

# Measuring the Impact of University-Community Engagement

## South East Coastal Communities Dissemination Paper 5

The South East Coastal Communities (SECC) programme brought together nine universities spanning the coastal region across Kent, Sussex and Hampshire. This final paper in the SECC Briefing Series shares our experience of measuring the impact of university-community engagement.

### Key Points

- There is a need to distinguish between evaluating the impact of the partnership on its stakeholders and evaluating the wider social impact of university-community initiatives
- Impact measures should be realistic and proportionate both to the partnership activity and the stage of development of the partnership
- Current policy developments suggest a number of strategic priorities for impact work: these will shape how and what we measure in the future



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 Indices<sup>1</sup>, 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).

<sup>1</sup> 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](#)

# South East Coastal Communities Project Dissemination Series

## Paper 5: Measuring the Impact of University-Community Engagement

### Key Points

Identify where your project lies on the continuum between capacity building and mature engagement and distinguish accordingly between developmental outcomes and social impact.

When designing your evaluation approach:

- Be clear what you are measuring and why, distinguish the different domains of impact and think through the practicalities of data collection
- Be realistic about what you might achieve
- Be flexible enough to improve your measures if needed and to capture unexpected outcomes
- Take a sampling approach
- The rigour and burden of evaluation should be proportionate to the resources available, and to your priorities

When evaluating a suite of diverse projects, it may be more effective to agree some collective priorities and recognise a plurality of approaches in achieving those.

Current policy developments suggest a number of strategic hooks for impact work: these will shape how and what we measure in the future.

### Introduction

When the university partners and HEFCE officials embarked on the South East Coastal Communities (SECC) journey, many had high hopes of re-orienting their institutions' strategic priorities, of making a difference to their local communities and for providing policy evidence that university-community engagement deserved explicit funding recognition. If a week is a long time in politics then in five years, the political and economic context of SECC could change dramatically: and so it did. With an economic downturn, a new policy discourse of 'public engagement', and the practical reality of capacity-building (often from scratch) facing SECC participants, institutional change, social impact and political influence became frustratingly hard to realise. Indeed, a key learning point has been the importance of realism and clarity underpinning evaluation measures and of distinguishing internal project aims with dreams of impact far beyond. This final paper in the SECC Briefing Series shares our experience of measuring the impact of university-community engagement and considers how recent policy developments may affect how and what we measure in the future.

For capacity-building programmes like SECC, it can be helpful to distinguish between evaluating the impact on, for example, staff and student engagement, institutional prioritisation, teaching and learning or levels of community engagement and evaluating the social impact of university-community initiatives. Understanding social impact might mean assessing the effect of third-sector funding workshops on an organisation's financial stability, or the effect of a community writing group on participants' wellbeing. This could also be seen as a distinction between programme-level and project-level impacts. Although social impacts are likely to be of more interest to project leaders, understanding the programme effects on academic practices and on relationships between universities and their communities is critical. There were some issues in distinguishing these different impacts in SECC partly because the initial business case charged the project with building capacity and acting as a demonstrator. This had the effect of introducing social impact measures even though most institutions were starting from a fairly low baseline of activity and experience: for these participants, capacity-building measures alone would have been more appropriate.

Relatedly, we found that focusing on pre-defined project outcomes/measures can undervalue the practical lessons learnt through delivery and how these can improve future practice. SECC is replete with such examples. For instance, a number of institutions realised early on that even when building capacity in a relatively new area of work, the choice of project and approach should still derive from institutional experience, priorities and strengths. There was also important learning in how establishing community partnerships can require significant time for due diligence, navigating local politics and managing the translation issues that arise when new partners come together.

As obvious as it sounds: impact measures must be workable. A key aim in the SECC business case was that the project, 'demonstrate a measurable improvement in the capacity of third sector organisations to respond to the health and wellbeing needs of their communities'. Such an aim demands a complex outcome measure. We encouraged the use of indicators such as 'increase in turnover of community organisations' and 'sustainable changes in approach or activity within community organisations': but these were hard to quantify and even harder to attribute directly to SECC. Interestingly, one project which provided a concrete example of capacity-building in the community – the Count Me In Too project in Brighton which has influenced the commissioning of local LGBT services – had a number of years of relationship-building and activity prior to the SECC programme. In our enthusiasm, we perhaps overlooked that much of the SECC programme was about building the capacity within HE institutions to engage with their communities – and that building capacity within the community organisations within the project timeframe would be a bonus.



Another thorny issue was establishing a baseline at the start of the project. SECC principally funded new activity but it also funded the development of existing work. For those projects starting from scratch, the sheer volume of work involved in getting projects up and running meant that systematic baseline work was not possible, nor was there resource to do it. Kent, for example, established fifteen projects in Swale on issues ranging from drugs and alcohol services to community writing groups. For those projects, particularly in Sussex, where SECC was building on existing work, baselining was felt to be inappropriate, with universities and community partners instead preferring to work towards defined outcomes. It is clear that a baseline in the SECC context in reality meant multiple and differently constructed baselines. And this had a knock-on effect in terms of measuring impact. Ordinarily, a demand study or baselining work would be carried out prior to project funding. But SECC was missionary project, a pathfinder: and in this scenario aspiration can come before evidence.

### *Think through the practicalities of data collection*

SECC was a large project with nine institutions and more than 20 individual projects, and therefore potential data collection sites. At the centre was a steering group with representatives from each of the three sub-regions - Hampshire, Sussex and Kent. A decision was made at the start that as much money as possible should be devolved through the central group to the front line: this was partly to mitigate the scourge of many large projects – the absorption of costs into infrastructure – and partly in the belief that universities and their community partners should be the key decision-makers in allocating funds. However, without significant financial leverage the central steering group became an overseer, rather than a strategic guide. This in turn made it more difficult to co-ordinate the central evaluation.

The burden of data collection is also important to recognise. In general, it is worth tailoring the number and scope of evaluation measures to the financial size of the project: otherwise project leaders will spend their time filling boxes rather than delivering. SECC is an interesting case study of managing the evaluation of large projects. On the face of it, SECC was well-funded at £3.1m and £100k was set aside for evaluation. However, when broken down, the amount of funding per institution over the four years of the project was modest – perhaps £100k a year. Within this budget, institutions needed to build capacity, deliver their projects and collect evaluation data. In addition, because SECC project level evaluations were concerned with social impact as well as impact on institutional capacity-building, this required collecting data from community groups, which adds a further layer of complexity. So the principle of proportionality should apply at both programme and project level.

### *Blanket approaches to measurement can be hard to implement*

The experience of SECC is that it is difficult to find a one-size fits all approach to evaluating university-community engagement projects. SECC comprised of three sub-regions and nine HE institutions, each with their own priorities, networks, starting points, project themes, institutional configurations and so on. Reporting on programme-wide indicators was patchy and ultimately institutions pursued their own measures, albeit with some co-ordination at the sub-regional level. The institutions in Sussex for example all attempted to work from the REAP framework, developed by Jenny Pearce and colleagues <sup>2</sup> at the University of Bradford, but in the end adapted it to their own contexts.

## The REAP Framework

### The REAP Framework for University-Community Knowledge Exchange Evaluation

<b>Reciprocity:</b> There is a flow of knowledge, information and benefits in both directions between the University and its community partners in activities	<b>Access:</b> partners have access to the University facilities and resources, as opposed to receiving a one-off provision of goods and services
<b>Externalities:</b> There are benefits outside of those accruing to the partners and these should contribute to building social trust and social networks in the District and through these to enhanced sustainability, wellbeing and cohesion <u>locally</u> in the Bradford District and <u>nationally</u> to the building of a learning and knowledge based society	<b>Partnership:</b> Partnerships deepen and develop through the extended reciprocity and improved access. They are an output and outcome of CE activities, which should eventually also become key inputs to improving and enhancing those activities

This is a simple but systematic framework for partners to agree their objectives, both qualitative and quantitative. It also emphasises the importance of reciprocity in university-community partnerships, a concept we have discussed elsewhere in this series of briefing papers. The Sussex institutions were also charged as part of the SECC project to scope a model

<sup>2</sup> Pearce J; Pearson M; and Cameron S (2007), The Ivory Tower and Beyond: The University of Bradford at the Heart of its Communities – the University of Bradford's REAP Approach to Measuring its Community Engagement. Bradford ICPS-University of Bradford



for measuring the impact of financial and non-financial resources leveraged from external partners through SECC expenditure. The Sussex group realised that while such a model could work at the individual project level, standardised costing and data identification procedures are needed if it were to be used comparatively across projects. Progress on this has been made but longer term work is needed: first, to detail what should be measured and second, to refine how these are evidenced year on year. In summary, we learnt that good measurement becomes realistic only at a certain level of maturity.

The University of Portsmouth used some SECC money to fund a study aimed at assessing the impact of a selection of social enterprises in Portsmouth. Although this was not a direct evaluation of the SECC projects in Portsmouth, it did draw on learning from the programme. It used both qualitative and quantitative approaches and used financial proxies to attach a monetary value to the non-market contributions of social enterprise service interventions in the following ways:

- The value of volunteering time was calculated by multiplying the total number of volunteer hours by the upper quartile of hourly earnings in the local area.
- The value of a neighbourhood transport service was calculated by applying the cost of missed outpatient appointments to the number of journeys that the service provided to people who needed to attend hospital.

Although this approach was not new, it highlighted the need for community organisations to better understand the costs and benefits associated with their activities. The examples also demonstrate how context-specific impact measurements can be.

Of course, managing and paying for diverse evaluation approaches is a luxury of the funded project. Claiming that there is no one-size-fits-all is of little comfort to university managers or practitioners trying to promote the value of engagement. Within HE institutions then it may be more cost-effective to provide three or four collective priorities against which project leaders report at the aggregate level, using whichever methods they feel appropriate. Separately, project leaders may wish to monitor other impacts which they use to support their own learning and project improvement. But sampling and proportionality are key: it is not possible to evaluate everything all of the time.

<sup>3</sup> Rampton L. Impacts and Prospects – Developing Social Enterprises (2010). This University of Portsmouth case study is reproduced from p.16 of the SECC Programme Evaluation - Final Report (2011) by Step Ahead Research Ltd.

### *Be realistic, be flexible*

University-community engagement can be an exciting area of work. It attracts energetic and dedicated people. It enables university staff and students to 'make real' their academic learning and to feel like they are making a difference in their community. But as we have suggested, this can lead to unrealistic expectations about what can be achieved. We would recommend keeping impact measures realistic, simple and few. Better still, co-write them with community partners. And be flexible enough to allow for more useful measures to emerge early in the project: community engagement is a learning journey, not a science experiment.

### *Tell everyone your mistakes – and your surprises*

This is the last in a series of briefing papers on SECC, which have sought to disseminate the lessons of the project. We have been frank about our mistakes and are keen to communicate them beyond our partners and funders. They do not just address university-community engagement projects but anyone embarking on a multi-level, multi-partner project with all its issues of governance and collaborative working, as well as anyone working within the community and wondering how universities function. But we have also had unforeseen surprises and benefits which we didn't necessarily write impact measures for. For example, four or five projects in Kent and Sussex have either already set up, or are exploring setting up, social enterprises. While it is yet to be seen how they fare, such arts and social sciences knowledge-based spin-outs are a potentially exciting development. In addition, SECC has made a longer term impact on some institutions and sub-regions. For the Hampshire HE institutions, social enterprise is increasingly a key part of their student offer and the project has provided a platform for more informal and wide-ranging contacts between staff in those universities; in Kent there are early indications that work will continue in Swale as community partners have approached the universities to discuss new projects. Across the region, a number of projects have decided to continue activities, several of which are now being led more by community rather than academic partners. These examples demonstrate the diverse and often unexpected ways that 'sustainability' is realised.

## Measuring engagement in the future

The political, economic and policy landscape has changed dramatically since the idea of regional demonstrator project to promote university-community engagement was devised in 2006. With the introduction of higher student fees, a significant cut to teaching budgets and a proposed new regulatory role for HEFCE, the HE sector will become even more competitive. The 2011 White Paper proposes freeing up student number controls to allow popular institutions to expand and to make it easier

for new entrants to the market. Indeed, the White Paper re-iterates that ‘it is not the Government’s role to protect an unviable institution’<sup>4</sup>. Decisions on internal funding allocation will therefore in large part be informed by an assessment of how activities help universities to meet their strategic priorities and affect their ‘bottom line’. Since money for future university-community engagement is likely to come from within the institutional budget, or through successful funding bids and collaborations, demonstrating the strategic value of engagement to institutions will be (even more) crucial.

There are a number of possible strategic hooks for university-community engagement. First, as competition for students increases, some institutions might see engagement as a way of differentiating their recruitment offer. Engagement can provide students with an opportunity to apply their discipline in a ‘real life’ situation or develop employability skills such as confidence, communication and self-efficacy. Second, for those institutions that continue to receive significant public funding, demonstrating impact on society can be an important way of validating that continued investment. For example, in 2009-2010, twenty-one institutions participated in a HEFCE-UUK pilot scheme to develop ‘benefit statements’, which informed the 2010 HEFCE publication ‘Service to Society: Demonstrating the Public Benefits of Higher Education’<sup>5</sup>. Third, public and community engagement activity can support institutions’ widening participation efforts. The increase in tuition fees has renewed concerns about social mobility and the Office of Fair Access (OFFA) now has increased powers to negotiate and monitor institutions’ performance in this area. Finally and significantly, the new Research Excellence Framework (REF) places ‘research impact’ as 20 per cent in the 2014 REF exercise assessment, rising to 25 per cent in following rounds. Impact will be gauged by expert review of case studies submitted by HE institutions. The case studies should include any social, economic or cultural impact beyond academia - demonstrating actual benefit rather than simply dissemination - and should be underpinned by excellent research. Indeed, this is one potential site for future engagement evaluation work.

For institutions looking to measure the strategic and financial return of their investment in engagement, social return on investment measures (which attempt to apply financial proxies to outcomes or trace the multiplier effects of initial funding) may be of interest. However, as the SECC experience of working up such a model shows, these tools can take a considerable amount of time to define and refine and have limited explanatory power without accompanying qualitative work. As always, evaluation efforts should be proportionate to resources and priorities.

<sup>4</sup> Department for Business and Skills, June 2011. Higher Education White Paper: Students and the Heart of the System. Available at <<http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/hereform/white-paper/>> [Accessed 2 September, 2011]

<sup>5</sup> Available on the HEFCE website <<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/buscom/benefits/ServiceToSociety.pdf>> [Accessed 15 August, 2011]

## Conclusions

The story of the SECC programme has raised issues that will be familiar to many involved in initiating, managing, evaluating and sustaining university-community engagement work. In this final paper on evaluating engagement work we have flagged the importance of distinguishing the different domains of impact, of balancing rigour and burden with priorities and resources, and of being realistic about what you can achieve. We have also shown how multi-partner projects can create additional evaluation challenges.

When SECC was starting out, university-community engagement was the preserve of a few dedicated enthusiasts, with little national profile. Now the phrases 'public benefit' and 'impact on society' dominate policy statements and measuring the impact of engagement is a concern across the sector.

The audience for impact measures is changing too. Significant cuts in state spending to address the budget deficit suggest a substantial shift from public to private money, and a consequent fragmentation of funding sources. While previously universities may have been able to top-slice the teaching budget or manipulate existing government funding streams to finance engagement work, universities will now have to make strategic decisions on whether and how they fund this work within existing budgets. University senior managers will need to be convinced of the value of engagement work, particularly to their bottom line. The confluence of community engagement with other agenda such as student employability, the Research Excellence Framework or widening participation will also continue to shape understandings of engagement and how we measure its impact. These are both strategic hooks and potential distractions. University-community engagement practitioners will need to heed policy developments but look also to the longer term, if the full potential of evaluating engagement work is to be realised.

## Further Information

Beacons for Public Engagement and the National Co-ordinating Centre

In 2008, the higher education funding councils and other partners across the UK invested in six beacons for public engagement based in Newcastle and Durham, Manchester, Norwich (UEA), University College London, Cardiff and Edinburgh, as well as a National Co-ordinating Centre (NCCPE) in Bristol. A total of £9.2 million was made available over four years. More information can be found at: <http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/>.

### *Suggestions for further reading*

- Hart, A., Northmore, S. and Gerhardt, C., 2009. *Auditing, Benchmarking and Evaluating Public Engagement*. Bristol, UK: National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. Available at < [https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/EvaluatingPublicEngagement\\_0.pdf](https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/EvaluatingPublicEngagement_0.pdf) >

- Fort, S., 2011 (forthcoming). *Public Engagement Evaluation Guide*. Manchester, UK: Manchester Beacon for Public Engagement.
- People Science and Policy Ltd, 2011. *Evaluation: Practical Guidelines*. On behalf of NCCPE, Research Council UK and Department for Business Innovation and Skills. Available at <<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/publications/evaluationguide.pdf>>
- Hart, A., and Northmore, S., 2011. Auditing and evaluating university-community engagement: Lessons from a UK case study. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65(1), 34-58

## Contact details

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

Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp)

University of Brighton - Falmer Campus

Mayfield House 108

Brighton, BN1 9PH

Telephone: 01273 643004

Email: [cupp@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:cupp@brighton.ac.uk)

Website: [www.coastalcommunities.org.uk](http://www.coastalcommunities.org.uk)

Social Network: [www.cuppcop.ning.com](http://www.cuppcop.ning.com)

