Collaboration Between Universities

An effective way of sustaining community-university partnerships?

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The cost of bailing out the banks and rescuing the international financial system from near collapse in 2008 and 2009 has left many national governments with unprecedented levels of debt. In response, governments of all political persuasions are contemplating swingeing cuts to public services and/or significant tax increases. While the potential roles of higher education (HE) in helping national economies recover from recession through innovative research and the supply of higher-level skills are quite widely recognised, HE funding is unlikely to escape the knife.

A recent international comparative study for Universities UK (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010) suggested that the USA and Canada both cut overall funding for HE in 2009–10, particularly at the state or province level. In the UK, university funding was cut by an average of 12 per cent in 2011, with capital funding grants cut by more than half (BBC 2011). Cuts have been more dramatic for institutions focused on teaching than on research. The government has also announced plans to move from a central teaching grant model to one that is much more focused on student fees and loans (Willetts 2010). Arguably, this will make funding for many individual institutions much more uncertain in the short to medium term. Even in countries where overall investment in HE is being increased in response to the recession, many are introducing cost and efficiency initiatives, and areas perceived to be 'non-core' such as widening participation, are starting to suffer (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2010). In this context, support for community-university partnerships, with their seemingly tangential relationship to the core higher education missions of teaching and research, might seem easy targets.

This would be short-sighted; the potential of community-university partnerships to improve the quality of both teaching and research should not be underestimated. Our experience of evaluating and supporting a major program of community-university partnership projects in the south-east of England (the South East Coastal Communities or SECC program) has highlighted many instances where partnership projects have led to

new research opportunities, new developments in the curriculum, and opportunities for students to develop knowledge and skills outside the 'classroom' or lecture theatre environment.

The SECC program, which started just three years ago, in 2007–08, was born into a very different policy (and economic) environment. The program was initially envisaged as a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) pilot for a potential new public funding stream to support community-university partnerships. Regardless of the success of the program – in terms of demonstrating the mutual benefits and added value such work can bring to both communities and universities (and there have been some clear successes on these fronts) – the prospects for a discrete community-engagement funding stream for HE in the UK now seem remote.

At the time of writing, a significant number of SECC projects look likely to continue their activities after program funding ends, using a variety of income sources. What is perhaps more at stake, when considering core funding in this new higher education funding environment, is the ability to identify and support *new* community-university partnerships and projects. Even for the universities participating in the SECC program, funding will still be required in the future if they are to widen and deepen their community relationships and extend potential benefits beyond the departments currently participating in SECC projects.

Core funding for community-university partnerships is likely to be critical in two ways:

1   To provide initial seed finance for project activities that could act as 'proof of concept' and potentially attract funding from other sources in future

2   To enable universities to develop and sustain an effective infrastructure and/or conducive environment to engage with communities, that is, to attract and respond to enquiries and to develop working relationships with community members and organisations.

If universities in England are to continue to develop community-university partnerships and projects in the short to medium term, this core funding will need to be 'top sliced' in some way on an institution by institution basis from the funding and fees they receive for other things (such as teaching and research) – funding that is itself under increasing pressure. Clearly universities, like many publicly-funded organisations at the moment, need to explore ways of doing more with less.

This article draws on evidence gathered from the evaluation and coordination of the SECC program to highlight some of the opportunities that collaboration between higher education institutions can bring. One of the most distinctive features of the SECC program has been that universities have been encouraged to collaborate in order to engage communities, identify opportunities, and to scope, manage and, in some cases, deliver project activities. Key questions for the program have therefore been whether cross-

university collaboration can bring added benefits to community-university partnership work, whether it can enhance the support mechanisms for such work, and whether it can influence the likely sustainability of support mechanisms and partnerships (beyond individual projects).

In an 'age of austerity', we contend that collaboration between universities may be an efficient and effective way of engaging with local communities but that such inter-university collaboration is not cost-free and requires high-level strategic buy-in by institutions. Evaluation interviews with SECC project leads have suggested that the finance required to initiate and sustain individual projects can be quite small. Indeed, some project leads felt that *too much* funding can get in the way of developing effective community-university partnerships, upsetting the balance and reciprocity of the partnerships. However, the resources required to create the 'infrastructure' to support community engagement are sometimes overlooked. A significant proportion of these costs are for academic and administrative support staff time, although there may also be marketing and promotion costs as well as general office-related overheads.

For the SECC program the issue of collaboration also has a geographical dimension. Nine universities and one not-for-profit organisation managed the program collectively. Some of the participating universities were located less than 2 km apart; others were several hours drive away. Is cross-university collaboration more likely to be effective in improving sustainability where universities share a common location or where they focus on neutral ground? Indeed, can effective collaboration be independent of the *geography* of communities or of project activities and work at a regional, national or even international level?

We should perhaps note at this point that we are talking about the infrastructure and mechanisms to support community-university partnerships from the university and academic perspective. This is not to suggest that community partners do not also have support needs to ensure they get the most out of community-university partnerships. We should also note that the SECC program involves a very diverse range of projects, with differing objectives and levels of resources, which at the time of writing are still in their final phase of operation. It is not our intention here to assess the comparative successes of individual projects.

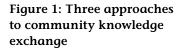**THE SOUTH EAST COASTAL COMMUNITIES PROGRAM**

The evidence used in this article has been drawn primarily from the overall SECC program evaluation exercise. However, the article also draws on participant research. Two members of the writing team remain engaged in the overall coordination of the program and are, in that sense, 'inside' the data that is presented here and, as such, are participant researchers. Although the name of the program is clearly stated from the outset, in order to protect the
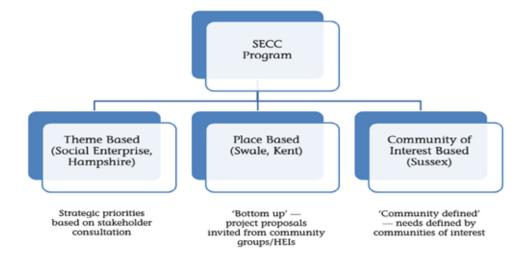
identities of the individual project workers we have 'anonymised' references to them. While a good deal of the information about the processes involved in the SECC program is already in the public domain, the results of the program evaluation are not. The decision to anonymise particular players was informed by the desire to reflect as deeply and critically as possible on those emerging results here.

The £5–6 million (£3 million from HEFCE) SECC program is now coming to a close. It has supported over 30 community-university partnerships and a wide range of projects. All have a common theme (health and wellbeing), a common broad geographical focus (coastal communities) and a common goal (to facilitate 'demand led' community knowledge exchange, working in partnership with local organisations to leverage added resources and value for the benefit of coastal communities). The health and wellbeing theme was deliberately chosen because it was seen to be sufficiently open to encompass the wide range of subject disciplines offered by the partner institutions, but it could equally have been another theme.

Geographically, the SECC program area covers the full coastal area of south-east England, from the Thames estuary in Kent to the New Forest in Hampshire. While the program was regional, it was primarily governed by three subregional boards (Hampshire, Kent and Sussex). Each subregional board had representatives from the three local partner universities and a number of community partner organisations. The boards were responsible for identifying and approving projects and for overseeing the financial and academic management of the program. Each subregion explored a slightly different approach to community knowledge exchange in terms of what a 'community' is, and what constitutes 'demand led' (see Figure 1), and each region began from very different starting points with regard to community-university partnerships and knowledge exchange.

In Hampshire projects could be described as relating to a 'thematic community' of social enterprises and entrepreneurs,

Figure 1: Three approaches to community knowledge exchange

with commissioning decisions based on a structured process of consultation with key stakeholders. Projects have ranged from Business School advice to potential social entrepreneurs, through helping communities to negotiate asset transfers and run community centres, to working with care social enterprises to understand the implication of the personalisation agenda in care budgets.

The approach in Kent could be considered as 'place based', with projects focused on a single local borough, Swale. A 'bottom up' approach to project identification was adopted, a call for proposals from community groups partnered with HEIs within broad selection criteria was circulated and the subregional board undertook a selection process. Projects have ranged quite widely in nature and focus: working with young fathers, older people and Roma groups for example.

In Sussex SECC projects have typically involved taking action on priorities identified by established communities of interest or practice, some of which predated the SECC program. Project activities have included older people learning to become researchers, developing a form of music therapy for different audiences, and improving how public services engage with and relate to lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people.

It is worth noting that, while distinctions between subregional approaches in terms of project activities are useful to make, in practice we are talking about relative emphasis. Many of the projects in Kent were focused on particular communities of interest as well as place (and sometimes communities of practice). Many of those in Sussex were with community groups that were quite narrowly geographically focused. Some projects in all three sub-areas have explored different aspects of working with and supporting social enterprises.

The regional board has not played a significant role in terms of developing thematic approaches or approving projects but has focused on ensuring sound financial governance, program-level monitoring and evaluation and, to some extent, developing opportunities for sharing learning and experiences between the three subregions. Each subregional board has a representative on the regional board and they sit alongside representatives from HEFCE and the University of Chichester (which has taken the lead role on financial reporting and management) and a small number of senior academics involved in the original bid but not in the delivery of the projects (including the Chair).

The nature of the mechanisms and infrastructure developed to engage communities and the extent to which this was done collaboratively between universities was left to the subregional groups to decide.

Sustainable Support Mechanisms

From their experience of community-university partnerships at the University of Massachusetts, Silka et al. (2008) note that 'resources are often simply too scarce and time too limited to devote to self-focused "process" goals such as sustainability'. They nevertheless suggest that there are underlying processes and structures that are important for building continuity in community-university partnership work. These include having a funding stream for project activities but also a means of communicating the university's capabilities and a continuous process for getting new faculty and academics on board.

The need for such structures and processes can easily be overlooked, sometimes through a genuine and understandable desire to ensure project funds reach beneficiaries and are not swallowed up in bureaucracy. In some cases, the SECC program has been no exception: while engagement mechanisms have been developed in all the subregions and participating HEIs, they have sometimes been ad hoc and have received little funding or support.

The SECC program evaluation suggested that there were three dimensions to these 'infrastructure' needs:

1   To provide an interface for attracting community enquiries

2   To deal with those enquiries in an appropriate manner

3   To support academics who work on enquiries.

Universities tend to present a complex and divided face to community partners. There is often a confusing array of faculties, departments, schools and individual academics, all operating apparently quite independently of one another. Therefore, an effective interface for community partners is essential for the long-term sustainability of community-university knowledge exchange. It builds trust, raises awareness and provides a flow of potential projects and/or knowledge-exchange activities for the future. In each of the three subregions, the SECC program has provided some element of community interface to help cut through this confusion.

Each HEI in the SECC program appointed academic leads to provide project guidance at a local level. In Kent these leads have had quite a high profile amongst community organisations in and around the Swale area (perhaps unsurprising given the tightly defined geographical remit of the program in the subregion). While the partners in Kent ran an open bidding and scoring exercise for funded projects at the start of the program, the subregional program manager and academic leads have continued to receive enquiries and approaches from a number of community organisations over the last three years. They have tried either to deal with them directly or pass them on to relevant colleagues, but the process of managing these additional enquiries has understandably relied on the goodwill of the project team rather than systematic processing. Not only did the project team not have access to any further central funding for projects, it was difficult, even for senior academics, to have full knowledge of colleagues' expertise across their institution (let alone across partner

institutions). Time spent receiving and responding to queries has not been directly funded by the program, and has taken resources. It is still open to question whether any of the subregional program managers or academic leads will continue in their gatekeeper role once program funding has ended.

In Hampshire, while the thematic focus of social enterprise might seem to imply a relatively small 'community', the number of social enterprises and potential social entrepreneurs in the subregion is likely to number in the thousands. As in Kent, academic leads have provided this gateway function to a large extent, although they have had the infrastructure of business engagement (business helpdesks, websites, processes for dealing with business enquiries, etc.) to fall back on. Business engagement infrastructure is not ideal for engaging communities; the language, look and feel of business engagement can be quite off-putting to some potential social entrepreneurs and community groups interested in social enterprise. However, the overlap between enterprise and social enterprise does mean that adapting business engagement processes and structures is not unreasonable. The trading nature of social enterprises also means that they may be willing to pay modest amounts for value-added services from universities. One of the Hampshire universities is therefore looking to set up a self-sustaining unit to deal with future social enterprise enquiries (particularly around asset transfer), while another one has plans to develop its business school as a regional Social Enterprise Centre of Excellence. The partners plan to continue to collaborate, but at this stage it looks likely to be collaboration through cross-referrals of social enterprises and community group 'customers' to institutions with the most appropriate academic specialism or project offer rather than a shared community-customer interface.

In Sussex, one of the universities has trialled a 'hub and spoke' model of engaging potential community project partners. A non-academic program coordinator formed the central 'hub' and queries were initially directed to her via a range of community contacts, recruited to act as 'spokes'. The key here has been to raise, through personal contact and briefings, the spokes' knowledge and understanding of the university, how it works and who to contact. As with Hampshire, the sustainability of the hub and spoke model when program funding ends is an issue, although the hub function may not require a full-time coordinator. The plan is for strategic-level permanent staff in the university to take over the role. However, the model is also coming under pressure from reductions in public expenditure that are filtering through to the third-sector community organisations that form the spokes and could lead to a high turnover of organisations and individuals involved.

Another university in Sussex has a well-developed community interface on which a good deal has already been published. It was developed before the SECC program but has been enhanced through program funding. The interface team, working

with the host university, has set up and managed a helpdesk for community partners, with a staffed telephone line, email address, website and marketing literature (see Hart et al. 2009). Through the program the helpdesk has been extended to take calls from a wider geographic area.

The helpdesk is backed up by a group of senior academics from across the university who share an interest in community engagement. Critically, this group includes academics from both the founding university and its nearest neighbouring HEI (with whom it has some history of collaboration). The group meets regularly (at least every six weeks) and discusses how to respond to queries the helpdesk can't deal with immediately. If appropriate, senior researchers are assigned to work on the queries (between one and five researcher days), resolving them or at least taking them to the next stage (student or postgraduate projects, funding bids, etc.). Currently, the helpdesk responds to around 200 enquiries a year, around a third of which lead to senior researcher involvement.

The interface team also provides an environment in which those involved in community engagement can share experiences, learn and build on the work of the past (for a fuller outline, see Balloch et al. 2007). In many community-university projects, community engagement and relationship building are only part of the project. From an individual academic's perspective, they may not even be the most important part; they will be more directly interested in things relating to their academic discipline: sports science, child development, music, etc. Yet community engagement and relationship building can be difficult things to get right. The unit provides a small body of staff to advise on and provide administrative support for community engagement and a focus for publishing academic articles on experiences and learning about community-university partnership work.

That the unit and helpdesk are likely to survive beyond the SECC program is testament not only to the added value of this kind of infrastructure but also recognition of that added value by senior strategic staff within the university (and to some extent its neighbouring HEI). High-level strategic buy-in can be crucial for ensuring that core staff and structures are supported during periods 'between grants'. This is essential for community-university partnerships working in the fields of social care, health and community wellbeing, as potential funding streams for this kind of work are often time-bound and/or 'pilot' in nature. Indeed, community partners are well accustomed to playing the 'game' of using a series of short-term projects to meet a longer-term need and to help build a critical mass of activity that has more 'transformative' potential.

However, the overall reduction in public spending will make even short-term funding scarce and more efficient ways of working will be needed. Why does every university in a region need to develop its own community-engagement infrastructure? Certainly

the SECC program has shown that shared structures for reviewing projects and approving funding for community-university partnerships can work (providing there is a shared funding stream for project activity).

Collaborative Opportunities

There is also logic in universities collaborating from a community perspective. Many community organisations, staff and beneficiaries are confused by the range of HEIs in the region and do not know who to approach, particularly where there are several universities in a single town or city region (which is common in the UK even for quite small cities). In this sense a shared infrastructure could also be greater than the sum of its parts, achieving higher levels of community awareness than individual institutions. It could also help to ensure that enquiries and opportunities are spread more evenly and dealt with by people with the most appropriate experience.

At a subregional level, most of the universities participating in the SECC program report that they are much more likely to work together in the future, although current structures such as subregional boards are unlikely to survive the end of program funding in their current form. This is despite the fact that in each subregion quite different types of universities have been working together: 'Russell group' research-orientated universities, redbrick universities from the 1960s and more teaching-orientated institutions (former polytechnics and teacher training institutions that became universities following the *Further and Higher Education Act 1992*). The program evaluation does suggest that relationships within subregions have tended to be stronger between the more teaching-orientated institutions. The desire to be seen to engage in prestigious and important research perhaps places a premium on national and international rather than local connections for research-orientated universities.

Nevertheless, in Sussex, a close working relationship has developed between a research-orientated institution and one with a more teaching-orientated philosophy. It is expected that support for their shared community helpdesk will continue, for example. This relationship predates the SECC program but highlights that institutions with different backgrounds and histories can still collaborate in community engagement.

The likelihood of future collaboration between universities in the UK on community-engagement infrastructure may also depend on forthcoming changes in the ways universities are funded. The proposals in the Browne (2010) report, *Securing a sustainable future for higher education*, one of the most significant policy papers on higher education in the UK in recent history, will, if implemented, mean less government-controlled funding and more autonomy for institutions. Equally, it is not clear whether the new Higher Education Council that is recommended in the report will continue HEFCE's role in promoting and supporting strategic initiatives such as the SECC program. A potential result of such changes could

be that community engagement, whether collaboratively with other institutions or unilaterally, would depend upon its strategic importance to the institution in the context of its overall business.

A Question of Geography?
Given SECC's 'regional' approach, does this mean that there has been a missed opportunity for setting up a sustainable collaborative regional-level structure to support community-university partnerships? The geographical focus for the SECC program was chosen because the 'region' shared a number of social and economic challenges (SECC 2007):

—low productivity relative to the southeast and, in some cases, the UK
—generally lower economic activity and employment rates and high concentrations of economic inactivity and 'structural' unemployment rates
—relatively low-skilled profile of its workforce
—lower business density and business start-up rates
—more traditional industrial activities, including lower value-added manufacturing and visitor economy; a low proportion of employment in knowledge-based sectors, especially in the private sector, and a high dependence on public sector employment
—a greater proportion of people already over retirement age than the regional average, with projections of further ageing
—relatively poor infrastructure and connectivity.

It was also, at least theoretically, a geographically contiguous region, representing a strip of settlements along the coasts. However, despite geographic proximity and shared social and economic heritage, it could not easily be argued that the SECC area is one 'community'. From each of the coastal towns the main economic and transport connections run inland towards London, not along the coast. The quickest way of travelling from one part of the region to another is often to go into London and come out again. Furthermore, inhabitants of the different towns and cities along the south coast do not feel part of a coastal community. Community identities are no more natural than national identities; they are socially constructed (Anderson 1991).

Indeed, it should be acknowledged that the program was set up with a strong subregional structure in recognition of this economic and social reality (note the plural 'communities' in the program's title). The regional focus of the program was always much more about sharing and disseminating learning than activity. In retrospect, the program may have underestimated the importance of this regional function until quite late in the day (discrete regional funding for coordination and dissemination was allocated only in the last few months of the program), but this should not be confused with a desire for the program to be regional in its operation.

This begs the question: is there a natural scale for supporting community-university partnerships? It might seem logical to suggest that this scale should be at the scale of the 'real'

community. However, students of social theory will realise that the concept of community has been subject to significant debate since Tönnies first sought to draw a theoretical distinction between community (Gemeinschaft) and society (Gesellschaft) in the 19th century. Onyx (2008) highlights that communities have both local and extra-local dimensions and recent interest in network theory has highlighted that we are all members of many interconnected communities (Rowson, Broome & Jones 2010). The geographical landscape of the communities we are part of is also widening over time. One of the ironies of community studies within tight geographical boundaries, from Young and Wilmott's study of family and kinship in East London in the 1950s to Pahl's study of the Isle of Sheppey in the 1980s, has been that they seem to identify close-knit communities just as they disappear, or at least become more dispersed.

Of course, 'community' is a highly contested term (Johnston 1994). It is not possible to circle an area on a map, around a university, for example, and assume it is a community. Quite rightly, the SECC project did not attempt to do this (although the funding body did attempt to impose a standard definition for the total study area). Communities of interest, in particular, such as people with similar disabilities, can be very widely dispersed.

But this does not mean that geography does not matter; despite the internet and relatively cheap travel, many of our social networks overlap geographically; they are focused around the places we spend most time, our homes, workplaces, the places we shop and where we spend recreational hours. Furthermore, social and economic processes, such as housing markets, can have sorting effects that create geographical clusters of people with particular outlooks or needs. Conducting a spatial approach to community development in such circumstances makes some sense (DCLG 2008). Even the projects in Sussex implicitly recognised the potential importance of place as a domain for interaction and learning by seeking to work with *local* communities of interest and/ or practice (Hart & Wolff 2006; Wenger 2006).

This geographical dimension to communities is particularly important when we consider some of the reasons put forward for investing in community-university partnerships. According to Carr (1999), such partnerships did not fully emerge in the US until urban problems, such as physical decay and rising crime, began to directly affect universities themselves, particularly in terms of attracting and retaining staff and students. This meant that the benefits of community-university engagement became clearer to the HEIs and the concept of mutuality or reciprocity developed. Reardon (2005) notes several drivers behind this growing level of engagement, including:

—attracting more public and private sector investment if universities can demonstrate their role in developing the economy of their local areas

—improving the vitality, attractiveness and safety of an area, which can help to attract talented students and staff to the university

—improving relationships with their communities, which can mean that there is more local community support for universities' expansion plans.

However, a focus purely on the local neighbourhood in which a university campus is based is problematic in terms of effecting social and economic change. Deprived neighbourhoods are the result of wider social and economic forces and efforts to reduce inequalities and exclusion will often need to operate on these wider scales.

It is also interesting to consider the program in terms of the relationship between the geography of project activity and the geography of key university sites. At a regional level it was agreed that projects would focus on the coastal strip rather than the inland parts of Kent, Sussex and Hampshire. This was quite natural, given that each of the participating universities had significant sites in this coastal area. However, in Kent there was a conscious decision to choose a 'target' geography for projects that was neutral. None of the Kent partner universities had a significant presence in Swale and none regarded it as a hinterland that was uniquely 'theirs' in terms of 'supplying' potential students or staff. It was felt that the neutrality of the geographical focus would both facilitate more open collaboration between the partner universities and raise the profile of higher education in an area with little history of community engagement with the sector.

By way of contrast, many of the projects in Sussex and Hampshire (though by no means all) were focused on the four university cities of Brighton & Hove, Chichester, Southampton and Portsmouth – all areas where one or more of the partners had a significant physical presence, with Southampton and Brighton & Hove both being home to two universities in close proximity.

INITIAL CONCLUSIONS

The SECC program reveals that collaboration between universities can significantly enhance the mechanisms for engaging communities, whether through cross-referrals between institutions or the provision of identifiable contact points (program officers or helpdesks) to help community members navigate and access the complex institutions that are modern universities. However, despite the collaborative nature of the program, the resource implications for HEIs have sometimes been overlooked, with responsibilities falling on temporary staff who will not be there once the program funding ends. In one or two cases, however, institutions have put in place more sustainable infrastructure with some level of collaboration and shared costs (in terms of staff time).

Collaboration at a subregional level has widely been seen by participants to have been a positive experience and most of the nine universities suggest that they will look for opportunities

to continue to collaborate – a significant outcome from the project given the competitive nature of the relationship between many of the participating HEIs before the program began.

However, given cost implications at an institutional level, effective collaboration on the mechanisms of engagement requires high-level strategic buy-in within HEIs to the concept of community-university partnerships as mechanisms for improving research and teaching as well as community relations. At the time of writing, some of the HEIs in the SECC program are much more committed to this idea than others. It may be true that all of the participants have travelled some distance towards this as a way of working but at the end of the three-year program there are still clear gaps between the most and the least engaged. This does not seem to be a product of the relative focus on teaching or research, although this may play some role, but is more a result of how involved senior strategic staff have been in the development of the program at a subregional and regional level.

To date, the regional board of the program does not seem to have been an effective catalyst for encouraging HEIs to think more about collaborative ways of funding and organising engagement mechanisms and infrastructure in future, although this may change as the program moves into its dissemination and legacy phase.

There remain clear opportunities for further collaboration on engagement mechanisms, however, particularly within the city regions that are home to more than one institution. It seems no coincidence that the two Sussex universities collaborating most closely are co-located in the same city. The location of a university campus is perhaps a useful starting point for building an effective support environment for university-community partnership work.

In Kent, the locality was chosen deliberately in order to see how an adjacent rather than a 'home' community might benefit from such a project. None of the three university partners had any significant presence in the area where the project was located. While individual projects have worked well, some academics involved noted that this may undermine the long-term sustainability of community-university partnerships in the area. The relationship between improving the local area and the benefits Reardon (2005) highlights for universities (such as support for expansion plans) is much less clear – potential benefits that can be essential when seeking to secure high-level strategic support from university management for community-university partnerships. In addition, academics involved in the projects noted that the perceived isolation of the study area and difficulties travelling to it were sometimes a barrier to engaging students and postgraduates in the projects.

There is, therefore, a strong case for focusing collaboration and shared support mechanisms for community-university partnerships where a number of community networks overlap geographically *and* encompass more than one university campus.

The SECC program experience suggests that this might be at the level of city region and/or functional economic area. However, this might be bigger than a travel-to-work area. The city region surrounding the universities in Hampshire, for example, includes two urban centres 32 km apart, with distinct travel-to-work areas but nevertheless encompassing an area with significant economic and social connectivity. By way of contrast, the team in Sussex found that there were limited connections between communities in and around the two urban areas that were 48 km away.

POSTSCRIPT: (GEO)POLITICAL PARALLELS

Discussion of the most appropriate geographical scale for economic and social interventions and the infrastructure to support them and the relative merits of decentralisation and localism is topical in most industrialised nations. In the UK, some 12–15 years ago, there was a shift towards regional structures in public policy-making and delivery, with the devolution of a range of policy areas to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the creation of nine English regions, each with a Government Office, Regional Development Agency, Regional Health Authority and a Regional Assembly (of representatives nominated by elected officials from local authorities at a county level). The philosophy behind this approach was to:

—support 'on the ground' coordination of the work of different central government departments

—provide a mechanism for redistribution and correction of economic and social geographical inequalities (that is, the north–south divide)

—circumnavigate local conservatism (with a small 'c') when considering physical regeneration needs.

The regionalisation trend faltered, however, when in a referendum the north-east of England voted against their regional assembly becoming a directly elected body (BBC 2004). In 2007 Regional Assemblies were abandoned altogether and in May 2010 the new coalition Conservative and Liberal Democrat Government announced that Government Offices, Regional Development Agencies and Regional Health Authorities would also be abolished.

A key reason the new government has given for the change is that regions are an artificial construct and do not reflect economic and social realities. The discussion now is around identifying functional economic areas in terms of travel to work, retail markets and business trading areas. Local Authorities and business groups have been invited to collaborate to become Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) at a scale that encompasses some degree of economic and social self-containment.

Many of the strongest candidates for LEPs are city regions. This does suggest that, for UK universities, collaboration at a city-region level would also allow for greater interaction with and influence on statutory bodies seeking to make economic and social interventions. However, the focus on urban areas and their

immediate hinterlands does raise the question of what will happen to places in between city regions, places on the margins: how will their needs be met? Gough (2009) notes that this question has also been raised by decentralisation- and localism-style policies across Europe. As community-university partnerships continue to develop and support community development around their – predominantly urban – campuses, is there a danger that this is one dimension of economic and social inequalities that they could exacerbate rather than resolve?

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