

UK Research Universities and Community Engagement: Developing a Practical Framework for Community Partnerships

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“Things were simpler in the past – weren’t they always? Then, universities were about intellectual pursuit, predominantly for its own sake, and they educated a very privileged minority. They were placed in cities but were not really part of them”¹

Introduction

In April 2003 the European Urban Research Association sponsored a conference on the theme “universities and their role in urban community development”, which was held in Enschede, The Netherlands. In the call for papers for the conference the organizers noted that many universities in the USA have set up community outreach programmes and that many universities in Europe as well as the USA ‘want to assume a more active role in furthering the socio-economic fate of the urban community’. Several excellent examples of engagement were presented at the conference. But both the attendance and the number of papers submitted for presentation was small, which would seem to suggest that while many European universities *want* to assume a more active role, they have not made much progress in doing so. A further exploration of the incentives and opportunities for university engagement with their communities therefore seems warranted.

This paper builds on our presentation at the EURA conference, in which we described emerging outreach efforts at a single British university. In this paper we expand our investigation to nineteen research-led British universities known as the Russell Group. The purpose of our study is to identify policy drivers for UK higher education community engagement programmes, identify service models that have been implemented and assess sustainability through investigations of different engagement models for industry and community based groups.

We begin our paper with a brief review of engagement programmes in the U.S., commonly referred to as university-community partnerships. We next explore the structure of higher education in Britain and the policy drivers that exist for engagement, specifically in theme areas of citizenship, urban regeneration, and social inclusion/exclusion. We then identify and briefly discuss engagement efforts that several of the Russell Group universities have undertaken and introduce a model for benchmarking engagement that the Group’s members have been developing. We conclude, by way of comparison with American approaches to community engagement, with some comments about the issues facing British universities as they attempt to develop community engagement models in the face of uncertainty as to whether there will be further Government funding to support such activities.

In the process of covering the above topics we will address the following questions:

- Has the primary focus of university engagement been business and economic development or community improvement? Are there differences in the way universities have responded to the needs of private and community sectors?
- Has the recent growth of community engagement programmes been a response to national policy drivers or just to funding inducements? Are university engagement programmes responses to “carrots”, “sticks”, or perhaps a mixture of both?

¹ From a speech delivered by Professor Eric Thomas, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bristol, to a meeting of the Bristol Society in the Great Hall of the Wills Memorial Building, 25 September 2002.

- Is there an overall focused concept and uniform model that has evolved for community engagement, or have programmes arisen purely spatially, in response to local and regional needs?
- If engagement programmes have developed purely as responses to fiscal inducements, then how sustainable are such activities in the long run?

The American Context for Engagement: University Community Partnerships

American institutions of higher learning, especially the state land grant colleges and universities have a long history of engagement with the communities in which they are located through such programmes as agricultural extension and university operated settlement houses. University community partnerships, however, represent a new type of engagement that has its roots in the civil rights and anti-poverty movements of the 1960s. First undertaken by individual faculty, then by specific departments and centres, and then embraced as at least in part the mission of some colleges and universities, these partnerships represent a joint working between the institution and one or more community partners, who collaboratively develop and carry out programmes that address social, economic, and/or cultural deprivation and/or neighbourhood regeneration.

University community collaborations take on a variety of forms, but represent an “approach whereby community activists and academic researchers work together during all phases of the research process” (Nyden et. al. 1997). A variety of topics are addressed ranging from studies of lead content in soil in a community, (Fitch 1997), to creation of a parenting programme in a lower-income community (Gallagher and Nahan 1997), to a comprehensive planning process for the revitalisation of a severely depressed urban community (Reardon 1997).

Several departments of the federal government have funded university community partnerships, most notably the Department of Housing and Urban Development through its Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) programme. Many philanthropic foundations also fund partnerships. Several university presidents were influential in creating the Campus Compact for Community Service to promote the development of links between classroom education and student engagement in community activities (see Torres and Schaffer 2000).

Some major U.S. research universities have shied away from university community partnerships, claiming that their role as cosmopolitan institutions transcends place and that their responsibilities are global rather than local (Feldman and Hursh 1980). But others, such as the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Illinois at Chicago have incorporated community engagement into their research missions.

Noting that research universities exist to develop knowledge, practical skills, and social attitudes and have faculties with expertise in many disciplines who are charged with ‘preparing students for active citizenship in a democratic society’, Barry Checkoway, Director of the Center for Community Services and Learning at the University of Michigan, argues that research universities are in a unique and strategic position to engage in public service (Checkoway 1991, 1997). Checkoway recognises that taking on public service requires a “reinvention” of the research university, but he contends that service can be integrated into the mission “in ways that address unmet

community needs in accordance with the core objectives of the university”
(Checkoway 1997, 308).

Engagement by English Colleges and Universities: A Historical Review

Currently the Higher Education Sector in England is in the mist of enormous change, perhaps not seen since the creation of the primarily, but not solely, vocational-based polytechnics back in the 1970s. English universities face a plethora of demands. Academics are seen as expert knowledge workers but the state response has been to increase regulation and monitor outputs whilst at the same time decreasing public funding (Deem 2002). Urban regeneration programmes, widening participation, social inclusion, citizenship, active communities, transparency, value for money and 'top up' fees are just some examples of policies impacting higher education in the UK today. These policies are often in conflict with each other, thus creating points of tension. Such is the mire swirling around UK universities.

A century ago many older universities in England had links with industry but these links became severed as the 20th century proceeded. It has only been recently that links with industry have been re-established with industry through the Government's Higher Education Business and Community Fund (HEROC), and then extended to communities through the current Active Community Fund (ACF). But will HE community engagement programmes be sustained once the ACF finishes? Will initiatives funded through the ACF once again be relegated to history? How embedded are these programmes and what are the decision making mechanisms regarding continuation? Is there support for them from the academic community or are they just good PR for each institution?

Historically English universities remained aloof from their communities. In 1852 Cardinal Newman noted that none of the great discoveries in chemistry or electricity had been made in universities. For him the point of a university was to provide liberal education

which stands on its own, which is independent of sequel and refuses to be informed by any end (Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education, Dublin 1852).

His Oxford colleague Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln College, declared

It is no part of the proper business of a university to be a professional school. Universities are not to fit men for some special mode of gaining a livelihood, but to cultivate the mind and form intelligence. (Address to the Social Science Congress 1876.)

However in the later part of the 19th century this perspective was challenged by two other educational objectives.

First, as the industrial age took root, there was a demand by industry for scientifically qualified personnel, which could not be met by the universities, Oxford and Cambridge at the time. The lack of skilled labour led to a decline in British economic growth rates and when compared with other countries, became a subject of national concern.

Many English firms were forced to recruit suitable trained workers from foreign countries, a situation many found to be unacceptable. So to create a skilled native born labour force colleges or universities were established in many English cities, specifically Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield. These universities thus started with close links to local industry. As time passed the universities went on to develop applied research relevant to local industry.

Secondly, the last quarter of the 19th century saw the growth of the Settlement movement in major British cities. Samuel Barnett, minister of a church in the East End of London, pioneered the movement and promoted it in a paper read at Oxford in 1883 entitled *Settlements of University Men in Great Towns*. Barnett wished to build social harmony and bridges between social classes. He believed that university extension failed because its privileged providers could not empathise with their audiences. University Settlements, he argued, would overcome the barriers by placing young university men into working class districts. Opposed to cultural imperialism, Barnett believed that Settlements would generate mutual understanding, and fire university participants with the desire to overturn gross social injustices. Thus an institutionally embedded and managed structure for community engagement, outside of the existing links to industry, was established.

The University Settlement Association was the parent organisation for Toynbee Hall, possibly the most well know of the Settlements and still in existence today in South London. Named after Arnold Toynbee a member of Balliol College, Toynbee was a pioneer in the arena of what is now called higher education and community engagement. It was Toynbee who stated

disseminated through the university an acknowledgement of the duties of the citizen and an enthusiasm for confronting the problems of a divided society (ibid)

It is the statement; ‘duties of the citizen’ that brings us forward to present policy developments associated with university engagement.

Community Engagement Drivers For Higher Education in England

Key Policy Theme: Citizenship

The meaning of citizenship has been widely debated in Britain over the past decade. Originating with the Commission for Citizenship report (Weathrill 1990 cited in HO AC CS 2002), the subject of citizenship has been picked up by many, perhaps most importantly by Giddens (2000) in his highly influential work, *The Global Third Way*, and by the current Home Secretary David Blunkett (2001) in *Politics and Progress: Renewing Democracy and Civil Society*.

In 2001, the Home Office, through its Active Communities Agenda (ACA), commissioned a Citizenship Survey². The purpose of the survey was to provide;

- evidence for Home Office community policies, which, it was hoped, would address issues of social cohesion and civil renewal,
- a means for assessing the Home Office performance against ACA targets, one of which was to make ‘substantial progress by 2004 towards actively involving

² The survey sampled 15,475 people aged 16 and over in England and Wales only, with an additional minority ethnic booster sample of 5,460.

one million people in their communities³ (HO AC 2001 Citizenship Survey 2002), and

- a significant contribution to the on-going debate about social capital, defined in the report as ‘social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trust which arise from them’ (ibid).

The Citizenship Survey found that people with high levels of education (university first degrees and beyond), who were in the higher socio-economic groups having the highest levels of household income and employment, were the most likely to be involved with volunteering and community activities. Based on these findings it is not surprising that the government has been driving universities towards community engagement.

Key Policy Theme: Urban Renaissance

Following the general election of 1997 the newly installed government created an Urban Task Force to look at the causes of urban decay and seek solutions to improve the quality of life in cities. The scope of the study was not limited to environmental issues such as housing and roads but included issues such as education and fighting crime.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published the outcomes to the Urban Task Force in November 2000. The report set out a new vision of towns, cities and suburbs which would offer a high quality of life and opportunity for all, not just a few. Universities and other education institutions were seen to be a key part of this process. The Rt Hon John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister wrote in the forward to this document

Britain has some of the best cities and towns in the world-famous historical and cultural centres, dynamic commercial areas; pleasant suburbs; and seats of research and learning that command respect the world over. But in the twenty years since the last urban white paper, many urban areas have suffered from neglect, poor management, inadequate public services, lack of investment and a culture of short termism (Our Towns and Cities: The Future 2000)

A key statement pushing HEIs engagement to industry is found in the Creating and Sharing Prosperity section of the report. Clearly stated here is the goal of

...encouraging better links between businesses and higher education institutions so that we can make the most of our excellent research base. ... Several programmes focus on promoting enterprise in the inner city with least investment (ibid).

The Urban Renaissance document speaks of coordinated efforts at all levels; national, regional and local and encourages all stakeholders to pool resources, expertise and learning to assist in delivering the renaissance agenda. HE institutions and regional HE association are encouraged to work with Regional Development Agencies as a way of optimising higher education’s contributions to urban regeneration.

As recommended, local initiatives such as Strategic Partnerships were set up to develop and oversee many of the regeneration programmes that were intended to

³ Community involvement and participation was defined as three core activities, civic participation, informal volunteering and formal volunteering.

implement the policies laid out in the Urban Renaissance Report. But what was left unclear in the Report was what roles have universities, on an institutional management level, in the programmes?

The National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) produced a briefing report in response to the Report. It welcomed its publication and stated the belief that

Adult learning in all its diversity, in the community and workplace, in colleges and in universities has considerable under-realised potential for building stronger communities and for engaging residents of urban neighbourhoods in activities which contribute to social and economic regeneration'. (2000)

However NIACE recognised that the Report contained no new measures relating specifically to adult education. They could see, however, a number of opportunities where learners' programmes should be at the front of policy implementation.

Key Policy Theme: Social Inclusion/Exclusion

A decade ago the European Commission (EU) published two White Papers, entitled European Social Policy & Growth, which covered various aspects of social and economic policy with the growing EU. In the area of economic policy the White Papers focused on competitiveness and employment. In the area of social policy they focussed on cohesion, solidarity, integration and exclusion.

Exclusion was defined as being a process that removes individuals from the 'cycle of opportunities' (ibid) and the 'failure of education' was identified as being 'an increasingly important and increasingly widespread factor of marginalisation and economic and social exclusion' (ibid).

The concept of social inclusion/exclusion did not come into general use in Britain until 1997 following the election of the New Labour Government. On 2nd May, 1997, the day following the end of the Conservatives' 18 years in office, the 'age of inclusion arrived (Levitas 2002) when Tony Blair announced that it would be the goal of the new Government to 'build a nation united, with common purpose, shared values, with no one shut out or excluded.'

New Labour appeared to embrace the concepts of inclusion and exclusion and began developing to develop policies and launch programmes consistent with them. In the Home Office the Active Communities Unit was set up together with the Social Inclusion Unit and other programmes for civic renewal and economic regeneration were brought on stream. The Voluntary and NGO sector were also brought into mainstream policy debates and developments. As the then Home Secretary John Prescott said in his speech at the re-launch of the Active Community Unit

I am very keen that we address not just the issues of how we have a better relationship with the major voluntary sector and local communities organisations but how we reshape the role of Government and how the Active Communities Unit, and along side it the new social cohesion work we've initiated, can bring together all the talent and energy that exists across the country, so that the relationship of Government and what I call civil society is dramatically changed.... because Government never could it all and...

because we have deluded ourselves if we believe we could simply deliver from the centre. (London 29 May 2002).

Key Programme: Higher Education Reach-Out to Business and the Community (HEROBC) Programme

The Higher Education Reach-Out to Business and Community (HEROBC) programme was established in 1999 as a way of attracting universities to become engaged with their external communities. The product of a partnership of three government units, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department for Education and Learning in Northern Ireland and the Department for Education and Skills, HEROBC was intended to initiate a 'third stream' of funding outside of teaching and research for programmes that would contribute to regional economic growth and competitiveness. Upwards of £83 million in additional funding was made available through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to complement the existing Council funding of teaching and research, and to encourage and reward the interaction of higher education institutions with business and the community. Funding under this programme formally ends in July 2004.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) that undertake HEROBC projects are required to produce an annual operating statement to HEFCE documenting the details and progress of each of their projects. Although HEIs are graded on their performance against annual plans and targets, no specific targets were set regarding outreach to industry and outreach into the community. However, HEFCE guidance strongly suggests that the focus of HEROBC falls heavily, almost exclusively on the HEIs developing links with industry.

Key Programme: The Active Community Fund (ACF)

The Active Communities Fund (ACF) was established by the Active Communities Unit (ACU), one of three units in the Active Communities Directorate of the Home Office. The Directorate contributes to the aims of the Home Office by supporting

strong civic and active communities in which people of all races and backgrounds are valued and participate on equal terms by developing social policy to build a fair, prosperous and cohesive society in which everyone has a stake and to ensure that active citizenship contributes to the enhancement of democracy and the development of civil society. (UK Home Office website).

The purpose of the Active Community Fund is to recognise and support the role of volunteering in developing strong communities and social solidarity. The target of

'making substantial progress towards 1 million more people active in their communities by 2004' (HO Annual Report 2001 – 2002).

HEFCE was able to secure up to £27 million from the ACF to be distributed as the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF), once funding plans were approved, to all HEIs in England. Aimed to support volunteering and community engagement by both university staff and students, HEACF has a goal of creating up to 14,000 new opportunities for volunteering by the end of the 2003/04 academic year. The support documents of the programme also state that HEACF is

Intended to enhance the key role played by higher education institutions in their local community and...follows on the objectives of HEROBC (HEFCE guidance notes 2001).

Reporting requirements for the ACF differed greatly from those for HEROBC. Outcomes from ACF projects are not required for inclusion in the annual operating statement to HEFCE. There is no grading against performance, but targets are set against expenditures. Monitoring reports submitted annually are purely numerical; the number of new volunteering opportunities created and the number of new opportunities created for people over 50⁴. Guidance for final reports to HEFCE has not yet been released. ACF targets have been found to be very fluid as many HEIs find the definition of a volunteering opportunity rather vague.

Drivers, Community Engagement and the Russell Group Universities

We now turn our attention to how have higher education institutions responded to the above policy drivers. ACF and to a lesser extent HEROBC are programmes that promote community engagement. But how have institutions of higher education responded? Have they developed meaningful community initiatives? And furthermore, have they embedded a policy of community engagement into their institutional management?

We do not attempt to answer these questions for the entire higher education system in Britain. Rather we focus our study on the group of research-led English universities referred to as the Russell Group universities. An informal network of 19 institutions, the Russell Group, often termed the ‘British ivy league’ of universities⁵, are all based in urban centres. In line with other UK universities, and unlike America ‘ivy league’ universities, Russell Group institutions are dependent on state funding to run their core businesses - research and scholarship. Often considered to be prestigious universities, research has shown that Russell group students, on average, earn more than average than those from other universities (Centre for the Economics of Education).

We further limit our focus to only the 16 Russell Group universities that are located in England. With the establishment of regional assemblies and the devolution to regional structures to greater and lesser degree in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, policies governing higher education in these areas is becoming increasingly different from those in England. Thus policies regarding engagement and the responses to them are likely to be different.

The work reported on in the following paragraphs is part of a larger effort to study the differences in engagement programmes between new and old universities in the UK, to compare and contrast outreach programmes to business and grass roots based communities, and to investigate sustainability issues surrounding engagement related to the assessment of impacts and outputs (benchmarking)⁶. This paper looks

⁴ Initially, there were no unit costs attached to each volunteering opportunity, although subsequent guidelines put the number at £2000 per opportunity.

⁵ The Russell Group network was formed in 1982 in response to polytechnics (vocational based institutions) acquiring university status. The group was named after the meeting place of the Russell Hotel in London.

⁶ The methodology used in the paper is a critical review of community engagement drawn from documentation analysis. The epistemology of the paper will take two of the eight threads of analysis of

only at the community engagement programmes at Russell Group universities and identifies factors influencing service models, creditability and sustainability at these universities.

All sixteen of the English Russell Group universities in England are considered here, but some of the results of our study presented below are from interviews with appropriately selected representatives from only six universities. Due to time, resource, and capacity constraints the others have deferred being interviewed until a later date. Subsequent versions of this paper will include the outcomes from these deferred interviews⁷.

We look at three aspects of community engagement by the Russell Group institutions. First we identify the kinds of community engagement they have undertaken. Second we look at the institutional arrangements that have been created to support community engagement. And finally we describe a benchmarking process undertaken by the Russell Group ACF Network that is an attempt to document and assess the quality of their engagement efforts. The Russell Group ACF Network, an informal group of managers who oversee ACF funded projects, was formed to identify and share best practice, exchange ideas, provide support, and act as an advocate and collective voice to promote the importance of community engagement activities.

Engagement and the Russell Group Universities

Although our interest is in the scope and amount of community engagement entered into by the Russell Group universities, we will begin by looking at responses to the Higher Education Reach-Out to Business and the Community (HEROBC) programme. While HEROBC seems weighted toward involvement with industry and not community, community directed projects are not prohibited.

HEROBC and Community Engagement or the Lack Thereof

From the evidence it is clear that activities under HEROBC by the Russell Group universities were focused exclusively on engagement with industry, a return to historical relationships first established some 100 years previously. From the beginning links to industry were assured through the setting up of Regional Advisory Groups to assess programme implementation against regional priorities and commitments. Members of the Advisory Groups were drawn from Regional Development Agencies, Regional Government Offices, and a HEFCE Regional Consultant. Since community groups and NGOs were largely absent there was neither incentive nor driver for Russell Group members to develop governance, practice, or relationships with community based organisations.

Acknowledging and perhaps supporting the lack of community engagement under HEROBC, HEFCE included a 'get out clause' from engagement activities with communities for research-led, read Russell Group universities, in the embedding section of its 2002 monitoring report. HEFCE goes on to distinguish between

HE as identified by Tight (2003);

- **System policy** – the examination of the national context, whilst considering historical factors and funding arrangements.
- **Institutional management** – the examination of governance, practice and external relationships

⁷ The interview process involved phone interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire. Where appropriate there was follow-up via email exchanges and documents were collected from web sites.

research-led and teaching-led institutions in a manner that can only perpetuate the divide between the two. It states that

There may be higher levels of commercialisation in research intensive HEIs, who are best placed to spinout and licence the results of their research. Institutions that concentrate on being excellent providers of teaching, or have a regional focus, or who are widening access and developing non-traditional methods of delivery, link these strengths to their business and community roles. (2002).

So, HEFCE launched HEROBC, in partnership with two government departments with a view to developing third stream programmes that would compliment research and teaching activities. Take up was high but, as already stated, most programmes focused on links with industry, rather than community based groups and initiatives. There was no steer from the government department regarding balance between these two sectors in the community.

ACF and Community Engagement

Prior to the ACF, and in some cases HEROBC, five of the six universities interviewed had some form of community focussed activities in place but with little strategic overview and coordination internally between activities. Many activities were being delivered through cultural mechanisms such as museums and concerts or through student unions and student community action programmes. Two universities were running Law Centres providing low cost legal advice. One university, located in the North of England, where there is a high concentration of ethnic communities, had established a race archive that is considered a community resource open to everyone⁸.

One university had a quite extensive programme in place through a community work unit. The objective of this programme is to provide training for local people to undertake community consultations with their locality, and the overall aim is to 'empower community activities'. All six universities have continuing education programmes delivering credit and non-credit bearing courses.

With support from the ACF, service models have been widely developed and opened beyond those found previously. We have found, without a doubt, that funding from the ACF has seeded many community-based engagement programmes. Most of these programmes have a volunteering and service focus due to nature of the ACF funding. However, the scope of programmes has been wide. For example, three of the six universities have set up community sports coaching programmes that are not linked to courses. These programmes provide students and staff with the opportunity to earn a community coaching accreditation with the understanding that they then volunteer their time to local communities.

Two of the six universities have set up their own grant programmes with ACF funds. Staff and students can apply to fund targeted programmes and seed new ones.

⁸ Universities are not stand-alone institutions; many academics and staff employed by universities are actively involved in community activities within their own time. In 2002, The University of Bristol surveyed their workforce to assess volunteering activities staff performed in their own time. Most volunteering activities were primarily through faith-based networks and organizations. Forty seven percent of the respondents reported volunteering on average six hours per month. However all volunteering took place in their own time. It is worth noting that in response to the outcomes of this survey, the University introduced a one day per annum paid volunteer release day.

One university set up a low cost community counselling programme where students on counselling degree courses volunteer their time, over and above what is required for their training, to provide service to people with low incomes living in marginalized communities. This programme has been very successful and to date has the highest number of over 50s volunteering⁹. Mentoring programmes have flourished, although funding from other government sources have superseded these programmes through the ACF.

Many of the universities have set up similar programmes to those mentioned above. Sports related programmes have proved to be very popular. Others have tried innovative ideas such as the community counselling that sprang from collaboration between internal departments and individuals' personal interests.

Not surprisingly, it appears that the lack of stringent monitoring requirements and definition of a volunteering opportunity has provided flexibility in the use of ACF funding. This flexibility has allowed the universities to develop innovative projects and service models. Most of the workers we interviewed commented on the paradox of a lack of stringent monitoring which would seem to lead to lower profile of community engagement, but which has allowed for 'flying under the radar' leading to the creation of opportunities for flexibility and innovation.

Institutional Management Processes and Strategic Decision-Making

Despite the use of ACF funding to establish a variety of community outreach efforts, it appears overall, based on our limited sample, that the use of ACF funding by the Russell Group universities has focused on developing and supporting internal infrastructure for community engagement programmes. All six have used the ACF, to varying degrees, to finance infrastructure to support community engagement, for example, setting up a volunteer resource area complete with database for researching volunteering opportunities or developing websites. This focus on infrastructure is a good sign for future sustainability of community engagement efforts.

However, the level of support for engagement from senior managers and academics varies enormously. This is borne out in the participation of the various stakeholders. Levels of support range from one university having no direct involvement with Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC), to five having either one or more involved, primarily through committee reporting.

Four of the six institutions have set up committees or working groups to specifically monitor, or oversee, (or both), activities funded under ACF. One university had no PVC involvement or internal committee to report to. The worker at this university has developed a reporting process whereby an annual briefing report is sent to the head of their division. However this was set up at the person's own initiative and not in response to any institutional management processes.

Only two of the six universities have external stakeholder involvement in the development and monitoring of their programmes. Of these two, one has representation from its Local Education Action Zone (LEA)¹⁰. The other has set up an external stakeholder Social Inclusion Steering Group in response to having failed to find support for such a committee or group internally at the university. The Social

⁹ Reasons for this are likely to be linked to the profile of people on the course; many have taken early retirement or are re-training for a career change.

¹⁰ Another government programme, the LEA was set up to assist schools in England deemed to be requiring extra support to improve their methods.

Inclusion Steering Group is comprised of several community-based professionals representing various diverse communities. It meets three times per year to monitor activities, provide support and advice and guide developments.

Although the focus of ACF funding on support for internal management structure is a good sign for future sustainability, the looseness of such support mechanisms with institutional management of each HEIs raises questions as to whether the community engagement programmes are indeed sustainable and where will support for them come from. In response to the concerns about sustainability and the lack of extensive reporting outcomes attached to ACF funding, which could make evaluation of the programmes difficult¹¹, the Russell Group ACF Network decided to work towards the development of a benchmarking model for assessing ACF funded activities

The Russell Group Benchmarking Model

Benchmarking, the process of identifying and learning from best practice in other organisations, is a tool appropriated from the private sector. Developed with a view to improving performance, benchmarking has gained substantial support within the UK public sector. It has been used by such organisations as Business in the Community (BITC), particularly in their Race for Opportunity initiative, a programme within the UK to promote employment of individuals from ethnic communities within the workplace. It is valued and popular enough throughout Europe to warrant a European Benchmarking Code of Conduct.

There are many reasons, both internally and externally why the ACF Russell Group Universities decided to develop an HE community engagement-benchmarking tool. The reasons can be broken down into three general areas; developing relationships with external partners, identifying best practice and application of the community engagement model, and making the case for continuing support of community engagement.

The Network members hoped that by developing a benchmarking model for community engagement that they would create a robust institutional management mechanism for identifying community engagement activities and assessing the value of these activities. Further it was felt that benchmarking could assist stakeholders within the universities to see the value and future possibilities of community engagement and to gain an understanding of the funding opportunities for innovative activities. A benchmarking model could also be used to distil a summary of community engagement activities into a single format. Such a summary would presumably be of interest and use for PR, Press and Marketing departments and for stakeholders to see what activities are available for their involvement.

External stakeholders, it was believed, would also have an interest in information derived from a benchmarking process. Community groups, who often lack funding and the capacity to address important problems, could use the benchmarking results to identify useful models for collaborative relationships with universities. Other external stakeholders, such as industry and trusts, might find the information of interest for the purposes of securing funding. Prospective students

¹¹ The outcomes are only numerically based with no qualitative link to sustainability targets,

might find they prefer attending a university that has engagement programmes¹². Overall, sharing best practice with a range of stakeholders is valuable to everyone.

With these possible benefits in mind, the Russell Group ACF Network made a decision to pursue a benchmarking tool for HE industry use. The intent was to develop a tool that would provide the following measures.

- Input and outputs of community engagement
- Costs associated with community engagement including cash contributions, staff time (their own and within work time) and in-kind support (often referred to as leverage and/or matching funding)
- Benefits to both the community and HEIs

A benchmarking model would only be useful across the range of the Russell Group institutions if it met the needs of each. It was thus important at the outset to determine the intentions, scope and ability for each HEI to incorporate the model into their institutional management processes. To assess these issues the group worked with outside facilitators who have carried out similar work with the private sector.

There were also concerns regarding adapting a private sector application to the public sector. Primarily these concerns focussed on data collection issues. Questions that needed answering included what data would be collected, who would collect it, and what would be the boundaries around areas of work associated with benchmarking.

A final question facing the members of the Russell Group ACF Network was whether a benchmarking model could assess the impact of ACF activities from the perspective of external stakeholders. Assessing impacts is difficult in the early stages of any programme. Of course benchmarking can assist with evaluating if the model is developed with this aim in mind, but assessing impact with external ACF partners was and still is problematic. Even though the fitness for purpose of the benchmarking tool would have its limitations, the decision was made to proceed with its development and testing.

In all twelve Russell Group universities are currently benchmarking their community engagement activities. The scope of benchmarking varies between institutions, some are testing it on a few departments or units, others are just working with ACF projects, and a few are attempting to benchmark their entire university.

Final results of the benchmarking efforts are not expected until July/August 2004, so to write extensively about the process and its outcomes at this date would be difficult. However to date some preliminary observations can be made. Several weak points of the model have preliminarily been identified. These include:

- The model is adapted from the private sector and is not entirely appropriate for application to higher education. Since the facilitator's lacked understanding of issues in HE, the resulting model does not quite fit HE
- The model is a management tool, which perhaps will be a barrier to gaining support from the academic community

¹² With the introduction of tuition fees at UK universities, institutions may need to show students what value they get for their fees beyond their basic education. Community engagement could become an attraction for at least some portion of students.

- The model went through too many changes and perhaps has been weakened in the process
- Lack of research experience by some members of the network calls into question the validity of the process

Members of the Russell Group ACF Network generally feel that the process of developing the benchmarking tool could have been improved through

- Having fewer meetings but with greater focus
- Working with facilitators who better understand the HEIs
- Using sub-groups to produce appropriate plans for whole group
- Conducting research into what benchmarking models already exist for not for profit groups¹³

At this point in time, it is difficult to fully gauge the appropriateness of the model for use with HEIs. There is no comparative research into non-for-profit benchmarking models. Hopefully this step will come next year.

Ultimately the question of whether benchmarking is an important tool for management or an academically robust tool for guiding community engagement calls into question the whole ethos of HEIs and community engagement programmes. The question yet to be answered within the Russell Group universities is whether benchmarking will be seen as purely an institutional management tool or as a means for building support for community engagement at the highest level of the academic institutions. Perhaps it can do both.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper we set out to look at the background and policy drivers relating to community engagement programmes at English Universities, to present preliminary findings with respect to engagement at the Russell Group universities, and to compare the experience of the Russell Group institutions, with university community partnerships in America, where they are perhaps best developed. Our investigation is timely since university engagement has become an plank in the New Labour Government's policy implementation growing out of New Labour's embracing of Gidden's (2000) ideas of a Third Way democracy, its addressing social inclusion through setting targets of social inclusion, and its focus on neighbourhood renewal as crystallised in the Urban Renaissance White Paper.

Historical similarities exist between American "land grant" colleges and universities and the British Russell Group universities. Both were called into being in response to a need to produce an educated class of individuals who could run their nation's businesses and industries. Early on both engaged in some form of "extension" taking education outside of the classroom and into the community. And both supported the Settlement Movement through operating and staffing settlement houses.

¹³ Other universities have looked at developing benchmarking for community engagement programmes, notably the Association for Commonwealth Universities that includes the University of Brighton. But it was felt that the strength of developing the Russell Group model was that it is a ground up practitioners model, and not one imposed from above that was developed purely by academics with little hands on experience or other stakeholders with perhaps theoretical perspectives but little practical experience.

During the 20th century both American and British universities moved away from providing community service, but American institutions did not fully disengage from community involvement. Although research became an increasingly important component of the “business” of universities on both sides of the Atlantic, the notion of “service” as part of a three-legged stool of teaching, research, and service, remained viable for the American professoriate. In the 1960s and 1970s, activist American faculty used the concept of service as the justification for creating new models of community outreach, which overtime became university community partnerships.

The development of university community partnerships in the US was initiated through the actions of individual or small groups of faculty, who as time passed created outreach centres. These centres often were the cores around which the universities built their outreach programmes. This bottom up approach to the development of outreach is a major difference between community engagement in the US and in the UK. To date, British programmes of community engagement are being driven by Government policy and funding. To be sure, some staff at British universities are interested in community engagement, but many remain sceptical or opposed to broadening their remit to include service.

In the US, university community partnerships generally mean collaborative working with local community based organisations in lower-income communities on variety of projects to promote community improvement and individual achievement. In Britain, when universities have been given the choice between engaging with industry or communities, industry has won out.

The time may be right to allow for the development of community outreach and engagement within British universities. The current policy drivers for engagement in England, citizenship and social inclusion/exclusion are reflective of similar concerns as those that motivated civil rights and anti-poverty efforts in the US. These drivers can provide incentives for both faculty and their universities to undertake community engagement that goes beyond a simple response to funding opportunities. Civic renewal and participation, social inclusion and the promotion of equality of opportunity are themes consistent with notions of a liberal education and can be ones around which meaningful outreach efforts could be built.

Funding, of course, is a key to the success of community engagement efforts, whether they are in the US or the UK. As university community partnerships developed in the US the source of funds for their support has broadened. While many universities have participated in HUD’s Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) programme, many other sources of funds for partnerships exist, including the Fannie Mae Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, and state and local government programmes. The Policy Research and Action Group (PRAG) a collaborative of 5 Chicago area universities and over 20 community organizations has received financial support from the MacArthur Foundation for the past 15 years. British universities wishing to develop sustainable outreach efforts will need to broaden their search for funds to support them.

The establishment of an institutional framework is also necessary to implement a meaningful commitment to community engagement. Community engagement at American universities grew from individual efforts and centres and a framework evolved as universities became ever more committed to university community partnerships. The framework in American universities is almost always

embedded within an academic unit of the university, thus giving outreach a status similar to the other academic pursuits of teaching and research.

At present only the beginnings of an institutional framework for engagement has been developed at the Russell Group universities. The absence of a framework at one university lead to its missing of a funding opportunity through the Higher Education Innovation Fund. The absence of a framework is also hindering the ability of the universities to tap into funding opportunities through regeneration programmes such as the European Social Fund, Local Strategic Partnership, and Neighbourhood Renewal.

The benchmarking process undertaken by the Russell Group ACF Network represents a potentially important step towards the development of an outreach infrastructure. Establishing return on investment figures, plus having the data to compare developments across Russell Group universities plays an important, although informal, role in building support for outreach activities. Benchmarking should help the universities as they attempt to come into line with the new role that Government is placing on them and can be used to demonstrate that engagement is an activity consistent with their missions.

Clearly from small beginnings community engagement programmes are a growing area in English universities, and there are clear strong public policy agendas at both the national and European levels consistent with increasing university involvement with their communities. As both Neave (2003) in Europe and Checkoway (1998) in the US have pointed out efforts at promoting active citizenship provide opportunities for academics, researchers, and universities, to become involved in areas outside of teaching and research. Although there is some way to go before the community engagement programmes of the English Russell Group universities catch up with the university community partnerships of the US, hopefully the efforts initiated by the Russell Group universities through their participation in the Active Communities Fund programme have begun the process of building institutionally embedded sustainable infrastructures out of which robust community outreach efforts can grow.

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