

Geographies of Collaboration in University - Community Engagement

South East Coastal Communities Dissemination Paper 3

The South East Coastal Communities (SECC) programme brought together nine universities spanning the coastal region across Kent, Sussex and Hampshire. Each sub-region took a different approach to defining their community. In the third of this series of dissemination papers we look at the opportunities for sub-regional and regional working between universities and their communities.

Key Points

- The SECC experience of 'regional collaboration' suggests that universities need to be able to manage community engagement activities flexibly and locally but also at the sub-regional level.
- Universities should provide a 'way-in' for communities, whether this is a collaborative gateway within a city-region or grafted on to an institution's existing business engagement structures.



Pictures Courtesy of Danny Weinstein



South East Coastal Communities Project Dissemination Series

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 3: Geographies of Collaboration in University-Community Engagement

Key Points

- Multi-partner projects can present particular challenges. Encouraging project coherence and cross-pollination of ideas at the centre, without imposing unhelpful constraints on time-pressed local actors is one such challenge.
- The SECC experience is an interesting case study for ‘regional collaboration’ and what that can mean in practice. It suggests that universities need to be able to manage community engagement activities flexibly and locally but that there are opportunities for joint working, particularly it appears at the sub-regional level.
- Universities should provide a ‘way-in’ for communities, whether this is a collaborative gateway within a city-region or grafted on to an institution’s existing business engagement structures. Over time, these entry points can create their own momentum of conversations, projects and ideas.

Introduction

In the third of this series of dissemination papers on the South East Coastal Communities (SECC) programme we look at geographies of collaboration, and particularly what opportunities there are for sub-regional and regional working between universities and their communities. The use of shared services and shared infrastructure has been topical – if not widely enacted – in the higher education sector in England, and rarely a policy document is produced without the phrase “sharing good practice” making an appearance. Indeed, this dissemination series is an example. But the experience of the SECC programme is that community-university engagement is a particularly local and contingent phenomenon. In addition, higher education institutions are not always natural collaborators. Most have a strong corporate identity and mission and may view neighbouring universities as competitors for staff and students – or worse, non-competitors. However, in straitened times, collaboration may be key to making engagement more cost effective. We offer here some brief lessons for collaborative community engagement and for attempts at regional collaboration projects in general.

A regional experiment

Originally, SECC was conceived as a regional programme for universities to engage with their coastal communities in a mutually beneficial way. The project was unusual in that the impetus came from staff in the regional team at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and evolved through informal discussion rather than a formal commissioning process. Even at those first meetings, it became obvious that the universities would not want to take the same approach and indeed, it seemed appropriate that their approach should be responsive to local need rather than imposed by template.

However, the project needed a unifying theme and for the sum to be greater than its parts – for example, to demonstrate that, acting as a region, universities could leverage more in-kind contributions, could share contacts and ideas or could recycle resources more effectively. Out of this then developed the notion of three sub-regions – Sussex, Hampshire and Kent – trialling three different approaches to community engagement, but working under the regional banner of South East Coastal Communities. At the regional centre was a small management group overseeing strategic direction, evaluation and dissemination and devolving budget pots to each of three sub-regional boards. Decisions to approve and fund local projects were made at the sub-regional level, unless they exceeded an upper threshold. This was a deliberate decision to empower and resource those closest to the communities and avoid funding being absorbed by ‘bureaucracy’.

Ironically, having a low-resourced management group at the centre may be one of the reasons why the project evolved largely as three separate projects, though under one brand. There were attempts to engender the sort of regional knowledge exchange – if not activity – originally envisaged, through for example a regional programme website and a social networking site, though these have been under-used and not always kept up to date. Regional events were also held and well-attended but it is not clear that they generated additional activity or learning.

By contrast, relationships at the sub-regional level have been very strong and extended beyond SECC matters. The programme has both strengthened existing connections and forged new ones. Many participants in the programme have reported good information and practice sharing at the local level and there is an expectation that community engagement collaboration will continue, although perhaps not as discretely funded ‘SECC’ activity.

“Traditionally, the three universities that worked together here in Hampshire have not collaborated extensively so it was good to build these relationships. Future collaborations are now possible because of the good experiences over the last three years, but would need to be around a focused set of activities that are resourced appropriately.” (Hampshire participant in SECC)

Implications for collaboration

The SECC experience has some implications for attempts at regional and sub-regional collaboration in community engagement and more generally. Conceptualising and steering community-university engagement at a regional level is challenging. Despite a similar social and economic heritage and representing a geographically contiguous strip of land, the coastal communities in the South East are not ‘a community’. Indeed, the main economic and transport connections for many South East coastal towns and cities run to London, rather than to each other. In a similar way, universities are not homogeneous institutions: they each have a distinctive corporate identity, ethos and aims. To its credit, the project structure was sensitive to this diversity and in general, the ‘loose federation’ of universities under the SECC brand encouraged multilateral relations across the sub-regions, rather than bilateral relationships with a central function. Indeed, the SECC experience has put institutions in a good position to respond to the cross-Research Council initiative ‘Connected Communities’². There were still perhaps missed opportunities for common learning and opportunities of scale. With sufficient funding for example, SECC could have developed engagement toolkits or tested a consortium approach to buying legal or financial advice. Interestingly, some of the large-scale knowledge-sharing work is now being carried out by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, also funded by HEFCE.

At a sub-regional level – a city, local authority or county level - there is good logic for collaborating given shorter journey times, common networks and likely a shared local pride and attachment. Community partners, too, are likely to be less interested in ‘which university’ locally and more in finding a personable academic with the appropriate expertise. As part of the SECC programme, each sub-region developed its own community interface(s):

“Our helpdesk has developed as a genuine gateway in to Brighton and Sussex, two co-located universities. Whilst we were co-working before, we now have a publicly articulated service that enables local communities to access both institutions in one hit. This is a powerful development. Many local people don’t really distinguish anyway, referring to ‘the university’. It’s complex enough for external people to navigate one university in search of what they need, let alone two.” (Sussex participant in SECC)

A dedicated and effective community-university interface can create its own momentum of conversations, projects and ideas, though inescapably it requires some core funding: operating the interface at a local or sub-regional level may make good practical and financial sense. Of course, the ‘wiring behind’ is crucial and institutions need to work on fielding queries effectively and professionally. It also relies on neighbouring

² Connected Communities is a cross-Research Council research programme, led by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), to mobilise researchers, communities and other stakeholders to enhance community regeneration, self-reliance, health and well-being. For more information, see <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx#3> (accessed 5 March 2011).

universities being willing to collaborate in this area.

The question of whether there is a natural spatial boundary for effective collaboration is topical given the Coalition Government's review of the geography of public administration (Pratt et al., 2011, forthcoming³). This includes the abolition of regional development agencies and regional strategies and a renewed focus on cities and neighbourhoods. The aim is to better align the spatial impact of policy interventions with economic and social 'reality' (Pratt et al., 2011, forthcoming). The SECC experience generally affirms this re-visioning of the landscape, though ultimately the precise contours of those boundaries should be shaped by the opportunities for mutual benefit that arise between universities and their communities.

Finally, the SECC programme raises questions about the value of a steering group where there are strongly differentiated sub-projects. The nature of SECC as a bottom-up programme, combined perhaps with the intrinsic 'localness' of community-university engagement was a challenge to the regional layer.

"Regionally I think SECC was less successful. Certainly from my perspective, the knowledge exchange and collaboration beyond the sub-region was difficult. I think the geographies, as well as the foci, were too diverse." **(Hampshire participant in SECC)**

"On collaboration with other regions, my experience is that we had successful networking events with good ideas and best practice aired and exchanged. On a project management level, we have had very useful contacts with the Sussex region and, in the first half of the project, we had advice from our Hampshire colleagues, particularly on establishing social enterprises. However, the sub-regions have had distinct approaches to SECC so the project manoeuvrability has been limited." **(Kent participant in SECC)**

While an independent and well-regarded support structure or affiliation could work well at a regional, national or international level – for example, the National Centre for Co-ordination of Public Engagement or the international Talloires Network – it is not clear that a management function sits well at these levels. Where the sub-projects are so diverse, they may be better funded separately or be required to engage in a common unifying activity. For example, the SECC programme could have been better tied together if every partner institution was involved in establishing academic credit for their community-university work, as part of the funded outcomes.

³ Pratt, J. et al (2011, forthcoming) 'Sustainable Support for Community-University Partnerships: A question of geography?' Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement (accepted March 2011)

The importance of geography

In traditional academic thought, knowledge has no spatial boundaries. But geography is important in community-university partnerships. The SECC programme envisaged universities investing their intellectual resources in to their communities through projects of mutual benefit and there is an intrinsic 'localness' to this endeavour. While there are important opportunities for organising and sharing learning at the regional, national and international level, management structures for community-university engagement may be best sited close to home. The sub-region – city, county or local authority area – emerged in the SECC programme as a particularly successful site for collaboration. Co-incidentally, this goes with the grain of much of current Government policy on the geography of administration. Universities might explore how they can reduce their own costs and improve their offer to their communities by joining together with neighbouring institutions to provide a single, welcoming interface with their communities.

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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