

New approach for university and community engagement

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Current policy pressures on universities to focus on improving their research excellence and to widen participation make it hard for them to engage meaningfully with excluded communities, according to research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

University-community engagement remains marginal to the organisation, funding, management and strategic control of universities. This reduces their benefits for excluded communities.

"Traditionally, universities have regarded excluded [communities](#) with an air of detached benevolence," says Dr Paul Benneworth of the University of Twente, who led this study, looking at universities in the North East, the North West and Scotland. "However, if universities are to help change the lives of people living in the deprived communities local to them they must begin to manage their engagement more strategically."

Currently, community engagement tends to be done 'by' universities, 'to' communities. Universities offer access to facilities, services and learning but there are few opportunities for community learning activities to become embedded within universities, even where there is a close fit with universities' own needs. This means universities miss out on the chance to help develop 'social capital' in these communities. Social capital is the networks and relationships between groups which helps hold communities together and bind them into the rest of the country.

Dr Benneworth comments "We have recently seen the best and the worst of communities in action. Our research gives some pointers to the

opportunities that universities now have to contribute to wider social efforts to prevent rioting becoming an endemic social problem, and helping to rebuild a vibrant public realm".

The study acknowledges that devoting resources to managing engagement is not easy since universities must prioritise the individuals within their institution rather than the communities who live outside it. Furthermore, university-community engagement is a transient and a side-line activity, which can make it difficult to anchor into university programmes and structures.

However, according Dr Benneworth, universities can engage more effectively in community social capital building, even now. To help them increase their impact, the researchers have developed a three-stage strategy:

Stage one: Create small-scale learning communities, linking academics with community groups.

Stage two: Link the activities of these communities temporarily to core university teaching and research, to allow the activities to professionalise and grow.

Stage three: 'Spin out' these activities into the deprived communities to develop further, allowing them to address particular symptoms arising from social exclusion.

Dr Benneworth cites the case of the Moneyline initiative, which emerged from Salford University to address financial exclusion: "Moneyline is good example of where a community engagement activity moved out of the university and developed into a social innovation that spread into excluded communities. Indeed, this was behind the idea of Community Investment Trusts, which have grown to become a feature of the

financial landscape."

Dr Benneworth and his colleagues have already played an important role in advising university leaders and government policymakers on how universities can bring their insights on socio-economic disadvantage to help improve the fortunes of socially-excluded communities.

There are several key policy issues that emerged from the project. Firstly, communities need to be clearer about what they expect from a university. This is important because other university tasks tend to be well-defined in a language that universities understand - that of targets, key performance indicators and strategic objectives. Secondly, the spin-out phase must be well-financed and include a good proportion of the community.

Dr Benneworth concludes, "Perhaps most importantly impact funding must be available for the whole three phase cycle, not just for developing the idea academically. In this way, university knowledge can really be made accessible for the benefit of excluded communities."

Kate Hudson, project manager at the Beacon North East in Newcastle-Durham commented, "The challenge for universities is not to regard public engagement as a strand of what they do, the mere communication of their teaching and research, rather it should be the core of what they do, the very influence on teaching and research. At their best, universities are institutions for both private and public good and we must harness this potential and ensure that our efforts do not fall above or beyond those communities closest to home and often, most in need."

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