

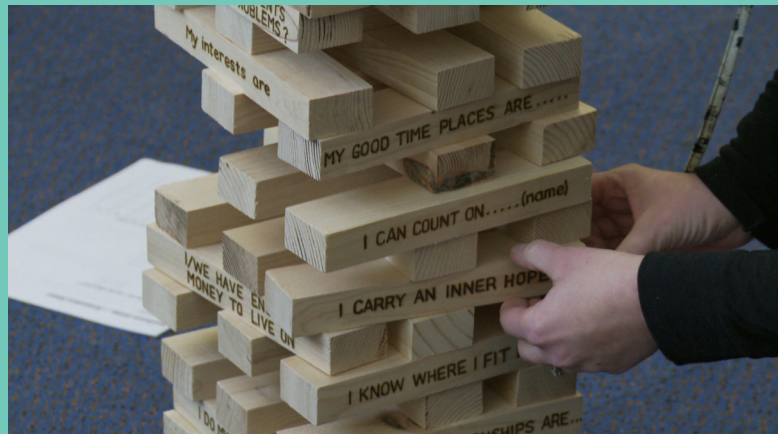
Models of Partnership Working in University - Community Engagement

South East Coastal Communities Dissemination Paper 2

Who constitutes 'the community' and how should universities work with them? In this paper, we draw on the experience of the South East Coastal Communities (SECC) programme to explore three different ways in which participating universities chose to define approach and work with their 'community'.

Key Points

- Institutions involved in the SECC project trialled three distinct approaches to defining their community: by theme; by place; by common interest or identity.
- While some funding is important, successful partnership working is characterised by investment of time in long term relationships and understanding the mutual benefit for community and university partners.



Pictures Courtesy of Danny Weinstein



Introduction to South East Coastal Communities

The South East Coastal Communities (SECC) project was funded in 2008 by the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) for three years. It brought together nine universities spanning the South East of England coastal region – University of Chichester, University of Brighton, University of Sussex, University of Portsmouth, University of Southampton, Southampton Solent University, University of Kent, University of Greenwich and Canterbury Christ Church University – to form a collaborative and strategic approach to university-community engagement. In particular, the universities were asked to work in partnership with local third sector and community groups to build the capacity of those organisations to meet the health and well-being needs of their coastal communities.

Each sub-region took a different approach to defining their community: Hampshire explored the potential of their universities to support local social enterprise; the Kent universities took a place-based approach by concentrating on Swale and the Isle of Sheppey; and the Sussex institutions focused on particular sections of the community identified by common interest or identity, such as older people or refugees. Health and well-being was a purposefully broad category to cohere the differing institutional interests and ambitions within the SECC project.

Why South East coastal communities? Although the South East area of England is generally regarded as prosperous, there are pockets of severe deprivation and exclusion. Using the Index of Multiple Deprivation Indices¹, it is possible to identify a rim of deprivation stretching from Gravesend, Sheppey, Margate and Dover in the east, moving down to Folkestone, Hastings, parts of Brighton and Hove, Worthing and moving west to Portsmouth and Southampton. South East coastal towns are often sites of declining ports, heavy industry and former defence towns and may lack the necessary investment to re-orient successfully towards tourism or other service sector industries.

University-community engagement is often interpreted as public engagement in research or making available university libraries and sports halls to the local community. SECC required universities to do something much more radical. It asked them to connect their intellectual resources with the knowledge and experience of their local third sector organisations and community groups to address issues of mutual interest together. A concrete example would be a university academic partnering with a drug and alcohol voluntary service to conduct a user-needs analysis and then co-producing a tailored model of care. In each case, partnerships were expected to articulate clearly the mutual benefit both for the external organisation and for the university (academics and students).

¹ The Multiple Deprivation Indices are available for 2004 and 2007 at the Department for Communities and Local Government website <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/research/indicesdeprivation/>. The 2010 Indices are due to be published on 24 March 2011

As well as test ideas, build infrastructure and partnerships, the SECC institutions were also charged with contributing to the national policy debate on university-community engagement and potentially to act as a regional demonstrator for sustaining engagement work. In three years, a tall order indeed. This dissemination series shares some frank insights from the SECC experience as well as reflections on the future of university-community engagement. It will be of interest to university engagement practitioners, senior university managers, policymakers and statutory and community partners.

[Paper 1: The Future of University-Community Engagement](#)

[Paper 2: Models of Partnership Working in University-Community Engagement](#)

[Paper 3: Geographies of Collaboration in University-Community Engagement](#)

[Paper 4: Embedding University-Community Partnership Working](#)

[Paper 5: Measuring the Impact of University-Community Engagement \(forthcoming\)](#)

South East Coastal Communities Project Dissemination Series

Paper 2: Models of Partnership Working in University-Community Engagement

Key Points

Institutions involved in the SECC project trialled three approaches to defining their community and discovered the benefits and drawbacks of each:

- by pre-identified theme (e.g. social enterprise).
- by place (e.g. a suburb or local authority area).
- by common interest/identity (e.g. refugees or health professionals).

Successful partnership working is characterised by:

- Mutual benefit.
- Understanding the purpose and value of the university's contribution.
- Good relationships.
- Understanding and navigating the local strategic environment.
- Some money.
- Investment of time and taking the long view.

Introduction

In the first of these briefing papers, we explored the changing social, political and economic contexts for community-university engagement in England. We suggested that, rather than batten down the hatches to the prevailing winds of public spending austerity, universities recognise community engagement as an important way of achieving more with less. In addition, community-university engagement resonates with the renewed political focus on localism and civic society, the social pressures for corporate responsibility and transparency, and the technological advances in social networking and knowledge mobilisation. But who constitutes 'the community' and how should universities work with them? In this paper, we draw on the experience of the South East Coastal Communities (SECC) programme to explore three different ways in which participating universities chose to define approach and work with their 'community'.

Community university engagement: what's all the fuss?

Anyone from outside higher education looking in would be forgiven for wondering why universities engaging with their communities should generate quite so much debate. However, as Powell and Dayson (2011²) highlight in their review of civic universities, there is historically an unresolved dialectic within the university system in England. On the one hand, the Enlightenment heritage positions the academic as a detached observer, interested in universal knowledge and unconstrained by geography. On the other, is the role of the university as a significant local stakeholder and employer, hosting intellectual resources which could appreciably improve the social and economic well-being of its community. Indeed, for some, involvement of the community could appreciably improve the quality of teaching and research in the university. This juxtaposition of liberal versus vocational, individual versus socio-economic or elite versus mass continues to characterise policy debates on English higher education (op cit., 2; Bourner, 2010³). More prosaically, universities have recognised that a prosperous and desirable location is important in attracting staff and students. Tensions between 'town' and 'gown' can also undermine the local goodwill required to support expansion plans or to build new student residences.

The South East Coastal Communities programme

Today then, universities must engage to some extent with their communities, but the nature and depth of this engagement will be strongly defined by their mission and ethos. For many institutions, community engagement is about granting selected access to resources and facilities through public lectures, open days, lifelong learning courses and membership of libraries and sports halls. Community engagement of this type has an important public relations function and can support widening participation objectives. The universities participating in the South East Coastal Communities programme were asked to do something more radical. They were asked to create mutually beneficial partnerships with local community and statutory organisations to improve the health and well-being of their coastal communities. This mutual benefit was to be founded on bringing together the intellectual resources within the university and the tacit, practitioner and local knowledge of community organisations. In this model, rather than a linear transfer or lending of knowledge, the universities were charged with building capacity in their communities and indeed, challenging and influencing their own practices, teaching and research. Finally, rather than being a fringe activity undertaken by some academics or departments, the SECC participants were encouraged to elevate the strategic importance of community engagement within their university and to embed the infrastructure required to sustain future activity.

² Powell, J. & Dayson, K. (in press) 'Engagement and the idea of the Civic University'. In Benneworth, P. (forthcoming 2011) *University Engagement with Socially Excluded Communities: Towards the Idea of 'The Engaged University'*, Springer – Higher Education Series.

³ Bourner, T. (2010) 'A compatible partnership? Student-community engagement and traditional university education', *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, Vol. 3. (2010). Available at <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/ijcre/index>

Who constitutes 'the community'?

The first question facing the universities was how to define their 'community'. Clearly, who constitutes a community and where the boundary of that community lies, will shift according to context and purpose. Using different markers, such as identity or interest or experience for example, will result in multiple and overlapping communities within the same geographical location. Another concern for universities is how to make the best use of modest funding, such as seeking partnerships where they have relevant expertise or existing good relations. Each of the three sub-regions participating in SECC took a different approach to defining their community and, although this was partly a conceptual convenience to cohere the programme (and in practice the approaches overlap), the framework is useful for identifying the strengths and limitations of each.

Communities defined by geographical boundary ("place")

The universities in Kent decided to focus their activities in the Swale region and particularly on the Isle of Sheppey. What is unusual about this choice is that neither of the three universities had significant relationships with this area; it was not a notable source of undergraduates; nor was it a major source of employers for graduates. The benefits were that Swale offered a neutral ground to universities embarking on strategic engagement, where communities had little experience of engaging with higher education. Focusing on such a tightly defined geographical area also allowed the university to have a demonstrable impact.

Kent case study:

The **Remember Blue Town Heritage** project looks at how the working lives of people in Sheppey over the past fifty years has changed and tries to re-connect the experiences of previous generations in adapting to difficult economic circumstances with experiences of the younger generation in responding to today's uncertainty. In part, the project hopes to overcome the misunderstanding and social distance between the young and the retired that can be characteristic of coastal communities. The **University of Kent** and its partners are training local people to undertake reminiscence work and to work with young people in imagining their futures. Training will also be provided in interviewing and audio-editing. This work is complemented by an art project that attempts to capture past and present visions of the island, all of which it is hoped will re-invigorate local people's sense of place and identity that could form the necessary glue for community action. The Blue Town project contributes to research on the sociology of work, family, community and deindustrialisation. It has also engaged a broad range of research methodologies, including audio work, visual representation and life history interviews.

After an initially guarded reaction from the local community in Swale, who understandably feared becoming a conquered outpost, the partnerships are generally flourishing. Indeed, academic leads in the Kent sub-region report that they have been approached by community leaders to work on initiatives that extend outside the life of the SECC programme. It is particularly impressive considering the universities worked from a standing start. Although ambitious – perhaps overly so – ‘letting a thousand flowers bloom’ in a tightly defined location has enabled the Kent universities to reach many of Swale’s communities. Achieving critical mass in this way could have an impact multiplier effect and reinforce a sense of collaborative achievement. But without careful co-ordination, it can also create boundary disputes and make communities feel overrun. Projects outside of the immediate locale may need particular strategic justification too. With Kent for example, there are no planning applications or student nuisance issues on the Isle of Sheppey that require diplomatic investment and the cost of engagement with the island is high given the distance and poor transport links. For these reasons, Kent colleagues have had to be clear on their rationale for drawing the community boundary where they have. Periodically reviewing the case for mutual benefit is crucial to mitigate the risk that senior university managers shift resources to other engagement opportunities that appear to offer ‘better returns’.

*Communities defined by their interest, experience or identity
 (“communities of interest”)*

The universities in Sussex chose to define their community partners through forming or working with pre-existing ‘communities of interest’ and/or ‘communities of practice’. A community of practice (CoP) is a group of individuals who participate in a particular activity or who share a common experience. The members of the CoP come together to share and develop their knowledge about that activity. So, for example, a group of social policy academics, police and social work professionals might meet to discuss how they can best work with young runaways. In this way, CoP are sites of mutual learning. Communities of interest (CoI) are used in the SECC context to underline the participants’ identity or experience as the main unifying theme. The Sussex universities for instance worked with older people, young people with special needs and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual community (LGBT). There is some overlap here with defining communities by place: the residents of a particular road or estate may share some common experiences or identities.

Sussex case study:

The **Activity Buddies: Promoting Quality of Life for Older People** project is run jointly by **University of Brighton** and **University of Sussex** and extends the successful work carried out by members of the well-being, health and occupation for older people (WHOOP) group, hosted by the Clinical Research Centre for Health Professions. The project brings together university students of the School of Health Professions (physiotherapy students, occupational therapy students and podiatry students), School of Pharmacy and Biomolecular Sciences (pharmacy students), University of Sussex (sociology students) and School of Applied Social Science (social science students) and provides an opportunity for students and older people, in care or in their own home, to engage together in intergenerational activities related to the student's subject area. So, for example, one strand of work called 'Dispensing with the Mystery' brings pharmaceutical students and older people together to discuss experiences of using and taking medication and how the medication works. Another project strand, the 'Foot Health Education Programme', sees podiatry students providing tailored advice to older people on good foot care, crucial to reducing pain and disability and promoting mobility in later life.

The CoP/Col approach has raised interesting issues about representation and choice of focus in community-university partnerships. In a number of cases, the academics involved with particular CoP/Col have themselves been members of that community, either through their identity or experience – for example, as members of the LGBT community or as parents of children with special needs. We discussed in the introduction to this paper how community engagement challenges traditional notions of objective scholarship and of the academic as expert: CoP/Col are a good example of this tension. Here, non-academic expertise is recognised and valued and the 'objects' of research are also asked to become co-enquirers and learners.

However, a CoP/Col is not a democratically elected grouping and should not be seen as a definitive representation of a particular community. It is important therefore that CoP/Col members consult more broadly when they are seeking to act on behalf of that broader constituency. The CoP/Col approach will also tend to create groupings that evolve from individual academic or departmental interests and experiences and these may not be the communities deemed most 'at need' by local statutory agencies or other bodies. Such partnerships may though be characterised by stronger personal relationships - and a clearer understanding of mutual benefit - than projects where priorities are dictated by a strategic framework.

Communities defined by the university's expertise or interest ("theme")

The universities in Hampshire took a thematic approach, exploring how social enterprises that benefit their local communities could be established, expanded and/or made financially sustainable. Social enterprises, like ordinary commercial enterprises, are trading organisations operating in competitive markets, but they explicitly seek to balance making profits with making a positive impact on the people they employ and/or serve, and often the local community in which they operate. The Hampshire universities had a good track record in enterprise and entrepreneurship and it was felt that using social enterprise as a vehicle to engage with local communities would build on existing strengths. A thematic approach is particularly appropriate where the university has specific expertise – or wishes to develop further expertise – in an area of engagement and may be employed as a recurring motif, reflecting the institution's mission or brand. Other examples might include: social innovation, the environment or inclusion.

Hampshire case study:

Portsmouth University has developed an innovative project based on **community asset transfer**. The University is working with six local partners so that assets (principally buildings) currently owned by charities or public sector organisations can be transferred into community ownership and run as social enterprises, encouraging multiple and sustainable use of the space. The University has provided expert consultancy on asset transfer and postgraduate student expertise on architecture and business planning for the new social enterprises. Work on the transfer of Church of England properties has been particularly successful and attracted Government interest in the scheme. Plans are now underway for a Community Interest Company (CIC) to be set up to continue the work on a sustainable basis.

The thematic approach does raise some issues for university-community engagement. Firstly, if the university is primarily offering consultancy and advice on a given theme, this may weaken opportunities for community capacity-building and knowledge exchange. Second, and relatedly, the university needs to be clear why it is best placed to provide expertise rather than other organisations. For example, in Hampshire, universities needed to demonstrate why they were best placed to provide expertise on social enterprise, rather than third sector consultancy organisations or existing social enterprise infrastructure. Finally, a particular challenge for the Hampshire universities – and this has applied to all the institutions involved in SECC – has been the delays or difficulties arising that were outside their control. These include obtaining planning permission, changes in the national or local policy environment, and completing legal due diligence.

The margins or the mainstream?

A key aim of the SECC programme was to encourage participating institutions to put community engagement further up their institution's list of strategic priorities and for this reason, staff at pro vice-chancellor level in each university were closely involved in the development of the bid. However, as the SECC programme draws to a close, it is clear that the impact on the institutions has been variable. Where the organisational impact has been weakest, this may be because the institution already has a strongly defined mission or because the SECC project was managed as a discrete activity and little publicised across the institution. Where SECC funding has made more strategic influence, the institution may already have been oriented towards this type of activity or because it built on well-established partnerships or projects.

Put bluntly, at around £300k per institution over three years, it was always going to be a big ask to secure significant strategic change – and indeed to believe it could be measured reliably within the funding period. However, an interesting finding from the SECC programme is that buy-in from middle management level is as important as senior level support. Deans and Heads of Department can affirm the strategic tone by ensuring community engagement is a criterion in recognition and rewards structures for individuals and departments. Middle managers can also support staff to manage their workload flexibly: too often, staff have been expected to be doing engagement 'in their own time'. This links back in part to the tension within academia about the status and value of engagement work, although the requirement to evidence impact as part of the Research Excellence Framework may help to address this.

Successful engagement

While universities in the SECC project adopted different partnership models and defined their communities in different ways, a number of common features of successful community-university engagement emerged:

- **Mutual benefit** – both the university and the community partner must benefit from the partnership. Altruism may characterise some elements of the partnership, but altruism alone is rarely sustainable in the long term. Community representatives need to be assured that the university is listening; and that the work is relevant to their experiences.
- **Understand why** – Universities should be clear on the unique contribution and value added by their involvement in any community partnership, rather than other potential stakeholders. This will provide a coherent offering to their locality and ensure universities employ their resources to best effect.

- **Good relationships** – Universities need to work hard to build successful relationships based on trust and respect and negotiate power differentials with sensitivity. It is important to identify the key people locally, in the community and in the statutory sector.
- **Understand and plan for the environment** – Just as good relationships facilitate successful partnership working, it is important that universities understand their local strategic and political context. At a statutory level, this includes administrative processes, strategic planning cycles, key points for influence and timescales. University staff (and students) may also need specialist support where community-university partnerships raise legal, financial, ethical or pastoral issues.
- **Some money** – A key learning point from the SECC programme has been that money does not in itself ensure successful partnerships. Indeed, some academics and potential community partners will be put off funding that has tight conditions attached or significant monitoring requirements. But money can buy out staff time, *enabling them to engage*. The SECC experience suggests that staff time, reward and recognition are the main inhibitors to community-university engagement.
- **The long term** – Successful community-university engagement takes time: time to build relationships, to negotiate new environments and new challenges – and to make and learn from mistakes. Engagement can be difficult: in the early stages, it often requires substantial investment of time and emotion and the benefits are not always immediately obvious. But as networks mature, there can be a strong ripple effect of new connections and projects. This is noticeable as the funding for the SECC programme draws to a close.

Conclusion

From the outset, the universities participating in the SECC programme were faced with important questions. In particular they were asked to define their 'community', to understand their unique and legitimate contribution in relation to that 'community', and to develop relevant and mutually beneficial ways of working. The SECC programme offers some examples of how universities can respond to the call to engagement, defining their communities by place, by common interest or by strategic theme. It provides no definitive answers however. Each university must negotiate – and re-negotiate - the meaning, value and purpose of engagement with their communities if they are to ensure successful and sustainable partnerships in the long term.

Contact details

For more information on the Coastal Communities Programme, please contact the Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp) at the University of Brighton.

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