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Putting higher education in its place: the socio-political geographies of English universities

Abstract: Universities have traditionally been understood in terms that assume their special status within the social world – somehow divorced from the places within which they find themselves. Yet they are also increasingly expected to make some contribution to regional development. With the help of evidence drawn from an ESRC project, this paper sets out to explore some of the implications of recognising the importance of the changing policy geographies of higher education. It highlights the extent to which and considers the ways in which universities are embedded within their regions and localities, while also being connected into wider set of relationships.

Key words: universities; region; engagement; entanglement

1. Introduction

Universities in England can no longer be discussed as if they have some sort of special or protected status (whatever the guarantees of 'academic freedom') even if (for the moment at least) they are still managed at arms length through a funding council (for a longer perspective on the shifts since the 1960s, see Halsey 1992, Johnson 1994, Salter and Tapper 1994, Tapper 2007). In recent years higher education has been at the centre of major policy shifts. Instead of being immune from the cold wind of neo-liberalism that has been blowing through the rest of the public sector, universities have been feeling their full force. This process has found its most notable expression in the financial arrangements arising out of the Browne review, which ensure that rather than mainly being paid for through general taxation, universities will instead be funded through a system of fees and loans to be repaid directly by graduates alongside their income tax (Lord Browne et al 2010).

The full implications of introducing a new fee regime remain uncertain, although it is unlikely that overall demand for higher education in England will be significantly affected. However, its differential impact will be significant, with some universities having scope for expansion even as others are squeezed, either because their fee levels are forced down or because student recruitment is affected. Some programmes of study and disciplinary areas will also suffer, even as some increase in popularity. In any case, the development of a new model for fees and funding is only one aspect of a wider (often confusing) policy environment, in which universities are being required to compete for students with fully private providers of educational services and other new entrants, at the same time as members of a select (and self-identified elite) group are expected to find ways of rising up global university rankings.

This is a world in which rhetoric around the need for business-ready vocational education sits uneasily alongside an equally powerful rhetoric around academic excellence for the few; a world in which assumptions of institutional autonomy in a competitive market sit uneasily alongside managerialised target setting and a belief that research should be delivering impacts that deliver a range of (easily

quantifiable) social and economic benefits (as expressed, for example, in the impact expectations of the Higher Education Funding Council's Research Excellence Framework) (for powerful critiques of the new world, from a range of persectives see Bailey and Freedman 2011, Collini 2012, Molesworth et al 2011). Since universities are increasingly assessed and judged in terms of the contribution they make to economic prosperity, national competitiveness and social well-being., not surprisingly perhaps, one response this has found a direct expression in the plethora of publications issued both by individual institutions and their representative organisations in which claims are made for the wider significance of what they can deliver beyond the class-room (particularly in fostering the so-called knowledge economy) (see, e.g., Universities UUK 2010a, b and c).

Here we focus on just one aspect of the emergent world of higher education in Britain – looking at the ways in which universities are placed and place themselves in their regions. In some respects this may seem a marginal concern in the face of the changes identified above, but the explicit identification of a regional role by funders and policymakers as well as universities themselves is symptomatic of the broader repositioning. The regional role of universities has taken on an increased salience in the language of global and national public policy (see, e.g. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2007) as well as being celebrated by the institutions themselves in a series of publications produced both by collective agencies (Kelly et al 2010) and by individual universities (as case studies are reported and 'best practice' shared) (see, e.g., Charles 2003). On the basis of a review of publicly available documents produced by a range of British universities, for example, Scott and Harding note that most of them 'claim to produce eminently useful knowledge that can be utilized by a huge range of 'communities' but is especially valuable to those living, metaphorically speaking, on the university's doorstep' (Scott and Harding 2007, p. 2).

 There are two interrelated reasons for taking issues of placing rather more seriously as a policy concern. The first concerns the relationship between universities and local and regional development, while the second relates to

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universities and community/public engagement. Each of these has been the focus of policy development, whether driven by international and national agencies, local and regional authorities, or the more basic imperatives of institutional survival.

The economic impact of universities on their regions and localities is increasingly well articulated and researched (see, e.g., Kelly et al 2010). But the nature of the regional role in practice – the way in which it is made up and constructed - is rather more elusive, and it is on this that the paper focuses, with the help of evidence drawn from the ESRC funded HEART (Higher Education and Regional Social Transformation) project[1].

The ESRC Initiative of which this project was a part was explicitly focused on the impact of higher education institutions on regional economies, and was also supported by the funding councils in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and ran between 2007 and 2011 (http://www.impact-hei.ac.uk/). In a sense the initiative was itself a product of the new world, tasked with identifying the wider value of universities to regional economies, on behalf of funding councils seeking to justify the funding that passed through them. Our own project – which focused on higher education and regional social transformation – was less concerned with the specific economic impacts of higher education (expressed for example in multiplier models and direct forms of knowledge transfer) and more with issues of social and cultural change.

The project was structured around four case study universities located in three urban regions in England and one in Scotland (despite the different policy context for higher education in Scotland, we have included evidence from the Scottish case in what follows, because the local experience on which we focus is not directly shaped by that context). The institutions cover a range of types, ranging from the elite to the more vocationally based. As a result, it was possible to consider both how the different missions of particular universities might affect their regional engagement and how differences in regional context shape what is possible. Interviews were conducted with key players in the universities and with a range of stakeholders, including representatives of

community based interests, local government, schools and other public agencies and business, as well as other local universities. The understanding of 'region' on the basis of which the research was undertaken was not limited to that of the then current official (adminstratively defined) government region. Instead the focus was on the localised economic, social and political activity spaces defined through the networks of relations within which the universities found themselves (for some purposes, of course, this did mean the government regions, but for others it might mean city-regions, cities or even neighbourhoods) (see Allen et al 1998).

Before turning to evidence of the ways in which universities practise their regionalism, drawn from the research fieldwork, the next section sets out aspects of the wider policy context that is redefining the role of universities, first by considering arguments relating to the knowledge economy and regional development and then by reflecting on the ways in the relationships between universities and their communities have been and are being re-imagined.

2. Universities as agents of regional economic and social change

Since the 1970s economic models focused on the national scale have been undermined. There has been an increased recognition not only of the significance of networks that cut across national boundaries, but also of sub-national (regional or urban) activity spaces in what have been identified as new geographies of capitalist development (see, e.g., Scott 2001, Storper 1997). And as national economies have become more regionalised, so universities seem to have been expected to a bigger role in regional and local networking and capacity building (see, e.g., Benneworth and Hospers 2007, Chatterton and Goddard 2003, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2007). Internationally, it has even been suggested that these shifts have deepened 'the reliance of the bulk of institutions upon local and regional consumers and clients' (Scott & Harding, 2007, p. 10).

In recent years there has been an increased focus on the role of universities in the promotion of innovation and economic growth, particularly in the context of

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what has been identified as the 'knowledge economy' (see, e.g. the discussion of university-industry links in Yusuf and Nabeshima 2007, published by the World Bank). At the same time, the role of universities in the development of disadvantaged regions and in the promotion of 'learning' regions has been given greater prominence in public policy documents. They are expected to help transform 'lagging' regions, making them 'competitive', at the same time as supporting 'leading' regions in maintaining their strengths and competitive advantages (in some cases even playing a role in the transformation of society – see Brennan et al 2004). They are understood to have a key role in the sponsoring of 'learning' regions (see, e.g., Rutten et al 2003). An OECD report on higher education and regions goes further in identifying multiple roles that higher education institutions might play in their regions: through knowledge creation and transfer, as well as cultural and community development, which create 'the conditions where innovation thrives' (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2007, p. 1).

In other words, universities are identified as key transformative nodes in a globally networked and market dominated world, carrying messages of competitiveness and innovation as well as actively delivering technological change through forms of knowledge transfer (even if some have begn to question the extent to which they are actually able to deliver on these expectations – see, e.g., Lawton Smith 2007).

Although the emphasis is generally on direct economic impacts (universities as drivers of innovation and creativity) the importance of other forms of place based community engagement is also identified. These are often presented as providing the necessary underpinning to the building of trust and social capital, which in turn is seen to be a necessary prerequisite for sustainable economic development. So, for example, the OECD argues 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.' (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2007, p. 5).

From this perspective the involvement of higher education institutions in local and regional development can be seen to deliver on more than just narrow economic goals, and this has also found an expression in public policy in England. So, for example, it has been claimed that:

> Universities have a vital role in our collective life, both shaping our communities and how we engage with the rest of Europe and the wider world. They play a huge role in our communities through the provision of cultural and sporting amenities and in passing on and preserving a set of shared societal values, including tolerance, freedom of expression and civic engagement…All universities are major contributors to the regions where they are located…Many universities…see themselves as important civic institutions in their city and region: this role is to be praised and should be enhanced. The Government welcomes the role that universities play in engaging their local business community and strengthening the quality of local civic leadership (…) Their building programmes can be integral to wider regeneration programmes. (Department for Businness Innovation and Skills, 2009 pp. 18-19).

In the first decade of the 21st century, higher education policy in England was framed within the broader political agenda associated with new Labour. An emphasis on economic priorities in a globalised knowledge economy was linked with a 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. Stress was placed on the need to develop a national (and regional) skills base capable of generating and underpinning competiveness, within the labour market, as well as driving business and technological innovation, even if this was pursued alongside a continuing sympathy for the elite institutions, seeking to position them at higher levels in global academic hierarchies (see, e.g., Departnment for Education and Skills 2003, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills 2008, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2009. See also Wright 2007 for a discussion of university-industry links at regional level).

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Since the formation of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in May 2010, however, the emphasis in England has been squarely on university funding and student fees, which has largely been justified in terms that focus on the global competitive position of England's elite universities, as well as the need to shift the balance of funding from state to student or graduate. It would be hard to find any explicit reference to local or regional economies in statements emerging from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills or the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) since May 2010 (see, e.g., Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011). This does not, however, herald the end of a geographically placed role for universities. On the contrary, some are expected to play a national or even global role, while also acting as local or regional development nodes, while others are more explicitly expected to build from a local or regional base. Universities are frequently involved in the local enterprise partnerships (sponsored by the Coalition government) that have been given the task of taking over from the old regional development agencies.

3. Playing the regional game

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the institutional missions of the various universities have a substantial impact on the way in which they position themselves within their regions. There are clear differences between the universities on which we focused. Some of them explicitly define themselves as serving their region, in terms of student recruitment, delivering new industrial opportunities, up-grading workforce skills to fit regional needs and so on. Others present themselves more directly as positioned at elite level nationally and possibly even globally, bringing global excellence to the region.

Nevertheless, in all the cases we considered there was a close and continuing set of relationships between universities and local and regionally based agencies of various sorts. In part these were a direct expression of the business priorities of the universities: such agencies may be sources of funding or, equally important, regulators whose decisions can open up or restrict opportunities for them. So for

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example, in three of the cases universities drew directly on financial support from regional and local agencies (regional development agencies and more localised development agencies) to develop new campuses, launch new areas of curriculum and research development, or support mergers. In all of them, to a lesser or greater extent, major property development initiatives relied on planning permission and, in at least three of the cases, the commitment of local agencies to the university's plans, as part of a wider strategic development (and place marketing) programme.

One strong driver of university involvement in broader regional issues, in other words, is that they can get something out of it. In one case, in partnership with other higher education institutions and the hospital trust, a university clearly took the lead in a major development partnership supported by the local authority and aimed at transforming a significant part of the city through a continuing process of investment in new buildings to create a distinctive university quarter stretching along a road leading out of the central area. In another case, a local MP commented that a university 'has been a conscientious contributor to the regeneration of' the area', but went on to note that, 'It has also been a significant beneficiary from regeneration because [one of its campuses] is one of the flagship developments in the…area. The university early on recognized the potential for its own development from the commitment the government was making to the…area, and has taken advantage of that'.

All of the universities more or less effectively sought to play the regional game – and in that sense the 'ivory tower' model is long gone. In formal terms they were all involved in various networks (for example, until 2010 through regional development agencies in England or through a range of local and regional representative bodies), and these bodies were often important sources of income in one way or another (particularly in support of particular projects or capital schemes). However, even at the time of our research, when there was a fully developed institutional architecture of government regions in England, it was clear that universities rarely identified themselves with the broader government regions. Their relationship with such bodies was almost entirely instrumental

and formal. This does not mean that the relationships were irrelevant: on the contrary in several cases, they generated and supported major initiatives.

However, in the interviews we conducted, a clear distinction was apparent between the requirements of regional politics, relating to regional institutions and networks, that is those associated with the formal structures of government administrative regions, and the day to day relationships of place – that is the taken for granted daily or weekly sets of interactions with communities, street level bureaucrats (concerned with planning) and local elites. Within the wider regional networks universities positioned themselves to achieve particular ends, to perform the 'citizenship' role that was expected of them as regional players, and to avoid being bypassed by some initiative or other which might be driven through regional agencies. Their closer identification (represented in promotional materials as well as direct impacts of one sort or another) was more likely to be with city regions or even more narrowly drawn urban spaces – in one case (in London) a slice of the city-region, in another a dispersed urban area made up of a network of smaller cities, in two quite explicitly the city in which they were located.

The sets of relationships involved at this level are more elusive, in the sense that they are often informal, yet also more intense. In one case, it was made clear by a representative of the business community and confirmed in discussion with senior local government officer that 'You can't have a single debate about where the city is going without the University…being represented'. It was taken for granted that senior politicians and officers would meet together with their university counterparts in a range of contexts and events, although it was apparent that the extent of (informal) interaction varied from institution to institution. In two cases we heard complaints that it was easier for one (the supposedly more prestigious) local university to gain this sort of access to local policy makers than it was for others.

More generally, what was striking was the extent to which these forms of relationship seemed to generate a congruence between the claimed interests of places, as expressed through council statements as well as in interview and those

of the universities – in almost a parallel set of strategies. So, in one case, there was a shared drive towards 'world' or 'global' status – within a strategic framework which sought to make a world class university in a world city; in another the drive towards new digital industry was associated with the ambition to develop a new digital curriculum (each rebranding the other); in a third it was the contribution of the university to developing a cultural centre that was both seen to be transforming the city and transforming the image of the university; in a fourth the university was deeply embedded in strategies aimed at transforming a declining area through forms of iconic development.

This relationship was summed up in the words of one local authority senior officer: 'The universities in the city region…are absolutely fundamental to the economy of the city region'. The 'region' is not only the area within which they find themselves, but also the place which they help to shape and by which they are in turn shaped. Without there being any direct strategic planning relationship between city government and university, it was apparent that each had expectations of the other, particularly in terms of development – which in several cases then found expression in particular property oriented partnerships.

Region and university are involved in a complex dance of 'image and cultural attractiveness', which operated as a common discourse running through our case studies. As one regional business representative commented: 'The universities make the area more attractive, and we're trying to make this area attractive to companies who want to locate here'. More modestly in one case, a senior academic indicated that student feedback suggested that the university acclimatised people to the view that the city within which it was located was not 'as bad as all that'. Universities draw on the images of the areas in which they are located in the promotional process and the opportunities that they have are shaped, at least in part, by that location; while the (city)regions in which they are based often seek to draw on the reputation of 'their' university as a means of defining/redefining themselves in different ways. The relationship is understood to be mutually reinforcing in that the cultural attractiveness of the university may be expected to influence inward investment and possibly also attract members of Florida's 'creative class' (Florida 2002), while the cultural

attractiveness of the city or region is expected to encourage student applications, and even make it easier to attract particular staff. What matters in this context is not so much whether these assumptions and understandings are justified, but rather how they help to frame continuing sets of relationships at local level.

The differences between institutional types can be exaggerated – institutions with global and national ambitions also draw extensively on a regional pool for students, even if from a wider one, too. And they also supply labour to the local and regional economy. In one of our cases this was particularly apparent – despite the claims (following the expectation that 'new' universities have more of a regional focus) of one institution to be the locally rooted one, in practice it was the other (supposedly more nationally and internationally focused institution) whose alumni were to be found in a wide range of positions within local public sector and government agencies. Similarly, although in another a claim was made that it was the new university that supplied the basic labour in terms of white collar professionals, actually a more complex situation was apparent as students from one institution moved to the other for the final professional aspects of training. In other words, in this context, it was necessary to think about universities not simply as individual and discrete entities, but as operating as a system, in which there are implicit as well as explicit divisions of labour at regional/urban level.

4. Business as usual

It is difficult not to be cynical about the rhetoric to be found in many university mission statements, which (alongside claims about their academic excellence and the wider benefits they provide to economy and society) often imply that universities have some sort of disinterested commitment to regional and community development. In practice, unsurprisingly, however, it was apparent that the driving force of university business strategies is generally (and understandably) much more instrumental. The factors that determine university strategy relate to ways of generating income, whether from students, alumni, state bodies, charitable trusts and foundations or elsewhere.

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While each institution had its own set of specific community and regional or local initiatives, in none of them were they more than marginal, and in many cases they relied on the existence of external financial support from national or regional sources. This is not to dismiss the sincerity of university statements and the well-meaning phrases contained in them, merely to confirm that universities (like other social institutions) are above all committed to finding ways of ensuring their own survival and reproduction (in this context, see Neal 1998, which explores the incorporation of equal opportunities policies into universities).

It is increasingly widely recognised that universities have a significant local impact as businesses in their own right. They are major employers. They have their own property strategies and a range of other impacts that may go beyond the immediate economic effects of spending by students and staff, or even knowledge transfer and business spin-offs. The wider social and cultural effects may be as significant as any effects that can be measured through economic multipliers, however important those may be.

In this context, it is helpful to contrast the effects of initiatives that are intended to have local impacts with the broader impact that universities may have simply because of the ways in which their core activities are pursued. This was put particularly strongly in the words of a senior academic manager of one institution who commented that: 'We engage in lots of very direct, immediate interventions which are designed to improve things in the communities that surround us, but what I would say is that … the biggest single impact we can have on the lives of the people around us, is to be a very very successful globally recognised university that succeeds in its primary mission of being world class in terms of research and teaching. Because if we do that, that has a direct impact on the economic success of the city region and the whole'. In other words, it was argued that, what might be seen as the side effects of institutional success were likely to be more important locally than any specific locally targeted initiative.

While it has become commonplace to point to the positive impact of universities on the leisure and entertainment industries in city centres, Paul Chatterton has highlighted the potential danger that 'exclusive geographies' of consumption may emerge in some of these in response to a growing student population (Chatterton 1999). This is a timely warning, which makes it important to look more closely at the particular experiences of different cities and their universities since they are likely to vary according to institution and regional context. Howeve, only in one of the cases we considered was there any significant impact of this sort, and even in that case it was argued by many of those we interviewed that the scale of the city was sufficient to absorb and even shape the emergent consumption geographies associated with the university.

The transformation of particular areas of cities may nevertheless involve upheaval for existing residents, particularly since many universities are located in central urban areas surrounded by communities whose members are experiencing high levels of deprivation. In such cases, property development does not take place on a greenfield site, and universities become another agency of urban regeneration through forms of clearance and redevelopment (see, e.g. Hatherley 2010 for a discussion of the regeneration and renewal in the 1990s and first decade of the 21st century). In one of the cases we considered the scale of activity (undertaken in collaboration with a range of partners) was clearly transformative, serving to redefine a whole sector of the city as an informal campus; in another the concentration of higher education activities into what could be identified as a cultural area was identified by some interviewees as a retreat from serving the more peripheral working class residential areas for the sake of promoting the city in different ways; similarly, in a third, the use of regeneration funds to develop new campuses was also associated with a shift in emphasis away from had been traditional student markets.

Concerns were also expressed in one case about what has been called studentification (Smith 2008, Hubbard 2008) because the expansion of the case study university (alongside other local universities) had resulted in the residential concentration of students in private rented accommodation in particular parts of the city. The issue was raised directly in interviews with

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members of a local residents' association, who highlighted not only the localised impact of the concentration in bringing problems of noise and environmental disorder while students were in residence, but also left many properties empty through several months of the year. Such were the concerns about the issue that a strategy for its management was developed by the local authority in collaboration with the local universities. The side effects of the expansion of a globally or nationally positioned university, drawing in students from across the UK but also from overseas, was significant in other words, requiring the development of policy at local level.

By contrast among institutions whose main student intake was local, perhaps unsurprisingly, similar concerns were not raised. At the other extreme, in one of our cases, because the student body was mainly drawn from relatively close at hand, with majority of students being part-time or (in the case of full-time students) remaining in the parental home, there was little evidence of a significant consumption impact from a new student population, although one senior local government officer did note that the spending of students and staff was having an impact on a small part of the city, in the direct environs of the university. In a household survey conducted in areas whose residents were on low incomes, despite the lack of any significant contact with the university (either in terms of employment or the participation of family members in study) there was a largely positive rating of the university and its value to the city and region.

Business as usual for universities, also involves responding to the initiatives of government and (most important) funding agencies, and the drive to widening particpation, for example, has in practice largely been understood as a localised or regional practice. At the time of the research, almost all universities were eager to stress their support for initiatives aimed at drawing in students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and English institutions were involved in the recently concluded HEFCE sponsored AimHigher partnerships, although their ways of translating that support into positive action varied significantly.

The approaches of one of our case study institutions and another which we considered were focused on raising awareness of the benefits of higher education and targeted involvement with particular schools, not to attract students but more generally to 'raise aspirations' (encouraging young people to think about routes to university, but not to any particular university). Public engagement included broadly based strategies that – as a senior academic manager commented – were intended to bring the benefits of global academic excellence to the region through activities including public lectures, school based talks and summer schools. The existence of a high profile regional champion was itself understood to offer an inspirational example of what is possible – challenging the assumption that the 'regions' outside London were somehow marginal or subordinate is implicitly presented as a message to those who see themselves as excluded from the world of higher education.

However in these cases, rather than being a central institutional concern, widening participation was of peripheral importance – a (not particularly unwelcome) requirement of the wider policy regime within which universities operated. As a representative of the local business community noted of one such university, it was 'very anxious to support the local disadvantaged communities, and have access to all, but in reality, is it an institution which is focused on addressing disadvantage directly? Probably not'.

For others, however, widening participation had a much more central position in institutional definition. It was explicitly referred to in strategic statements and attention was drawn to its significance in interviews with university managers. Contrast was drawn between the extent to which such universities (the more vocationally oriented 'mass' universities) were able to deliver on the widening participation agenda in ways that more elite institutions could not. But in this context, too, it is important to recognise the business logic of such a priority - in one of the cases where widening participation was identified as a key aspect of the university mission, it was pointed out by a local educational stakeholder that 'widening participation is the University's main business. They are the students which the university attracts and therefore widening participation is just part of

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everything they do, it's in their culture'. Since widening participation within the local and regional population was seen as a potentially significant source of students, community engagement and initiatives aimed at raising aspirations and working with schools and colleges were also intended more or less directly to feed into increased applications.

5. Conclusion: the potential of place

Even more than most other institutions that serve wider national and even global markets, universities are 'rooted' in place and necessarily have a relationship with their regions (city, city-region, sub-region, government region). Although there are many examples of institutions with distributed campuses (for example to enter new educational markets, often overseas) and still more examples where campuses inherited through merger have been closed and rationalised or concentrated (in several of our cases with the help of state funding channelled through regional agencies), it is rare (although not entirely unknown) for them to relocate across any significant distance. Even where mergers have taken place it tends to have been within a relatively constrained territorial space.

None of this should be taken to diminish the importance of the micro-geographies of university location – apparently minor shifts across borough boundaries can lead to significant shifts in identity and focus, as we discovered in two of our cases: in one, it was suggested by local stakeholders that a particular – largely working class - borough had been deserted; in another, concentration towards the central area was interpreted by some (including members of academic staff) as shift away from the needs of those living on the urban periphery. Nor should it be understood as minimising the extent to which some universities are (more) global players, while others are (more) locally focused, but even the former are located in places they help to define, in part by acting as nodes within networks that stretch beyond the local..

Despite their wider ambitions (relating to research and teaching), which in principle appear to have little relationship to place, universities are effectively, to use the term introduced by Kevin Cox and his colleagues (see, e.g., Cox and

Mair 1989), locally dependent. As a result, it becomes necessary to move beyond debates which pose the question of the extent to which universities are 'in' rather than 'of' the region, because they are necessarily both. However much they might wish to present themselves as somehow disengaged (and today, of course, few universities would explicitly seek to do that) they cannot be – in a sense, they are always necessarily embedded. The notion of 'engagement' as currently expressed in public policy relating to universities (for example in the Beacons initiative or the Research Excellence Framework's current emphasis on 'impact') (HEFCE 2011, National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement 2010) continues to assume a clear distinction between university and public or community, implying that one discrete and bounded entity must find ways of engaging with another. Matters are more complicated in practice, because there is always some form of engagement, interaction and connection. But this does not mean that the relationship is always the same, nor does it mean that it is always positive.

Too often a simple distinction is made between those (generally less prestigious) institutions that are expected to play a regional role and those (generally more prestigious) whose role is seen as national or even global. The former are understood to be reliant on local students and often therefore those with lower entry qualifications, while others – the elite institutions - are understood to exist as islands within a sea of mediocrity, often literally located within but clearly set apart from the deprived areas of the inner city. However, place matters, not just for those universities that are more or less explicitly allocated regional roles, but also for those that seek to play a more explicitly global or national role. The specific details will vary from place to place but if the social role of universities is to be adequately understood (and not merely in terms of the rhetoric handed down by government, funding councils, their own representative bodies and communications departments) then it is always necessary to explore the complex relationships between place and institution, as each helps to shape and define the other.

It is necessary to shift the focus from 'engagement' (by implication between academics and 'ordinary' people) and rather to reframe the question in terms of

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entanglements and mutual dependency. Even where a university is largely seen as (and defines itself as) a national or international player rather than a local player, one that – as interviewee powerfully put it - 'does not do local stuff', not only can its decisions have a dramatic local impact but its ability to perform as a national or international player may equally depend on its ability to operate effectively as a local player. And even where, as one Vice Chancellor said of his institution, it is 'the only show in town', keeping the show going depends on finding some way of contributing to the town's development, if only to keep the show on the road.

However extensive the march of the new managerialism through the university sector (see, Deem et al 2007), the institutional missions of universities do not simply emerge from some abstract set of visions formulated by vice chancellors, university executives, strategy units or consultants. They are themselves path dependent, growing out of institutional histories or what Burton Clarke has called organizational 'sagas', reinforced by telling and retelling so that as well as providing 'some rational explanation of how certain means led to certain ends,…it also includes affect that turns a formal place into a beloved institution, to which participants may be passionately devoted' (Clarke 1972, p. 178). But they also shaped by the complexities of geographical placing associated with them – within national (perhaps global) as well as regional networks and systems. This is not a straightforward or simple process. The ways in which regions and places are imagined by those located within them, and the attempts to reach out and draw in apparently distant places to deliver local outcomes, are the product of active work by a range of professionals, not only those who can be identified as higher education managers but also academics through their own networked relationships; not only government and quasi government agencies but also business organisations and even students (see Allen and Cochrane 2010 for a discussion of the notion of 'reach').

In his call for the re-invention of the 'civic' university John Goddard (2009) both refers back to a longer tradition in England and calls on the example of the US land grant university (see also Silver 2007). In some cases, universities still have an identifiable 'civic' role particularly in major cities outside London

where the university has been seen as a key institution – acting as a 'symbol of continuity and influence' and in 'disseminating culture' (Hardy, 1996, p 12). However, while memberships of governing bodies and statutory agencies, and various partnership opportunities tend to be 'normal business' for many universities, such 'community links can easily reduce to symbolic gestures and talking shops which salve more consciences than they solve social problems' (Mohan 1996, p. 102). In revisiting the notion of the 'civic university' in a contemporary context, John Goddard has set out an agenda in which such institutions 'should be strongly connected to people and place. They should be committed to generating prosperity and well-being and balancing economic and cultural values' (Goddard 2009, p. 6).

This is a moment at which the purpose of higher education is being hotly debated, and one expression of this is to be found in debates around their responsibility to the places in which universities find themselves. Even the so-called 'third mission' of universities (alongside teaching and research) goes beyond more traditional sets of linkages with industry and is reflected, for example, in initiatives (such as the Beacons for Public Engagement sponsored by the UK's funding councils, Research Councils UK and the Wellcome Trust), which highlight 'the many ways in which higher education institutions and their staff and students can connect and share their work with the pubic. Done well, it generates mutual benefit, with all parties learning from each other through sharing knowledge expertise and skills' (National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement undated). But David Watson takes this further to identify 'a challenge to universities to be of and not just in the community; not simply to engage in ''knowledge-transfer'' but to establish a dialogue across the boundary between the University and its community which is open-ended, fluid and experimental' (Watson 2003, p. 16. See also Watson 2007 for a more developed discussion of the implications). Rachel Pain, Mike Kelsby and Kye Askins have even revisited the arguments around 'impact' to argue that it needs to be re-imagined in more radical terms to encourage and enable the co-production of knowledge by university researchers and local communities, in ways that might generate more transformative possibilities for change.

Recognising the extent to which universities are necessarily embedded within place opens up the possibility of viewing university/society relationships rather differently, since it very clearly implies a mutual dependence, even if it may sometimes seem a rather mundane one (see also Goddard 2009, Benneworth et al 2010). In his thinking about the university community-relationship Paul Chatterton imagines the possibility of making it a more equal one within which a shared public culture may be built (Chatterton 2000), and Craig Calhoun (2006) suggests 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 are able to interact to generate political progress. These approaches may seem far away from the detailed day to day (business-like) interactions we have discussed, and we would not claim that there is a direct route through those to the visions of Chatterton and Calhoun, the possibilities sketched out by Pain and her co-authors, or even the more pragmatic programme spelled out by Goddard. But demystifying the world of universities may also make it easier to begin to discuss what is distinctive about what they might be able to contribute towards the achievement of those visions, or the development of others.

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