Universities as social and cultural infrastructure: Summary of roundtable discussion

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Introduction

This roundtable was part of a new phase of the British Academy's work on social and cultural infrastructure, *Valuing People, Places and Spaces*, which is based around the rubric of 'creating, supporting and enhancing social and cultural infrastructure to improve and sustain society'.

One aspect of this phase of work will focus on exploring social and cultural infrastructure in relation to different sectors and institutions via a series of roundtables – the first of which was this roundtable on universities as social and cultural infrastructure.

Overview

The event brought together a wide range of experts and practitioners, including academics, higher education managers and professionals, and representatives of think tanks and other policy organisations.

Dr Molly Morgan Jones, Director of Policy at the British Academy, and Professor Dominic Abrams FBA, Professor of Social Psychology, University of Kent, co-chaired the event. Professor John Goddard OBE, Emeritus Professor, Newcastle University, and Professor Andy Westwood, University of Manchester, provided respective 'Insight Talks' as a means of starting the discussion.

The discussion was framed around the following questions:

- How do universities, and the different constituencies within them, contribute to social and cultural infrastructure, and how can this contribution be articulated, measured and evidenced?

- How can universities work with other institutions to strengthen social and cultural infrastructure, and what wider value to society and communities would this have?

This summary note outlines the opening Insight Talks by Professor Goddard and Professor Westwood and summarises the key themes to emerge from the following discussion. These themes included: change over time; localities and geographies; local partnerships; bridges between constituencies; capacity and career structures in universities; continuity and scale of funding; and, the REF and other incentives and drivers. Comments have not been attributed to specific attendees, with the exception of the respective talks by Professor Goddard and Professor Westwood.

Professor John Goddard Insight Talk

Professor Goddard began by emphasising that universities must be sensitive to the local contexts in which they operate and the significance of their history and the history of the places to which they belong.

In the UK, it is important to understand that locally endowed proto-Universities such as Newcastle, Sheffield and Birmingham supported late 19th century urban industrialisation and the health of the workforce. They also played a role in building local soft infrastructure as this was a time in which new municipal government structures were formed. In short, universities helped build what we now call social infrastructure.

But in the later 20th century many so-called redbrick universities to an extent turned their back on place. University expansion in the 1960s was overtly if not formally anti-big cities – for example Warwick, Lancaster and Sussex. The designation in 1992 of locally controlled but centrally financed polytechnics as universities with the aim of reducing the unit cost of teaching and moving the UK quickly up the OECD rankings in terms of participation in higher education signalled a further disconnection with place. Another context is that institutional and individual academic autonomy has remained a fundamental principle – it is up to individual academics and university leaders to decide the priority they attach to civic engagement. Marketisation also raised the possibility of the financial collapse of universities in less prosperous places where they were so called 'anchor institutions'.

However, there are now clear indications of a changing UK zeitgeist around universities and place. This can be linked to a growing awareness of the importance of devolution to levelling up and the role that universities can play as anchor institutions tying down the global in the local and supporting a fairer and more just society locally.

Indeed, Research England is supporting regional networks such as Insights North East and the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) programme. NCIA is an ambitious new initiative to generate and mobilise intelligence about what works, for whom and in what contexts, to catalyse and share civic innovations, and to provide universities with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. NCIA's aim is to help universities to use their neutral convening power to facilitate the development of reciprocal relationships between themselves, other institutions including the arts and the general population within a shared locality. In this respect, the role of individuals willing and able to span boundaries will be critical. It is a challenging programme of work needed to enhance the role of universities in building social infrastructure. NCIA look forward to potential opportunities to build on this discussion convened by the British Academy.

Professor Andy Westwood Insight Talk

Professor Westwood stated that his talk would make two key arguments – first, that social and cultural infrastructure is of vital importance, and second, that social and cultural infrastructure is central, not peripheral, to what universities do.

Social and cultural infrastructure can be defined narrowly or broadly. The narrow definition focuses on elements such as museums, libraries and theatres. This form of social and cultural infrastructure is important, but often not a major priority for policymakers, and sometimes loses out to other funding priorities.

The broader definition sees social and cultural infrastructure as something that generates social capital. As applied to universities, this definition captures how universities provide capacity to their local communities, provide graduates to the social sector, and so on. A case can be made that the broader definition is best.

The Levelling Up White Paper emphasised six kinds of capital, in a model that drew heavily on work from the Bennett Institute for Public Policy. The capitals are financial; physical; human; intangible; institutional; and social. There was some discussion of universities in the White Paper, but they were mostly understood as contributing to human and local knowledge, and also as contributing at the national level more than the local level.

However, universities can contribute to all six capitals, at the local and regional as well as the national level. The White Paper rightly suggests that the six capitals must intertwine. All must be strong, and all are inseparable – we need to improve all six rather than just some of them.

Civic pride, which is hard to measure, but very important, is another area where universities can contribute.

Looking ahead to the future policy agenda, it is crucial to consider which approach is appropriate for different institutions. Universities can play a role as anchor institutions, not just in relation to local economies but also local politics.

Summary of key themes

This section summarises the key themes that then emerged from the discussion which followed the two Insight Talks.

Change over time

Participants noted that universities were historically conceptualised as belonging to a particular place. One example is the University of Birmingham, founded by the politician Joseph Chamberlain in 1900, which was intended to have a 'civic' purpose, as an institution that would contribute to Birmingham. But, participants noted, this has changed to some extent. Some universities have less of a focus on contributing to, and being part of, the social and cultural life of the places in which they are situated. They are indeed sometimes seen as representing a culture that is alien or at odds to their place. However, there are some signs that this is changing again. The University of Cambridge, for example, previously emphasised its nature as a global institution. But there is now more focus on the university's contribution to place, which is a significant change.

Taking account of different localities and geographies

The ways in which universities form part of, and engage with, their local social and cultural infrastructures are strongly shaped by, and entwined with, the characteristics of local areas.

One factor that will impact on this is the level of deprivation in the local area, and also the number of universities in an area. Participants noted that in localities where there are higher levels of deprivation, and so fewer organisations with particular capacity or knowledge, universities may be called upon to fill this space. There is also likely to be higher demand if there is just one university in a particular area. Therefore, an aspect to consider in relation to universities and social and cultural infrastructure is potential variability in terms of what different universities take on.

A linked question is that of universities' role in the regeneration of a local area. For example, for those universities based in towns, there may be opportunities for a university to be involved in the regeneration of the high street.

Local partnerships and relationships

There are also questions as to the role of key people in the community, and how they interact with universities. There is a critical space for these intermediaries whose role includes creating links and 'connecting the dots'. But for these interactions to be successful universities need to have structures in place that facilitate and foster these links, and enable partnerships to fulfil their potential over the longer term. In a broader sense, there needs to be a shared clarifying

purpose between all the organisations and individuals involved, including the university.

The discussion also covered the relationships between universities and local authorities. It was noted that at present universities and local authorities are still not always seen as natural partners, and participants considered what steps need to take place to foster these relationships. One key point made was that the variation between local authorities means there is no 'one size fits all' model that can work between universities and local authorities, but that each relationship will need to be tailored, and will also need to be sensitive to the needs of each individual place.

The role of ambassadors in relation to universities as social and cultural infrastructure can be crucial. Participants discussed how a well-respected locally significant individual such as a Mayor praising the work of a university can carry a lot of weight.

Building bridges between different university 'constituencies'

Participants noted that universities comprise a number of different 'constituencies' such as academic staff, professional staff, and students, and that individuals in these groups will engage with local social and cultural infrastructures in a variety of ways. Some staff employed by universities will have lived in the area for a long time and be fully part of the local community and engage strongly with local SCI (for instance as trustees for local organisations, school governors, or volunteers in some capacity) while other university staff (perhaps particularly those on temporary or short term contracts) may not feel as embedded in the community and locality.

From the perspective of the non-student local population, universities, in some cases at least, can appear elitist, or if not elitist then certainly distinct from the local population or place. For example, in some towns and cities there is an increasing sense that the local social and cultural infrastructure is not working – the transport system is perceived as in decline, the high street is seen as in decline, and so on. In this context, the local university in some cases represents a success that the rest of the city or region is not perceived as sharing. The non-student local population may not feel negatively towards the students or university, and there is not always a 'town versus gown' dynamic present in all towns and cities with universities. Nevertheless, there is sometimes a perception that the local university is doing well while the town is not.

There is also wide variation between how different universities will engage with local communities and infrastructures, stemming from both physical and conceptual factors. At a physical level whether a university is located within or outside a town or city can be a factor, as can the extent to which a university's campus is seen as accessible (and welcoming) to the wider community. At a conceptual level it was noted that some universities, such as many founded in the UK in the 1960s, were set up with the vision of creating a university which is a community by and within itself, in which the university is part of a counterculture set up to some extent in opposition to mainstream society. Universities created within this model were therefore by definition somewhat insular and did not focus on engagement with the local community, and in some cases actively set themselves up in opposition against it. There is therefore an historical and cultural background that some universities need to overcome when it comes to the SCI agenda.

The extent to which students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level engage and feel part of their local communities was also discussed. It was noted that the inevitable turnover of students can mitigate against them engaging with local SCI. Additionally, student housing that is physically separate from the wider community can mean that students do not fully feel part of the locality. Physical space is needed to generate both bonding social capital, i.e. social capital that helps bind a group together, and bridging social capital, i.e. social capital that helps build bridges between members of a group and other groups. But there is an increasing tendency for student accommodation to lack spaces suitable for social gatherings, and on some campuses it is hard to find basic necessities for social activity, such as places to sit-down.

The extent to which students do, or do not, see themselves as members of the local community, and the extent to which non-university members of the local community see students as full members of the local community, was raised as a factor with implications for the relations between universities and SCI. In some cases, students are effectively treated as if they are tourists or temporary residents, rather than as stakeholders in the community or place. Participants suggested that a key question in relation to universities functioning as social and cultural infrastructure is to find ways of building bridges between temporary and permanent inhabitants of a place.

Capacity and career structures in universities

It was noted by participants that the structures present within universities will impact on the extent, and the ways, in which universities engage locally. There are different models of how universities engage with their local communities, and variation regarding the number, level and funding of posts that focus on this type of activity. There will also be variation related to the size and type of university.

Some universities do have posts that focus specifically on this interaction between universities and local organisations and institutions, where a key part of the role is for the postholder to be the conduit between the university and these other organisations. Participants noted that these

can be challenging roles, where the postholder must act as a 'shock absorber' or mediator, and there will be instances where they are not able to fully realise the aims and desires of both the university or local organisations and the non-university local population. It was also noted that the career pathways within universities for individuals who carry out these kinds of roles are not always fully developed. There are therefore questions about how to build capacity and viable career paths in this area. There are also questions for universities as to how they recognise and reward individuals whose careers have spanned both university-based roles and community-based roles and so do not fit into traditional academic career norms.

Continuity and scale of funding

Participants emphasised that temporary, 'drive by' funding initiatives can have negative consequences in terms of local perceptions of university interaction and engagement with local communities. Initiatives end when the money runs out, and so do not have a permanent impact. While some of these initiatives might make important contributions, their sudden ending can create negative perceptions of the university, and therefore impact on its reputation locally.

Instead of local engagement consisting primarily of a variety of smaller-scale or shorter-term projects, participants suggested that there is great value in enabling and encouraging universities to take on larger-scale and longer-term roles in terms of contributing to the places in which they are located. However, this will be contingent on funding and financing models that support this type of engagement. This type of activity should be understood as an integral, embedded part of what universities do. Relatedly, the role of universities as convenors can be crucial. Universities have the potential to join-up the initiatives of different actors that may otherwise exist in separate silos.

The REF and other incentives and drivers

Participants highlighted that REF impact case studies across the UK contain a wide variety of examples of successful local and civic engagement by universities, and exploring these within a social and cultural infrastructure framing would be valuable.

Yet it was also noted that while these case studies can be studied for evidence of local impact, there is a need to consider the limitations of REF-defined impact, and to look beyond REF impact to consider what environment and drivers would enable universities more fully to engage locally. Participants stated that the greatest successes in terms of universities engaging with local SCI often came from long-term deep collaborations, where partners work in co-creation, and where the partnership created something that neither partner would have been able to achieve separately. For this type of partnership to be successful universities need to be able to be flexible in terms of

expectations, and to be able to enter partnerships without a predetermined list of expected answers or outcomes. However, this open, explorative, co-partner relationship does not always align with existing HE funding models. Yet it can be vital in terms of universities establishing trust and credibility. There is a need for system-wide change to address this alignment of funding models, but individual institutions cannot change this on their own; a coordinated and systemic effort is needed.

For example, participants noted that there are now funding incentives in place in relation to universities demonstrating REF impact, and discussed how if a portion of this funding was tied specifically to universities demonstrating their capacity to carry out sustained high-quality social and cultural infrastructure activities, then this would act as a strong driver and universities would therefore be incentivised to put in place the organisational structures that would foster this.

Moreover, the point was made that in terms of incentives and drivers universities have usually been encouraged to think and act in terms of a vertical hierarchy, in which funders and regulators primarily drive behaviour. It is thought-provoking to think through what the situation would look like if incentives were shifted in a way that encouraged universities to see themselves more as part of a locally-based horizontal collaboration picture that included social and cultural infrastructure organisations alongside other relevant organisations such as further education institutions.

Closing Remarks

Dr Molly Morgan Jones thanked all the participants for their contributions, and in particular Professor John Goddard and Professor Andy Westwood for their opening talks. Dr Morgan Jones gave an overview of the next steps for the social and cultural infrastructure work, including how today's roundtable will inform and feed into the wider programme. It was observed that the discussion had been particularly rich, and covered a great deal of interesting ground that could be built upon. The British Academy would therefore explore how a focus on the relationship between universities and social and cultural infrastructure could be developed further within its policy work.

List of Participants

Professor Dominic Abrams FBA OBE	Professor of Social Psychology and the Director of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes, University of Kent
Professor Robin Banerjee	Pro Vice-Chancellor for Global and Civic Engagement, University of Sussex
Lynn Barlow	Assistant Vice-Chancellor Creative and Cultural Industries Engagement, University of the West of England
Dr Diana Beech	Chief Executive Officer, London Higher
Nicola Berkley	Senior Policy Advisor, The British Academy
Greg Burke	Director of Place and Civic Engagement, Sheffield Hallam University
Dr Hollie Chandler	Interim Director of Policy, The Russell Group
Professor Richard Clay	Professor of Digital Cultures, Newcastle University
Sarah Cowan	Head of Higher Education & Skills, The British Academy
Dr Lizzy Craig-Atkins	Senior Lecturer and Departmental Director of Impact and External Engagement, University of Sheffield
Jim Dickinson	Associate Editor, Wonkhe
Dr George Evans	Policy Advisor, The British Academy
John Fell	Senior Policy Advisor, Sheffield Hallam University
Dana Gamble	Policy Manager (Places and Knowledge Exchange), GuildHE
Owen Garling	Knowledge Transfer Facilitator, Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge
Professor John Goddard	Emeritus Professor of Regional Development Studies, Newcastle University
Dominic Gray	Director, Opera North / Advisory Group Member for the Civic University Network
Professor Louise Kempton	Professor of Urban and Regional Policy, Newcastle University
Jess Lister	Associate Director, Public First
Professor Christopher Millward	Professor of Practice in Education Policy, University of Birmingham
Professor Des McNulty	Deputy Director, Policy Scotland
Dr Molly Morgan Jones	Director of Policy, The British Academy
Dr Peter O'Brien	Executive Director, Yorkshire Universities
Robyn Smith	Assistant Economist, National Institute of Economic and Social Research
Destina Thompson	Policy Advisor, The British Academy
Professor Jennifer Richards FBA	English (2001) Chair, Faculty of English, University of Cambridge
Professor Andy Westwood	Professor of Government Practice, University of Manchester
Dr Adam Wright	Head of Public Policy, The British Academy