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This paper draws on an ESRC funded research project exploring the interaction between universities and the social and cultural lives of their local and regional communities, and in particular socially disadvantaged and excluded groups. The project has taken a case study approach using four regions of the UK. In this paper, we focus on just one aspect of the research, specifically relating to the positioning of universities in processes of regeneration and cultural change. Our cases help to illustrate the spectrum of quite distinctive ways in which universities relate to local and regional economies. This is also true of the way in which 'image' is mobilised by universities and the regional and city based agencies with which they engage. Image is one of the 'transformative' discourses running through our case studies, both for a city and/or a region, and for a university.

Universities, regeneration and cultural change

Many UK universities have their foundations grounded in a wider civic and social role. The universities of the nineteenth century emerged from the demands of - and the new social relations associated with - a rapidly industrialising society (see Silver, 2007; Watson, 2008). However, since this period, the relationship between university, regional context and local community has become rather more uncertain, as institutions have come to develop their own academic identities, often locating themselves within wider national and even global academic and educational networks. It is not until the last couple of decades that there has been a renegotiation of the traditional relationships between universities and their communities, and especially in the development of disadvantaged regions.

This paper draws on work undertaken as part of an ESRC funded research project exploring the interaction between universities and the social and cultural lives of their local and regional communities, and in particular socially disadvantaged and excluded groups.

The project has taken a case study approach using four regions of the UK. Within each of these regions the research is focusing on one particular university to explore the complexity of relationships between socially disadvantaged groups and 'their' local university, and the impact. Each of the four regions is characterised by social deprivation and post-industrial decline. The four cases are:

- A post-1992 university in an English city region historically based on heavy industry and engineering, which has since declined leaving a poor economic base as a legacy;
- A post-1992 university in a Scottish city region defined by the decline of its manufacturing industries;

- A Russell Group university in another English city region whose economy was historically based on manufacturing and which now aspires to the status of a globally competitive city region;
- A post-1992 university in a major English urban area of regeneration and growth.

Here we want to focus on just one aspect of the research, specifically relating to the positioning of universities in processes of regeneration and cultural change.

There are two distinct but complementary lenses through which the role of universities in regeneration can be viewed.

Claims have increasingly been made, both in academic literature and in the promotional literature of universities and their lobby organisations, for the role of universities as potentially significant drivers of economic development, particularly in the context of a global knowledge economy (see, e.g. Harding et al, 2007). One aspect of the argument is that the new economy is more concerned with finding regions and localities within which enterprises can thrive than with national level policies and politics. In this context, it is suggested that universities may have a central role in helping to create the environment within which a creative and flexible workforce can feel at home and work productively. It is this perspective which positions universities most clearly with the regional missions produced by a range of government agencies (including RDAs in England), since they are frequently concerned with delivering regional transformation, enabling regions to operate more effectively within a global market place.

Second, however, universities may play a more direct part in forms of regeneration and economic development, particularly in urban areas. So, for example, the development strategies of universities (including their estates strategies) may also underpin property-led regeneration in particular localities (and the relocation of buildings may also have negative consequences for the places from which the move is made). The impact of local spending by students may also help to transform local economies, for good or ill.

Our cases help to illustrate the spectrum of quite distinctive ways in which universities relate to local and regional economies, based both on the nature of the university (its position within national and global hierarchies of one sort or another), as well as the regional context within which it is located.

This is particularly clear in terms of the way in which 'image' is mobilised by universities and the regional and city based agencies with which they engage. 'Image' is one of the 'transformative' discourses running through our case studies, both for a city and/or a region, and for a university. Each impact on the other, in terms of the 'type' of students a university can attract and in terms of businesses that might decide to locate to a city/region, and indeed in terms of wider perceptions both nationally and internationally.

In one of our cases, the university and the city present themselves as 'global' with each seeking to capitalise on the others' image; a second case, however, demonstrates almost the opposite, although here, too there is a convergence of interests between university and city region, with each seeking to use the other to change the negative image, for example through a focus on the development of niche areas of excellence (digital media) to attract new businesses and new students. In a third case the university has played a direct and active role (with the other local university) to create a cultural quarter whose purpose is explicitly understood to be to transform the city's image. This is reflected in the city's plans as well as the university's strategic documents. The fourth case represents a more competitive higher education environment and here the university plays rather a different role, taking advantage of the large scale urban regeneration process that is underway to reposition itself within the sub-region.

Running through much of this is an understanding of universities as agents of cultural change. This understanding may take several forms – from providing an environment within which creative industries will flourish, to transforming the local labour force through re-skilling to meet the needs of the knowledge economy, to offering the possibility of new cultural opportunities – and the balance differs between our cases. In practice this process may exclude some populations, even as it increases opportunities for others.

References

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