# The Future of Community - University Engagement

South East Coastal Communities Dissemination Paper 1

This briefing paper explores the possible futures for university-community engagement in England. A number of factors make this review timely: firstly, the changed political environment since the election of the coalition government; second, the Comprehensive Spending Review published in October 2010; and finally, the ending of government funding for initiatives such as the Beacons for Public Engagement and South East Coastal Communities (SECC) programme.

Key Points

- The re-shaping of the funding landscape for English higher education will create new drivers for universities to engage with their communities.

- The technological and cultural changes present a challenge to the traditional views of universities as secure repositories of codified knowledge.

- As key agents of influence on the economic, social and cultural capital of their localities, there may be important opportunities for universities given the renewed interest in revitalising civic society.
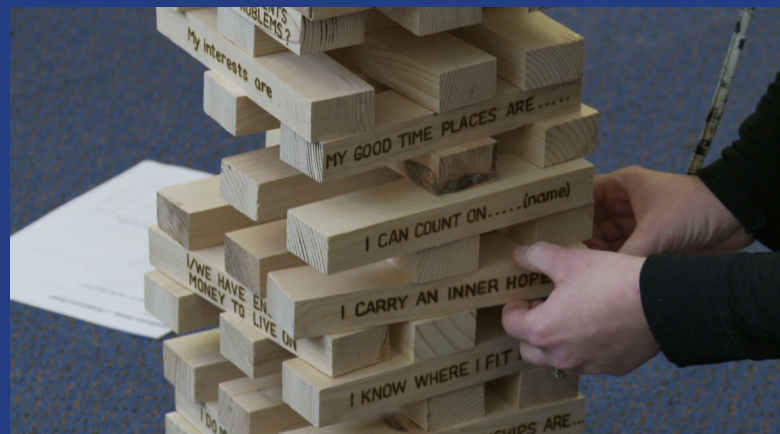
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South East Coastal Communities Project Dissemination Series

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[1], 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).

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 1: The Future of University-Community Engagement

Key Points

- The re-shaping of the funding landscape for English higher education may create new drivers for universities to engage with their communities, including the need to collaborate to add value to stretched public resource.

- The technological and cultural forces for knowledge-sharing, for example through open content programmes and social networking, presents a challenge to the traditional views of universities as secure repositories of codified knowledge. This movement recognises multiple sites of expertise and the potential of bringing these together to address pressing social needs.

- As key agents of influence on the economic, social and cultural capital of their localities, there may be important opportunities for universities given the renewed interest in the third sector and in revitalising civic society. This is reflected too in recently funded English higher education policy initiatives.

Introduction

To locate the dissemination work for the South East Coastal Communities programme (SECC), this paper explores the possible futures for university-community engagement in England. A number of factors make this brief review timely. Firstly, we are in a changed political environment since the inception of the SECC programme given the election of the coalition Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government in June 2010; second, the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) published in October 2010 signalled the deepest cuts in government funding – including in higher education - for generations; and finally, as HEFCE[2] funding for engagement activities such as the Beacons for Public Engagement and SECC draw to a close in 2011, the policy context for future university-community engagement will inevitably be re-visited and re-defined. This paper draws on policy and discussion documents and the opinions of 'experts in the field', to identify the possible shape of university-community engagement in the future.

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[2] Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Economic and political context

The CSR announcement in October 2010 heralded sweeping cuts in higher education for the period 2010-11 to 2014-15, particularly in teaching funding and capital grants. With inflation currently running at around 4%, and facing upward pressure, the impact of these cuts could be even greater in real terms. In future, it is likely that only 'priority areas' in teaching will be publicly funded, however defined. The Higher Education Innovation Fund[3] (HEIF) survives but is driven by performance metrics, based principally on income generation. Following the Browne Review published also in October 2010, measures have been passed in Parliament to raise the tuition fee cap to £9k a year. Student loans will be repaid after graduation, contingent on income. Even if the new fees are adopted from October 2012, it is likely that in the short term this new income for universities will only compensate for Government funding cuts. In general, less public funding and particularly less strategic funding, means that Government loses some policy levers over the HE sector to, for example, encourage community engagement.

At first sight then, it would appear that community engagement will suffer in those HE institutions which see this activity as 'extra' to their core mission. But this may be too simplistic an analysis. Firstly, because it depends on how we define community engagement; second, because universities have a number of moral, political and legal obligations, for example to taxpayers, to the wider public, to students and staff, and to local stakeholders; and third, because one reading of the current economic and political agenda would be that universities will actually have to engage more, rather than less.

Definitions

A word on definitions of community engagement. The first thing to say is that these definitions vary widely and depend often on an institution's history, location, ethos, administrative structures and leadership. The level and type of community engagement activity can also vary between faculties and departments within the same institution. So, to stereotype for illustration, engagement can on the one hand be about granting the public selected insights in to the workings of academe or delivering research findings in a lecture to a lay audience. On the other hand, it could involve academics and community partners exchanging expertise, or local communities bringing their issues to their university and partnering to co-produce research, teaching, community initiatives or social enterprises. It is as important not to over-chastise the former model of engagement, which might be appropriate in a given situation, as it is not to over-romanticise the apparent equality of the second model. University-community partnerships can be extraordinary and rewarding, as can they be beset with tensions over inequalities of power, funding and local politics.

[3] The Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) is designed to support and develop a broad range of knowledge exchange activities between universities and colleges and the wider world, which result in economic and social benefit to the UK.

The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) suggests that public and community engagement is an institutional approach, rather than a set of activities[4]. From this perspective, community engagement is therefore not a cost centre that can be closed in difficult financial times, but rather is integral to how the university operates and how it carries out teaching and research. The implications of this definition will be explored further below.

Green shoots?

The emergence (and recycling) of potential policy drivers means that the 'inevitable decline' of university-community engagement thesis is perhaps premature. These drivers include the Government's 'Big Society' proposals and the role of universities in future civil society, the technological and cultural forces for further democratisation of knowledge, and the renewed emphasis in straitened times on demonstrating value for public investment.

Big Society

The 'Big Society' has been a recurrent theme in David Cameron's speeches since early 2010 and was adopted in the Conservative party's election manifesto, although its roots can be traced back to the 2008 Green Paper 'A Stronger Society: Voluntary Action for the 21st Century'[5] and Cameron's Hugo Young Lecture in 2009[6]. In summary, the idea is to shift power from politicians to the people. A key criticism from Conservatives of the New Labour years is what they see as unsustainable levels of public spending, centralised control of front-line services through targets and micro-management, and de-localised, unaccountable regulation through, for example, regional strategies and quangos.

The Big Society idea draws strongly on the work of the Shaftesbury Partnership co-founded by Nat Wei and the Young Foundation. Indeed, Nat Wei has been appointed as a life peer and government adviser on the Big Society, based at the new Office for Civil Society (OCS) at the Cabinet Office. The work of the Shaftesbury Partnership, which aims to re-kindle Victorian philanthropy for the 21st century and the Young Foundation, which focuses on harnessing innovation and entrepreneurship to address social needs, are interesting clues in the direction and flavour of the Big Society theme.

The Big Society agenda operates at three levels: Government, service providers and the public. Government claims it will protect 'essential' services and facilitate local accountability through, for example, enabling local people to elect Chief Constables, and make available more data for people to make informed decisions. Services will be delivered by a mixed bag of social, public and private providers and local councils will be

encouraged to open up their commissioning processes particularly to third sector groups. At the top level, people and businesses are encouraged to participate in their communities through volunteering, attending public meetings or forming neighbourhood mutuals, and public sector workers will be offered the opportunity to form employee-owned co-operatives. The key themes cutting across this agenda then are reduced state provision, public accountability, transparency, and civic engagement.

The key question in this depiction of civic paradise is: where is the funding coming from? The short answer is, "Not from Government". Instead, Government is hoping to encourage social investment, charitable and philanthropic giving (again an echo of the Shaftesbury Partnership). There is a recognition however that start-up capital and initial support will often be needed. From April 2011, a Big Society Bank will be formed from funds taken from dormant bank and building society accounts to stimulate a social investment market[7]. Funds will be available to existing social enterprise intermediaries who support, mentor and invest in the third sector. The bank will open with assets of between £100 million and £300 million, rising as more unclaimed funds are collected.

Aside from the Big Society Bank, it is not clear how entrusting service providers is sustainable in the longer term, if the overall public funding pot is cut significantly. Existing third sector organisations will already be picking up the impact of public funding cuts (for example, in community transport or adult education) and will themselves be operating on reduced budgets. The Big Society answer is to encourage wider participation and new providers, but the problem of letting a thousand local flowers bloom may be that more and more organisations are chasing a diminishing pot of resources. Local commissioners will have to walk a path between co-ordinating provision to avoid duplication and inefficiencies but at the same time avoid accusations of bureaucratic control. Even those third sector organisations who are 'self-sustaining' – i.e. they cover costs or make a profit – are generally reliant on the public sector as their key client, for example, to deliver football training in schools or provide meals on wheels. It is not clear that charitable giving or philanthropy can step in to fill that gap. But for those involved in making the Big Society idea a reality, raising questions about funding is missing the point. Nick Hurd, the Minister for Civil Society told a fringe meeting at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham that the Big Society is not a Government programme. "The problem is, people want us to tell them what to do: they just need to do it," he said. Stephen Bubb, chief executive of Acevo, told another fringe meeting: "The Big Society is like the Holy Trinity: if you're asking questions about what it means, you don't understand it."[8]

In general, there is a great deal of scepticism among the media, the public and indeed members of the Government about what the Big Society will mean in practice, whether it can be delivered and whether it will inevitably

[7] See Cabinet Office document 'Growing the Social Investment Market: A Vision and Strategy' available at http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/growing-social-investment-market-vision-and-strategy (accessed 5 March 2011).

[8] Both quotations taken from analysis by Third Sector of the 2010 Conservative Party Conference, available at: http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/BigIssues/Details/87521/news-conservative-party-conference-2010/Article/1034063/Analysis-Big-society-hot-topic-Conservative-Party-conference/

be assigned to the dustbin of failed political slogans. For some, it is a thinly-disguised attempt to cut back the state and shoulder responsibility on local authorities. It would certainly be imprudent for institutions to tie themselves overtly to the coat-tails of a fledgling initiative. However, notwithstanding the critique, work on possible futures such as the Carnegie Report in to the Future of Civil Society[9] suggests that the third sector will inevitably be courted by governments to occupy ground where the state is retreating. Universities could play a key part in supporting organisations and community groups to do that. In addition, public spending cuts imply that universities and their local stakeholders will have to continue to work collaboratively and share resources, carry out a hard-nosed prioritisation of engagement activities, become more canny at navigating the funding landscape, and demonstrate their added value.

Added value

The mantra of universities providing added value for public investment is not new but is increasingly voiced as the HE sector heads in to a difficult spending round.

> The new Coalition Government has put increased emphasis on the importance of civil society and community activism through its 'Big Society' policy. However, public funding will be reduced in the future due to the need for budget deficit reduction, and this will affect higher education, as well as many of the other stakeholders with whom HEIs work in the community. [...] There is then a great opportunity in university-community engagement, but also a great challenge – how we do more for less. (Business and Community team, HEFCE)

One response to this dilemma, takes us back to the NCCPE definition of community (or public) engagement as being an institutional approach, rather than a set of activities. This means activity is embedded as core to the university's work, rather than an extraneous 'third stream'. As well as the potential benefits in enriching teaching and research, the student and staff experience and placing the university at the heart of local relations, it demonstrates how the employment and exchange of a university's intellectual and physical resources within the local community provides added value for public investment. This view was echoed by many of those we canvassed for this paper.

> My own view is that universities have a responsibility to engage in such activity but it may be difficult to avoid it being squeezed as the funding cuts deepen, although there is some scope to align mainstream educational and research activity with community engagement and build this in as part of educational and research practice. (Professor Ray Hudson, Durham University)

[9] Making Good Society: Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland (2010). Available at http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/getattachment/425ea7ae-58fd-4751-a52e-2e78362c97f4/Making-Good-Society.aspx

An interesting twist to the debate about value for public investment in universities is the declining share of public funding relative to total income for universities. Currently, a significant proportion of the sector's income comes through HEFCE and the research councils, although some universities also have significant endowment funds, international fees and lucrative commercial research contracts. If we put together the significant cuts to teaching funding and lifting the cap on tuition fees, universities will arguably be less beholden to government definitions of best value and more to the expectations of current students and donating alumnae.

The movement of knowledge

One final influence to note in assessing the future for community – university engagement is the increasing movement of knowledge, freely and globally. Knowledge can be shared instantly across the world through social networking sites and blogs, which many community groups are using to self-organise and by-pass traditional media and communication platforms. Similarly, the movement for 'open content' which allows information to be freely available, and in some cases copied and modified, is also challenging established and secure repositories of knowledge, such as libraries and universities. Of course, such established institutions have adapted quickly and co-opted this technology but there is a sense in which the new media is usually 'one step ahead', less fettered by legal, reputational or other regulatory constraints. Interestingly, these innovations in the movement of knowledge simultaneously globalise and localise social action. They create a pressure on state institutions and organisations to engage and to share information. Universities in particular are called upon to connect their knowledge with their local communities:

Review of recent English higher education initiatives

In this final section, we briefly consider recent English higher education policy in community engagement to try and identify clues to its future trajectory. The role of the principal delivery arm, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), is likely to change in the future. The Browne Report suggests that HEFCE become a funding and regulatory body, absorbing the functions of the Quality Assurance Agency, the Office of Fair Access and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator in to a unified HE Council[10]. Browne suggested that the focus should be on ensuring best value for public investment, including funding going to high priority courses; ensuring that minimum quality standards are met throughout the sector; ensuring that all institutions are providing equitable access for disadvantaged students; dealing appropriately with failing institutions; and resolving disputes between students and institutions. For the time being, HEFCE retains its statutory responsibilities and is charged with stewarding the significant changes to the funding model – and any likely fall-out. It is not clear amongst this, where policy making on business and community engagement would sit at HEFCE, if at all. We therefore look at recent policy initiatives and how they might inform future policy-making, whether it is driven within Government, within the Council or within the HE sector itself.

Beacons for Public Engagement

In 2008, the UK Higher Education Funding Councils, Research Councils UK and the Wellcome Trust funded six Beacons for Public Engagement ("Beacons") across the UK and a National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), hosted in Bristol. The aim was to bring about culture change in institutions to recognise and reward public engagement across subject areas and to build capacity for engagement. To embed support for public engagement, the funding and research Councils have recently agreed a Concordat for Public Engagement with Research[11], which will likely commit the funders to make public engagement a consideration in assessing research funding applications.

It is interesting that the funders settled on the phrase 'public' engagement rather than 'community' engagement in developing this policy and reflects perhaps the delicate path policymakers have had to tread in encouraging institutions to make engagement a core activity. Certainly, the Beacons exercise has demonstrated the full range of approaches and conceptions of engagement adopted by different universities. Whatever the semantics, the trend in support for public engagement at a policy level is unlikely to be reversed, particularly given its role in demonstrating the 'added value' that Government will want to see in straitened financial times. While practitioners on the ground may have misgivings about the conception of engagement adopted at a policy level, it might be pragmatic to co-opt and stretch 'public engagement' to be a broad banner for different aims and approaches.

[10] See p.46 of the Browne Report, available at http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/s/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf

[11] See NCCPE website at http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/why-does-it-matter/concordat (accessed 5 March 2011)

Social enterprise and Social Entrepreneurship Awards

Although HEFCE has supported social enterprise indirectly through HEIF, the HE Social Entrepreneurship Awards launched in 2009 are a stream of funding explicitly to promote social entrepreneurship within the HE sector. Administered by UnLtd, financial awards are available to individuals and informal groupings in universities – staff or students – who have entrepreneurial solutions to social problems. Given the renewed focus on social enterprise by the coalition Government through the Big Society agenda, the awards are timely. Work through the SECC project in Hampshire also demonstrates how universities can work with local communities to generate and mentor entrepreneurial solutions to local problems. HE institutions with the relevant expertise might seek to grow this activity, partnering with specialist third sector organisations as necessary.

PACEC publications

In 2009 and 2010, a series of working papers looking at knowledge exchange across the HE sector were published by Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC) and the University of Cambridge's Centre for Business Research[12]. In the report, entitled 'Knowledge Exchange and the Generation of Civic and Community Impacts,'[13] they make four key observations (pps. 43-44): firstly, that more HEIs should specifically include civic and community impacts in their strategic planning; second, that there needs to be greater consensus at an institutional level and at a sector level on the key performance indicators for community engagement; third, that where institutions are close geographically, there should be a shift away from "the current 'organic' form of complementarity towards a more deliberate and considered collaborative and comparative approach which could potentially allow for more informed and resourceful impact generation in shared communities"; and finally, that "a major barrier to the generation of civic and community impacts by HEIs is low levels of formal incentivisation and reward for staff and students who participate in community engagement". In summary, the report seems to suggest that universities are broadly 'engaged', albeit at differing levels, but that the engagement work is in general not prioritised, recognised or co-ordinated. This is partly what the Beacons were tasked to achieve. However, it is unlikely that there will be any future funding streams or policy directives on this, given the spending environment.

Metrics

The **PACEC** report picked up a recurrent question for community engagement policy: agreeing metrics to measure impact. To quote the report, there is "not yet a consensus regarding the KPIs of civic and community impact generation, and indicators of success are often drawn up by individual departments and programme co-ordinators on a case-by-case basis[14]" (p.43). HEFCE has been running a programme with Universities

[12] All PACE reports available at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/buscom/3stream/research.htm

[13] PACE Report on Civic and Community Impacts, 2010. Available at http://www.pacec.co.uk/documents/CivicImpactsReport Full.pdf

[14] PACE Report on Civic and Community Impacts, 2010, p.43. Available at http://www.pacec.co.uk/documents/CivicImpactsReport-Full.pdf

UK to develop robust measurements in the areas of society, community and culture; public policy; student enterprise and/or social enterprise; and staff and student exchanges between HE and business and the community[15]. The work was commissioned in recognition that the annual HE Business and Community Interaction survey (HE-BCI) is not well able to capture adequately these areas in the current metrics. The work was awarded to six institutions and a publicly available report is pending at the time of writing. Given the diversity of engagement activity and the ethos of different institutions, it is likely to prove difficult to find agreed metrics. The experience of the Research Excellence Framework, which is introducing a new element of rewarding 'impact' of research (on the economy, society, public policy, culture, the environment, international development or quality of life) is illustrative. In addition, given the funding cuts and stated commitment to loosening the shackles of centralised control, nationally agreed metrics sounds decidedly 'last government'. We can only wait to see what is published and how – if it all - the findings are employed.

Last words

This paper is written at a time of real uncertainty. As one contributor puts it, universities could go one of two ways: they could see community engagement as an easy target for cost-cutting in lean times or as a key means of achieving more with less. The challenge for community engagement practitioners is to demonstrate the latter. The forces for open and free exchange of knowledge, the growing interest in the local, the emphasis on added value and the expectations placed on all organisations to take social responsibility, suggest that universities will not be able to raise the barricades and hope to see the bad times out. The questions are how to demonstrate what different universities have to offer; how to partner effectively; how to embed, reward and sustain activity (where appropriate); and how to understand the value and impact of engagement. We hope to address these in the series of SECC dissemination papers that follow.

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