

Embedding Local Community Engagement in University Strategy Development: Reflections From Universities in Birmingham

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Embedding Local Community Engagement in University Strategy Development: Reflections From Universities in Birmingham

Cepeda-Zorrilla, M., Taylor, A., Hassan S., and Green, A.

Summary

- This brief makes a case for policy makers to understand the relevance of promoting community engagement in strategy and policy development.
- The findings suggest the need for engagement with new audiences and groups and for continued development of participative models of interpretation and governance. There is also a need to strengthen liaison with policy makers to develop indicators to monitor and assess engagement outcomes.
- The authors emphasise the importance of improving transparency regarding how strategies are developed and improving how engagement is measured.
- This brief considers the mechanisms that can be used to foster community participation in strategy and policy development and the value which this can bring.

Introduction

Research has shown that there is a lack of knowledge about the ways in which community engagement is implemented in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Correa-Bernardo, et al. 2012). This brief aims to present a local view of the nature and form of community engagement in the different Universities in Birmingham in the West Midlands. Five case studies are presented in this Policy Brief to show how community engagement is undertaken by the universities. The Brief concludes with a series of policy recommendations.

Background

Understanding community engagement

The term ‘community’ can be defined in terms of its spatial characteristics as the “people living in one specific area” but it can also be understood as a social unit that even where they “may not live near each other” they might be linked by social ties or share something in common about which they engage as a group (MacQueen et al. 2001 and Aslin and Brown, 2004). The term ‘communities’ can refer to a wide variety of organisations and individuals such as, public authorities, business, schools, civil society and citizens, among others (Farnell, 2020).

Different terms can be used to describe public involvement in policy and strategy such as consultation, participation and engagement. In this briefing we focus on engagement because this process “implies commitment to a process which has decisions and resulting actions” (Aslin and Brown, 2004). And because engagement “involves the sharing of information, the offering of accounts, the giving and receiving of reasons, and the articulation of values” (Holms, 2011).

Community engagement includes a “wide yet interrelated set of practices and philosophies such as service-learning, civic engagement, experiential education, public scholarship, participatory action research, and community-based research” (Hoy and Johnson, eds., 2013).

In this briefing we refer to community engagement to go beyond citizens’ engagement or public participation because community engagement represents the interaction between different actors in society with the purpose of knowledge exchange to address complex social problems.

Barriers and Challenges to community engagement

Despite several advantages from increasing community engagement, there is a knowledge gap about the impact of such participation (Yellow Book Ltd, 2017). There is limited research that explores and assesses multiple interventions and their place-based impact (Gaventa and Barret, 2010). For example, some research projects in Scotland found that although there are benefits from community engagement, there is a lack of empirical evidence on this and there is a gap between “the rhetoric of community empowerment and communities’ experience” and a lack of clarity about “the purpose of engagement” (Yellow Book Ltd, 2017).

Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions (HEI)

The main challenges identified by research for community engagement include: lack of trust, respect and confidence in the system; and how the system is not considered to be fair and equitable (Yellow Book Ltd, 2017).

Another important challenge is the inclusion of different groups; in some cases it could be argued that “participation is biased toward those with more privilege and more resources” (Berry et al. 2019).

In the Netherlands, researchers found that residents’ participation has been successful only in relation to “everyday concerns about safety on the agenda and contributed to small-scale improvements of public space, however, this has not been translated in contributing to neither regeneration plans at neighbourhood scale nor strategic decisions” (Teernstra and Pinkster, 2016).

The role of community engagement in HEIs

Community engagement in HEIs is a strong means to stimulate research, and improve the teaching and learning process (Butcher et al., 2003), however, it also represents “a shift beyond the traditional roles of instruction and research” (Correa-Bernardo, et al. 2012). It refers to the formal or informal process of networks, partnerships, communication media, and activities between Higher Education Institutions and local, regional, national, and international communities (Jacob, et. al. 2015). UNESCO defined this as the “third mission” (UNESCO, 2008, cited by Correa-Bernardo, et al. 2012) which represents “the economic and social mission of the university and its contribution to communities and territories” (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020).

This, in practice, should contribute to “strengthening democratic values and civic engagement; addressing the needs of the most vulnerable groups, contribute to cultural development, and help informing public policy” (Farnell, 2020), but also contribute to achieving “globally excellent teaching and research by involving co-production of knowledge with citizens to address societal challenges which have both a global and local dimension” (Goddard and Kempton, 2016).

In the UK, according to the Russell Group of Universities (2004), there can be three types of Community Engagement models: “first, responding to a specific need of the community without any return to the university; second, investing in a particular area of interest in the community which can be also beneficial to the university; and third, addressing the core needs of the university but simultaneously providing benefit to the community”.

Community Engagement in HEIs

The case of Universities in Birmingham

Given the focus of WMREDI on better understanding and supporting the role of universities and how community engagement can help them with their mission. This Policy Brief focuses on the findings from a research project that analyses university strategies within Birmingham. It is useful to consider the extent to which, and how, university strategies acknowledge and include citizen engagement as part of their “third mission”, this is an addition to universities’ focus on research and teaching. The “third mission” of Higher Education has both significant societal and economic impact.

Traditionally, universities are more inclined to be interested in economic impact; for example, in relation to: innovation, entrepreneurship, business cooperation, labour market relevance. This means, to provide graduates with the strong technical, professional and discipline-specific skills to succeed in the labour market (OECD, 2017) in order to safeguard the interest of the graduates (finding a job after completing their studies) but also to ensure effective use of public funds (Vossensteyn, et al. 2018). Our research highlights that the gap in assessing the impact of community engagement is a missed opportunity for universities to realise their potential socially, culturally and economically.

Method of analysis

This brief builds on work undertaken by City-REDI in conjunction with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) as part of a project commissioned by Birmingham City Council. The project mapped organisational strategies and citizen engagement in Birmingham in order to support the development of a ‘city vision’ for Birmingham.

It included:

- In-depth research and writing of a policy paper mapping existing organisational strategies of members of the Birmingham City Board. The City Board is a leaders’ group within Birmingham. Launched in September 2018, it is attended by sector representatives and chairs from statutory partnerships across the city from the education, health and wellbeing, local governance, safety and security, culture and religion sectors.
- Analysis of the extent and types of citizen engagement referred to in the strategies of City Board member organisations.
- Undertaking a desk-review of the strategies of the five Universities in Birmingham as an educational organisation, we explored how the organisation communicates through the strategy the extent of engagement conducted as part of strategy development.

A conceptual framework was developed to assess the extent of citizen engagement within the strategy documents of each organisation studied. The framework was based on reviewing the “Nine Dimensions of Stakeholder Engagement” (Natarajan and Hassan, 2020). The framework assesses how strategies and different organisations realise community engagement. This framework approaches engagement differently to what traditional practices of engagement achieve.

Community Engagement in HEIs: Reflections from Universities in Birmingham

The nine dimensions cover empowerment, influence and inclusion looking across processes, knowledge, and context, enabling analysis of the balance of voice, resources, engagement capacities, relationships with institutions, and visibility of different social groups.

Overview of the case studies.

Birmingham provides an excellent case study since the city is home to a variety of universities in terms of history, specialism, links to local communities and research-intensity.

Case study 1: Aston University

A technological university which received its Royal Charter in 1966. The university won the Times Higher Education Outstanding Entrepreneurial University award and the Guardian 2020 University of the Year award in relation to its work on graduate outcomes, diversity & inclusion activity, and embedding sustainability. It was awarded Gold in the 2018 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

Case study 2: Birmingham City University

Tracing its origins back to 1843 and formerly five colleges, the university was brought together as the City of Birmingham Polytechnic in 1971. It gained University status in 1992, becoming the University of Central England in Birmingham. The University changed its name to Birmingham City University in 2007. Awarded silver in the 2017 TEF, the university scores highly for graduate employability.

Case study 3: Newman University

Founded in 1968 as Newman College of Higher Education, it was known as Newman University College from 2008-2013, until the point at which it gained full university status in 2013. It focuses on interactive teaching, personal wellbeing and high academic achievement. It was awarded Silver in the 2017 TEF for its teaching standards.

Case study 4: The University of Birmingham

A world 'top 100 university' and part of the prestigious Russell Group, the university is one of largest civic universities in the UK. It was awarded Gold in the 2017 TEF.

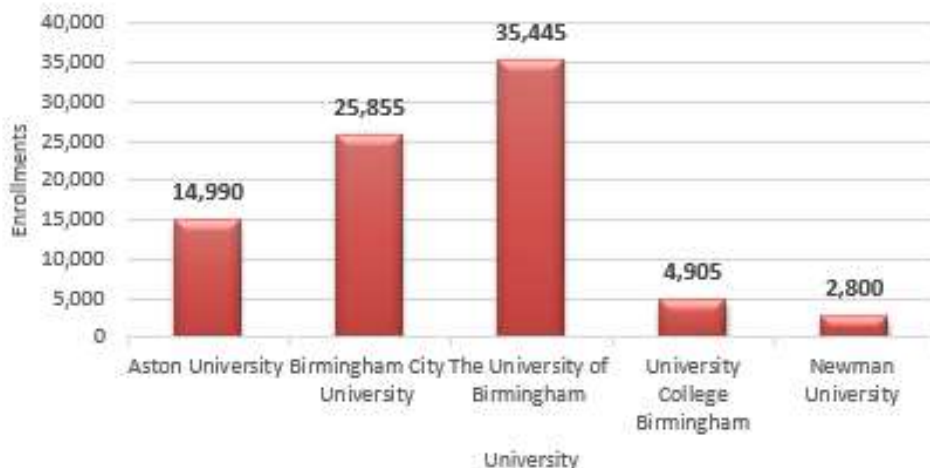
Case study 5: University College Birmingham

This university specialises in vocational courses in both the Higher Education and Further Education sectors. It provides career-focused education and training. Most undergraduate and postgraduate degrees are accredited by the University of Birmingham.

An overall picture of the staff employed and the number of students enrolled in the five universities in Birmingham is provided in Figures 1 and 2 respectively. The Figures show 83,995 students and 14,395 members of staff (academic and non-academic) in the academic year 2018/19.

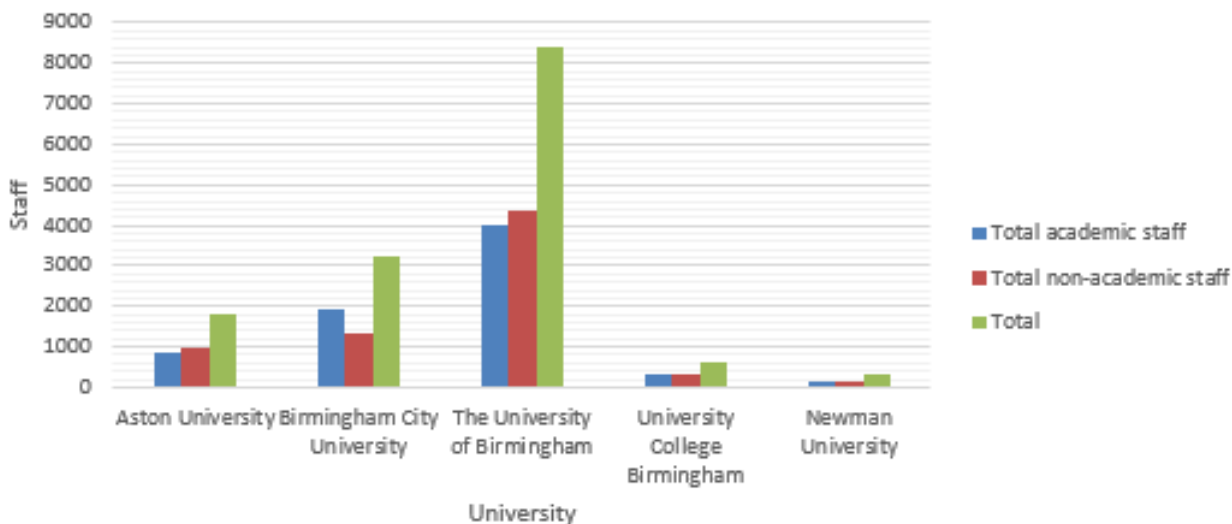
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Figure 1: Distribution of total HE enrolments within each of the Institutions in Birmingham 2018/19



Includes all levels of students (all undergraduate and postgraduate) enrolled in full and part time programmes. Source: [HESA, 2021. DT051 Table 1.](#)

Figure 2 Distribution of staff in the five HE Institutions in Birmingham 2018/19



Includes all academic and non-academic staff working full or part time. Source: [HESA, 2021. DT025 Table 1.](#)

Previous research has found that the way that community engagement is understood and implemented varies across universities in different countries (Correa-Bernado et al. 2012). Our research in Birmingham also revealed that community engagement processes, as well as the type of engagement delivered, also differ considerably between universities within the same city. The differences between the universities in Birmingham is in line with how the universities appear to perceive their role as local, regional, national and local actors differently. While, previous research found that no form of engagement whether civic, corporate or from social responsibility commitment is mentioned in the mission statement of universities in the UK (Annette, 2010), Goddard et al. (2018) argue that this engagement should be a core element of university missions.

This study found that all the strategies refer indirectly to engagement in their strategy. This is an important finding because when focussing on incorporating community engagement within their strategies, this can give more emphasis and support for engagement in University practice (University UK, 2010). Details about the community engagement in the university strategies is summarised below:

How universities' strategies address community engagement

- In their strategies, a number of the less research-intensive universities focus on engagement to promote student learning and emphasise the benefits of Higher Education to different local communities. The Newman University strategy prioritises: “Developing varied civic engagement activities to promote student learning from real-world challenges and to engage the community in the benefits of Higher Education”.

- Several universities, such as University College Birmingham and Aston University, emphasise engagement with industry in their strategies. For example, Aston University’s strategy emphasises how it stands out as an institution due to its longstanding strong engagement with local industry and business. It highlights the value of the university’s strong local and global engagement with a range of SMEs, as well as larger firms including BMW, HSBC, Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, Jaguar Land Rover, the National Crime Agency and Public Health England. The strategy also refers to co-funded collaborative research and bespoke training courses. The focus on industry engagement is closely linked to learning models at the university which include a strong focus on placements in industry, the professions or the public sector in order to give students strong experience of real life projects and prepare them for entering employment (Aston University).

- The strategies of the universities indicate they value engaging with local and regional governance and strategic organisations for societal benefit. Birmingham City University’s strategy emphasises the importance of “deep engagement with scholarship and with practice that is relevant to the developments in our society” alongside engagement with staff. The university has worked with local councils and the West Midlands Combined Authority to launch a pilot supporting innovation through community engagement, through the STEAM incubator, which is a project aiming to help start-ups to respond to the key needs of the West Midlands Local Industrial Strategy, including AI and data, an ageing society, clean growth and future mobility.

- The University of Birmingham’s strategy refers to engagement with businesses and funders (research or business) to achieve financial security. Aligned to its’ role as a global university, the strategy focuses on promoting international high value-research and teaching. There is less emphasis on the university’s role in relation to supporting on social mobility. Nonetheless, the strategic goals of the university emphasise the importance of the university’s civic role in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

Issues and examples of good practice relating to citizen engagement

PROCESSES

- In terms of **processes**, Birmingham City University and Aston University identify their beneficiaries the most explicitly in their strategies. The Birmingham City University strategy states which groups it wishes to empower (referring to the Index of Multiple Deprivation and students for free school meals) and how they intend to improve and influence social mobility. Aston University identifies three groups of beneficiaries: students, business and the professions and the West Midlands region and society. It then outlines key outcomes for each group. For example, the strategy refers to the university's influence on businesses through teaching graduates the skills and knowledge required by businesses and professional organisations, supporting translational research and knowledge exchange activities and linking businesses and the professions to graduate employees and entrepreneurs.

CONTEXT

- In relation to the wider **context**, the university strategies were generally quite strong in identifying the value of local, regional and international partnerships to their institutions, so indicating their engagement at a range of geographical scales.

KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

- In terms of approaches to **knowledge and learning**, it was challenging to use the matrix to identify the manner of engagement and understand how citizens, businesses and other communities have engaged in strategy design because the knowledge and learning dimension can only be fulfilled through interviews in order to understand how the knowledge and processes were included in a strategy, and what applications or case studies can be identified through practice that informs future learning for universities. This dimension cannot be understood through the strategies as they are a top level document rather than specific cases or examples these need further qualitative research designed to capture this data. There is evidence that even at the universities that prioritise engagement the most in their strategies, these activities often appear to be knowledge exchange exercises rather than an ongoing equitable relationship with the community. Although some strategies emphasise the benefits of working with other stakeholders or communities strongly, the strategies include little discussion of how these groups have helped to shape the strategy design.

- Birmingham benefits from a strong range of Higher Education Institutions, which complement each other in terms of their research intensiveness, engagement with industry and links to local and global communities.
- There is scope to improve how the strategies of several universities in Birmingham explicitly identify their beneficiaries and influence. Currently, this is sometimes implicit rather than explicit.
- In order to analyse the effectiveness of community engagement in the development of university strategies in Birmingham, greater understanding of the manner and nature of engagement is needed. Currently, strategies include very limited details in this respect.

Policy Recommendations

What should policy makers do?

1. Support the development of a strong and transparent strategic vision and plan for the future for the Universities regarding how their strategic priorities are identified in order to be able to monitor their performance and contribution (Goddard, J, et al. 2018) and the level of community engagement.
2. Identify the multiple types of community engagement. For instance, those relating to formal and participatory governance processes, and also those relating to associations and social movements (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010)
3. Set out indicators for Higher Education institutions that could include: “the nature and extent of engagement with the business and cultural sectors in their region; collaboration with other institutions and other levels of the education and training system; the programmes they develop and provide relating to ethics, environmental justice and sustainable development” (Goddard et. al. 2018)
4. Encourage university leadership to place greater value on instruction and research related to “the university’s social responsibility, through policy formulation, resource support and more critically through their public behaviour” (Correa-Bernardo, 2012).
5. Support universities in identifying barriers for community engagement and with opportunities to promote discussions between researchers, universities, funders and the public (Universities UK, 2020)
6. Contribute to the open debate about the issues faced in education for citizenship and service learning in the community and its role in the curriculum (Annette, 2010)
7. Support HE Institutions in establishing staff development, recognition and reward systems that aim to support academics to become 'civic professionals' (Annette, 2010)

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