Impact of
Higher Education Institutions
on *Regional Economies*
A Joint Research Initiative

University of Strathclyde Glasgow

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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:
http://www.impact-hei.ac.uk

Building social capitol in the inner city: university-community engagement at Liverpool Hope University

Today, university engagement is seen as one of many missions for universities in an increasingly overloaded managerial environment. However, there has been little detailed research on the extent to which university community engagement can contribute to addressing the challenge of urban exclusion, and whether, in turn, it contributes to universities' own institutional missions.

This research looks in detail at community engagement at Liverpool Hope University, a university which for fifteen years has sought to make community engagement a critical part of its mission. Liverpool Hope opened a campus in Everton, the poorest district in England's poorest city. This was as a means of contributing to rebuilding the city, as part of its commitment as a Christian institution to building a better world around it. The research traces the various contact points that exist between the university and excluded communities around Liverpool. It assesses the extent to which those contact points allow co-construction of knowledge and co-learning, and whether the resultant social capital created has improved the capacity of the local excluded communities to influence their local environments and be politically important, to address the disinvestment and disturbance that has disrupted their communities in the last thirty years.

Key Findings

Engagement activities at Liverpool Hope University are clustered around four 'pillars'

- The physical location of the university in an inner-city area acts as a primary focus for engagement activity.
- The university supports volunteering in the community both by staff and students.
- Degree courses have community engagement built into them. This is partly because community engagement is necessary as an employability skill in the arts sector.
- Community based organisations are located on the campus. These organisations are related to the activities and strengths of the university as well as helping the university with its Widening Participation mission.

Community engagement at Liverpool Hope University is not a hierarchical process

- Engagement has developed in clusters of activity bringing together people, projects and infrastructure. It is framed by rational drivers and ethical belief systems.
- There are connections between the activities at different

levels, which ensure that engagement moves beyond being a set of separate projects into something bound up into the cultural and institutional life of the university.

The large extent of engagement activities makes them self-reinforcing within the university

The effect of activities is to:

- Create a set of resources that, in turn, allow the university to achieve other things in the field of community engagement.
- Feed into the other key missions of the university, particularly raising the richness of the student experience and contributing to Hope's culture of scholarship.
- Create physical or financial resources and the opportunity to win new grants from funding bodies.
- Create relational resources. These are contacts between Hope, community partners and other agencies with whom communities can work, such as Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra or the city council.
- Create good-will towards community engagement within the university and help to embody the idea that community engagement can strengthen the delivery of Hope's core missions.

In terms of community capacity building, engagement activities have had varying success

- Activities connected with the physical location of the university have led to a slight improvement in the fortunes of the locality, as local actors have become relatively more important within local decision-making structures.
- Learning connected with volunteering activities did not tie the communities either to university knowledge or provide them with voices within university strategic governance forums.
- Engagement activities embedded in the university curriculum had negligible impact on building social capital in the community.
- The community theatre on campus was very successful, not only in developing technical skills but building various kinds of social capital in the community.

Implications

Engagement in the institution involves individual 'engagement heroes' coming together within a supportive environment, mobilising resources, shaping teaching, research and volunteering activity, and delivering impressive engagement projects.

Successful activities were those where:

- There was a practical kernel, which the university dealt with, and a set of benefits that were transmitted back to the university and were seen as desirable.

- It was clear why they fitted with Liverpool Hope, what they delivered for Hope and what capacity they brought to Hope.

The long-term value to the university of short community learning activities needs to be established

- Because the excluded community is not an important stakeholder for the university, there needs to be something like a long-term grant either to the university or the professional body involved in the activities to create value.
- In the case of Liverpool Hope, the activities that couldn't establish long-term promise and professional stability were unable to offer stability to the community learning spaces.

Without an external redefinition of the purposes of higher education, opportunities for university-community engagement will remain limited

In the current situation:

- Community engagement can be effective without being a central part of a university's rationale.
- What matters is that the community learning space is anchored into the university, and benefits from stability provided by the university.
- Commitment to particular practical projects is as important as an abstract ideal or ethos of engagement to making universities into engaged institutions.
- It is important to ensure that commitment is founded on a set of mutual benefits to all the different stakeholder communities within and outside of the university.
- Engagement should create inter-dependencies and responsibilities to a particular external community that give them the opportunity to influence university decision making.

Methodology

The study involved two phases of research. The first phase was a survey of community engagement activity at LHU as part of a survey of the 33 Higher Education Institutions in the North East, North West and Scotland in 2008 involving nine interviews with key stakeholders which were synthesised along with secondary material into a confidential project fiche. Parts of the fiches from four other universities (Liverpool, John Moores, Edge Hill and Chester) were also drawn upon been used to explain the wider background for community engagement in Liverpool and Merseyside and some interviews from other institutions have been used in understanding the changing pressures on higher education more generally. The second phase of the research involved a mix of in-depth elite

interviews, shorter participant interviews, non-participant observation sessions and guided walks through the Everton district of the city and the Cornerstone Campus.

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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