

CLOSING THE ENGAGEMENT GAP: Securing the benefits of linking with higher education institutions at local level

Policy Challenge Paper 1 from PASCAL International Observatory

New research from PASCAL International Observatory is highlighting the often uncertain relationship between local and regional government and higher education institutions (HEIs) located within their regions. As debates about the role and responsibilities of Universities continue in many countries, PASCAL's international study of universities' regional engagement (PURE) is revealing both a desire on the part of regional authorities in many parts of the world to engage with HEIs, but also an uncertainty about how to develop a successful and sustainable relationship with the higher education sector.

Regional impact

The presence of a University within a region will of itself have a significant impact. HEIs are major employers, they are significant consumers of goods and services, they most likely make an impact on the built environment of the area, and their presence will have implications for housing, transportation and other infrastructure development. They will most likely be significant contributors to the local tax base.

But impact goes far wider than this. The presence of large numbers of students will impact on the local labour market, and create demand for housing. A large student presence also offers a potential contribution to local social and cultural events and facilities. The University may contribute directly to the range of cultural facilities and activities in the region through its support of museums, theatres and concerts, public lectures, science festivals and the like.

The provision of resources for continuing professional development and training locally offers the potential to raise skill levels in the local population, and can stimulate interest in learning, boosting the economic base of the region. The knowledge and skills within local HEIs offer potential for business innovation and development and the formulation of new solutions to local policy and service delivery issues. Knowledge transfer can play a significant part in helping regions to develop sustainable policies and practice as is increasingly demanded by national governments.

These kinds of benefits have all been demonstrated in a variety of research in different parts of the world. The PURE study shows that the benefits are not just for established city regions, but also for more rural regions. Nor are the benefits confined to regions in more developed countries. A similar potential exists in all regions. A flourishing HEI presence within a region can directly contribute to its regional competitiveness, helping to put the region 'on the

map' in the face of increasing global social, economic and demographic pressures.

Engagement for a purpose

In these days of severely constrained public expenditure, regional authorities must strive to make the best use of any assets within their region. Data within the PURE study shows the regional impacts and benefits arising from HEIs are by no means systematically realised. Studies have identified a range of obstacles which can inhibit the development of a productive relationship. For example, HEIs may not recognise their 'regional' role, focussing instead on securing their position in a global market, or they may not be organisationally equipped, or fail to incentivise staff, to participate at regional level. Regional authorities may not recognise the potential of the resource within HEIs on their doorstep, or, if they do, may find it hard to 'get in' to access the resource available in a way which is useful and beneficial for the conduct of their business.

It is vital that regions ask themselves just how good is their engagement with the local HEI sector. Regions and HEIs within the PURE study were encouraged to benchmark their engagement practice across 7 domains which have been shown to be important for regional competitiveness. The resulting profiles of engagement served to promote awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of engagement practice within the region.

It was apparent that in some regions in the PURE study, asking these questions of their engagement practice was sufficient to lead authorities to fundamentally revise their stance towards the HE sector, from one which saw little benefit from HEI engagement to one where priority was being attached to establishing a systematic framework of relations with their local HEIs.

Identifying the engagement gap

Comparing engagement profiles of HEIs and regional authorities within a region will reveal those domains where there is a mis-match in current engagement practice, referred to here as the engagement gap. If recognising the scope of the engagement gap is the first step, it is also essential to assess the significance of the engagement gap revealed, that is both the difference in perceived practice, and the priority ascribed to particular domains for realising regional development objectives. This kind of analysis forms the basis on which regions can formulate a set of expectations of HEIs and approach them with a view to establishing the kind of role they might play in securing benefits for regional development and improved efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of regional policy and services.

Closing the engagement gap

Tackling the engagement gap requires some clear appreciation of the character of the relationship which is sought. Key issues to be addressed are outlined below.

What kind of engagement?

Engagement, like 'collaboration', or 'co-ordination' is a very loose term, which is ambiguous and needs to be 'unpeeled' if there is to be any clarity about the kind of working relationship which is sought. Engagement can extend from very basic representative attendance at formal meetings, through information-sharing, resource-sharing, and along a continuum of ever closer joint working embracing shared objectives with sanctions for non-participation, and ultimately to the creation of new organisations for the delivery of particular requirements. It is important to give some consideration at the outset to how far along this continuum regions wish to go in building a relationship with HEIs.

Strategic or programme specific?

It is vital to remember that any engagement relationship 'takes two', and requires time for understanding and trust to develop. All organisations have to manage the environment they are in as best they can., and partnership may involve scrutiny of organisational practice in a way that may not be entirely comfortable. A fruitful partnership with HEIs will depend on acknowledging the context in which each party is operating, on clear leadership and commitment, and is likely to be sustained by both strategic discussion and practical demonstration of what can be achieved in specific programme applications.

Which policy domains?

This paper has already alluded to some policy areas where the presence of an HEI will have an impact. But regions should consider the kinds of contribution from HEIs they could expect in securing a wide range of policy objectives. By way of example these might include:

- City and regional planning
- Support to business
- Qualifications, skills and learning
- Social inclusion and cohesion, and community development
- Heritage and culture
- Public health and wellbeing
- Sustainability
- Governance arrangements and management and efficiency

What kind of collaborative activities?

In pursuing particular policy domains, there are a variety of kinds of collaborative activity which have been shown to enhance regional government effectiveness. Apart from formal commissioning of projects, on-going collaboration can develop innovative programmes which might include, for example:

- Enhancing available analytical capacity through jointly staffed analytical units
- Developing joint business incubation facilities
- Exploiting the knowledge capital in a region through knowledge-sharing and innovation arrangements
- Input to formulation and delivery of staff training programmes
- Participation in student intern programmes, and short-term 'problem-solving' placements
- Supporting HE-based continuing education programmes
- Trialling innovative service delivery models
- Following up HEI international connections for the benefit of the local region.

Regions 'reaching in'

Engagement is most commonly talked about in terms of universities 'reaching out' to the communities in which they are placed, as they 'offer' the knowledge and skills of their staff to community groups, governmental organisations or businesses who may wish to take it up. Or individual academics may use local opportunities as research sites as they pursue new knowledge.

However, the contention here is that the present context demands that it is time for region authorities to 'reach in' to higher education institutions and seek out solutions to the issues they face. It is a common complaint from business and from public policy-makers that 'getting in' is not easy. It requires clarity about what is sought, and determination to establish innovative partnership activities to secure the benefits required and expected.

Everyone wins

Closing the engagement gap between regional authorities and their local HEIs represents a win-win situation for both parties. Whilst some HEIs define their mission in regional terms, others, often the more 'research-intensive' universities, position themselves on global frames of reference and can be reluctant to recognise the regional contribution as valuable in its own right or to their global ambitions.

It is increasingly recognised that there are benefits from regional engagement for all HEIs, benefits which span improvement to the student experience, improvements to the relevance of teaching and learning, and which open up research opportunities. This paper has already pointed to benefits for regions from systematic engagement with HEIs in different policy domains for the realisation of regional objectives in policy development and service delivery.

It is the proposition of this paper that regions, in the context of heavily constrained public expenditure calling for innovative responses to the reappraisal and fulfilment of their role, cannot afford not to seek the benefits which can flow from an effective partnership with HEIs on their doorstep. Some HEIs will be willing partners, others less so. Regional authorities need

to be clear what they want and need from HEIs, and secure it from 'the willing' and demand it from the others.

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September 2010

For further information about PASCAL and the PURE programme see
www.pascalobservatory.org .