POLICY CHALLENGE PAPER 1

Universities and regions: engagement for regional development

Issues of policy and practice arising from the Pascal PURE programme

This paper highlights issues of policy and practice for securing effective engagement between regional authorities and universities to enhance regional development. It draws particularly on experience reported in the 17 regions in different parts of the world taking part in the Pascal PURE programme to offer practical suggestions for regions and universities to apply within the particular contexts in which they find themselves.

Why engage?

It is increasingly the case that regional government has a vital role in securing the economic, social and cultural development of its region, and promoting the competitive advantage of the region in the face of pressures from globalisation. Universities too strive to secure their place within a global context, whilst facing pressures from national governments to justify public investment in terms of outputs and impacts locally, regionally and nationally as well as internationally.

The securing of a viable and sustainable place within the emerging global economy, and in the face of global pressures of climate change, demographic change and migration requires effective knowledge sharing and innovation processes to adapt and apply knowledge-based solutions in local situations. Moreover, it is no longer the case that universities enjoy a knowledge monopoly: local experience can be an important driver of innovative research and learning.

There is then a mutual interest for regions and universities in developing effective engagement relationships and processes. The challenge addressed here is how such effective relationships are to be secured and the benefits both to regions and universities realised.

Engagement: strategic or ad hoc?

It is frequently the case that individual academics develop collaborative activity with particular groups (businesses, communities) within local regions on an ad hoc basis. But there are a number of factors which have be shown to be important for securing competitive advantage for regions, including regional planning and infrastructure, human capital development, support for business innovation and development, interactive learning opportunities and social capital development, community and cultural development, and the promotion of sustainable development. Universities can potentially engage with regions in all of these domains.

Some universities have a clearly articulated regional focus: for others, often the research intensive universities, this focus is less clear, or indeed may not be re-cognised. Some regions contain only a single higher education institution, whilst

others have several who might give regional engagement varying priority, and who in any case are likely to be stronger in engagement in some domains than others. Regions too will have different levels of sophistication in their approach to these different domains. In order to maximise the opportunity for mobilising the knowledge and expertise in universities and for addressing regional development priorities it is suggested that it is in the interests of both regions and universities to develop a strategic approach to engagement, playing to all stakeholders strengths, rather than relying on ad hoc collaborations.

Developing effective engagement – where are we starting from?

An effective approach will depend on a shared understanding of where a region is starting from; it is important to ask how good is our engagement? There are tools available, which have been applied in some PURE regions, to help universities benchmark their own practice, and to assist regions in reviewing where they stand on each of the domains identified above.

The process of answering the question posed above should also lead to a consideration of the question, where do we want to be? This will allow the identification of areas in which university engagement would be beneficial.

Building partnership

Experience among PURE regions shows that building partnerships which will make engagement effective and secure its continuation requires a number of features, key amongst which are:

- Identifying and involving the range of relevant stakeholders;

- Identifying, involving and securing the commitment of senior decision-makers in each participant institution or regional organisation;

- Recognising that partnership building needs time to allow the development of trust and understanding, and to deliver outcomes;

- Undertaking some operational tasks to sustain trust and demonstrate progress and benefit from collaborative working.

Securing benefits from engagement

If effective partnership arrangements are an essential mechanism for furthering strategic regional engagement, the PURE study also underlines the importance of some key policies if benefits are to be realised. These include:

- Recognition of the importance of learning for both individuals and organisations, including mutual learning from inter-regional exchange, and staff exchange between universities and regional organisations;

- The importance of implementing policies of lifelong learning to facilitate not only the above, but learning amongst members of the community to increase skills and opportunity, to promote social cohesion and cultural identity, and to facilitate adaptation to changing economic circumstances and the challenges of climate change, and demographic change.

- Policies to promote knowledge sharing and knowledge mobilisation within the region to ensure that appropriate knowledge is brought to bear on priority issues. PURE regions have demonstrated the importance of mechanisms such as Knowledge Capital Centres in this regard.

- Policies to promote the take-up of knowledge through the development of systematic regional innovation systems are a vital part of securing effective knowledge transfer and take-up in both business and the service sectors.

- Policies and efficient practices to support small businesses are an important component of regional economic development. This includes the creation of new businesses both from university spin-out companies and from the community, incubation facilities for existing businesses with effective access to support and knowledge from universities, and the placement of students in local businesses to assist skill development and problem-solving.

- Policies and practice to seize the opportunities arising from environmental concerns and sustainable development are likely to be a vital part of regional (re)generation. The need is to ensure the capacity within the community to respond to the jobs and skills needs arising from the development and implementation of green technologies.

National policy context

The ability to pursue these policies in these areas is constrained in various ways by the national contexts in which regions and universities are operating. Where experience is demonstrating that national policies and practices are inimitable to achieving effective arrangements, regions and universities should increasingly make representation to national governments.

One such example relates to the governance of universities. It is apparent from work in PURE regions and elsewhere that the greater representation of external members in university governance arrangements would be beneficial for the development of commitment to university regional engagement.

Meeting the challenge

This paper has identified both mechanisms and polices which have been demonstrated in the Pascal PURE programme, and elsewhere, to be a key importance in maximising the benefits for regional development which can be obtained from strategic engagement between regional organisations and universities. The delivery challenge is not made easier by the constrained economic circumstances in which most regions around the world are now placed, although arguable, its achievement is all the more vital in securing sustainable recovery.

There is a wealth of experience described in the reports from the PURE programme, and PASCAL will be pleased to offer its continuing expertise to regions as they pursue the engagement agenda.

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15/6/2010