberal values and generators of human well-being. In his discussion of the university and the public good, Calhoun (2006) powerfully questions the way in which the private role of universities (that is, their role in benefiting their staff, students or alumni, or even business) has too often been reframed as a public good. 'Professors', he points out, 'tend to think universities exist naturally, or as a gift of history, in order to employ them' (Calhoun, 2006: 34).

He discusses some of the tensions between different visions of what universities might be for and how they might contribute to the public good. One of the dangers is that instead of more confidently identifying their contribution, they increasingly seek to sell themselves

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to governments and others in terms of the private goods they can deliver (higher salaries for alumni, skilled labour for particular economic sectors etc.) (Calhoun, 2006: 12).

For Calhoun the issue is a different one. He argues that the contribution universities may make to the public good is rooted in their ability to develop spaces of communication, spaces in which individuals and groups may interact to generate political progress. From this perspective, it is openness to critical debate and the ability to foster spaces within which such debate and interaction can take place that should define the wider role of universities. He stresses the need for free, open and critical debate within but not just within academia and across but not only across disciplines.

Increasingly, however, universities seem to have been called on to play a rather more active and interventionist role, related to the delivery of wider social goals and even to the transformation of society. Their contribution to the development of transitional societies, whether in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe or post-Apartheid South Africa has been explored in work by Brennan et al. (2004). Here the expansion of higher education has been fostered, not 'because of a belief in the intrinsic good of education [but for] more instrumental purposes to do with economic development, social cohesion, national identity and so on' (Brennan et al., 2004: 58).

The current policy landscape

These more instrumental purposes also help to frame the contemporary policy context in the UK. There is an expectation – from government and more widely – that higher education should fulfil a number of purposes:

- to be a major contributor to economic success;

- to produce, exchange and transfer cutting edge knowledge from research; and

- to produce graduates with appropriate skills and knowledge.

And, as noted above, it is also expected to contribute to the creation of a more socially inclusive society. Given the pressures of meeting these expectations, there must be some doubt about whether all can successfully be met. However, the distinctive missions and priorities that higher education providers have developed seems to be a strength of an increasingly diverse system in England – 'it provides opportunity for a wider range of learners and helps to meet the needs of specific regional and local economic and social contexts' (Little and Williams, 2009).

In this context, the notion of widening participation is important because of the way in which it brings together concerns of social equity (apparently creating new opportunities for those previously excluded from higher education) with concerns to transform the labour force, producing a labour force more appropriate for the global marketplace and the emergent knowledge economy in particular. The

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increased emphasis on the social and economic 'impact' of universities is also reflected in discussions about the regional role of universities, so that they are expected to help transform 'lagging' regions and help make them 'competitive', at the same time as supporting 'leading' regions in maintaining their strengths and competitive advantages. It is, perhaps easiest to measure impact in economic terms, but other forms of impact may also be the subject of policy intervention – so that, for example, community engagement is identified as a way by which universities can have a social impact on disadvantaged communities through volunteering and other community projects. At the same time, however, it needs to be recognised that:

> ' … universities are located in a global environment and face growing competitive pressure due to ranking and internationalisation. Also, universities need to diversify income sources and one of the channels is through the commercialisation of research (…) There is a growing expectation on the part of industry and business that universities will meet some of their immediate needs, and external stakeholders are increasing their voice in university activities.' (OECD, 2006: 1)

The HEART project

The ESRC funded HEART (Higher Education and Regional Transformation) project has been developed in relation to these wider debates. It 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 how they might be mobilised to counter forms of social disadvantage in their surrounding regions. The project is structured around four case study institutions and the regions in which they are located. The universities are located in three contrasting urban regions in England and one in Scotland, and cover a range of types. In other words we have been able 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, local government, schools and other public agencies and business, as well as other locally based universities.

Preliminary results are beginning to emerge.

First, it is clear that the nature of the 'region' with which universities engage varies significantly with the activities on which they are focused and the nature of the institution. This is apparent in a number of ways. In English regions outside London there is usually formal engagement with regional development agencies on a range of issues, but the identification with the official region in other ways is less significant – where the regional development agency is a source of potential funding, then universities focus their attention on it, but

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otherwise this wider region is not generally significant. Despite involvement in formal regional structures (regional committees etc.), in practice the focus is much more directly on the city region, and often a more narrowly defined version of the city - the area most directly affected by a wide range of university decisions. This seems to be the case in both England and Scotland. In London, of course, matters are more complicated because of the wide range of institutions within the city, but here too emphasis is placed on a part of the city rather than the whole metropolitan region.

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the institutional missions of the various universities have a substantial impact on the way in which they see themselves influencing and shaping their regions. Superficially, there may be similarities, e.g. in the way that they all emphasise their contribution to the building of a knowledge economy, but in practice these only mask wider differences. One of our case study institutions (a major Russell group university) is identified by stakeholders, and identifies itself, as having the task of bringing the world into the city region (a world class university in a world class city region) and also has a major direct contribution to make to the development of the city through major collaborative development of property with other local higher education institutions. Another stresses its contribution in building internationally significant digital media facilities locally, but the scale is very different and it is another university with a stake in that region which makes the claim to 'draw in the world'.

In terms of community engagement and widening participation the approaches are also very different. For three of the case study universities community engagement and widening participation go hand in hand – the one is intended to lead to the other at least in the longer term and widening participation is seen as a significant source of students. For the other institution, the main source of students is more traditional, with specific targeting intended to bring in a small number of highly qualified students from lower socio economic groups. All of the universities are, however, beginning to develop other forms of community engagement too, less directly focused on student recruitment and more on the wider social contribution that can be made through volunteering and in other ways. So, for example, 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 in other ways that help them to recognise the value of education and skills development.

If institutional mission is significant, however, it is also important to acknowledge the wider context (including historical context) in terms of shaping what is possible and how that influences strategy and practice. Institutional missions are themselves the product of what is possible, so that those institutions which place a greater emphasis on skills development both for regional populations and in response to perceived (regional) employer demand are also those for whom the recruitment of local students is the norm. Universities are all

embedded in their regions in particular ways, with long histories that underpin the relationships between regional and local stakeholders and this is reflected in the strategies they adopt and the ways in which they interact with local communities.

Conclusions

Our research raises important questions about how the core tasks and responsibilities of universities should be understood in the 21st century. In some respects, it is clear that teaching and knowledge production remain fundamental. But what is interesting is both how there may be unintended consequences from their involvement in these activities (e.g., in terms of community impact through studentification, in terms of cultural transformation changing local populations) and also the way in which wider tasks are being set for them. In the field of community engagement, the influence of government and funding council initiatives is apparent, except in those areas where some other business advantage has been identified. Universities also have to be seen as businesses whose main purpose is to survive in a particular funding environment and, like other businesses, corporate social responsibility is sometimes an afterthought unless the argument for business relevance has been won.

We have only just begun to analyse the data from our research and there is much to uncover. In particular, by the time the project concludes, we will have drawn out the impacts of our case study universities on disadvantaged communities. We will also have clarified whether the more instrumental responsibilities now being given to universities are achievable, alongside their continuing responsibility to deliver forms of public good along the lines identified by Calhoun.

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