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***Universities in their place: social and cultural perspectives on the regional impacts of universities***

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The presentation will draw on a recent UK project<sup>1</sup> (and the presentation's title reflects the title of the planned book based on the project). Through four university/regional case studies in the UK, the project sought to examine the regional impacts of universities, with the emphasis upon the social and cultural rather than the economic. Although the empirical focus was on the UK, the origins of the project lay in a larger international project on 'The role of universities in social transformation' and the presentation will attempt to set the UK findings in this larger international context. (The international project comprised a series of national and other case study reports, including a comparative report on India, Pakistan, Poland and Slovenia!)

Below, the main findings of the recent UK project are summarised.

**Universities and economic development/regeneration**

- Universities are important as nodes in the transmission of globalised competitive agendas – e.g. relating to the knowledge economy, digitisation, creativity etc.;
- Universities play a part in up skilling and re-skilling local workforces, but it is dangerous to see them as only doing so for their immediate region – the regional impact in terms of the local labour force is more apparent in the public sector than in the private sector;
- Universities have a significant impact as businesses in their own right – e.g. through their property strategies – and are significant employers of technical and professional staff (including knowledge professionals);
- The business strategies of universities are driven by their own priorities – in practice, however, these often seem to align with local and regional development priorities, whether because they create opportunities for them or because place and location matter (it is hard – although not impossible - for a university to relocate);.
- The unintended (or unplanned) consequences of university activity on places and their regeneration may be as important as the planned or intended ones – e.g. impact of studentification, bohemianisation, service activities, property development etc..

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Education and Regional Transformation: social and cultural perspectives (the HEART project), a project funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council

## **Regional and university images, local and institutional cultures**

- Image is a transformative discourse that runs through all the HEART case studies for both the universities and regions (from image 'enhancing' to image 'constraining').
- Universities have a *strategic* impact on their regions through partnership/development opportunities with agencies concerned with regional regeneration.
- Universities have a *physical* impact on their immediate environments (e.g. buildings, car parking).
- Universities' involvement in cultural ventures (both high and popular culture) and through the presence of students is *impact rich*.
- However, universities' involvement in cultural innovation and attitudinal change is *impact poor*.

## **Aspirations and opportunities for personal change and social mobility**

- All four case study institutions are reinforcing the dominant discourse around widening participation and 'low aspirations' locally by justifying engagement activities through this narrative
- However, how each institution engages with this discourses varies and is heavily dependant upon their position within the highly competitive higher education market
- The aspirations of many living in these four regions do not align with those valued within the policy and practice of national/local governments and educational institutions including universities.
- Universities were regarded by stakeholders as 'creaming off' the most able students through widening participation activities.
- While important opportunities for social mobility are being provided, a function of class reproduction and status confirmation may still be the dominant story.

## **Forms and discourses of public and community engagement**

- Developing active citizenship skills and programmes often form an element of the "public engagement" strategy of universities along with leadership and coordination roles in community development and regeneration strategies.
- The level and nature of universities' engagement and promotion of active citizenship vary according to the shape of the local HE market.

- All universities develop a rhetoric of public engagement but those explicitly positioning themselves on a global market show a more instrumental (strategic partnerships and actions) and/or institutionalised (being visible on commissions and fora, adhering strictly to HEFCE guidelines) approach. On the other hand, the more entangled universities (in local systems of social economic relations) seem to struggle to develop a more holistic rhetoric of engagement.
- 'Opportunity' universities: in 'new' universities located in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation, the rhetoric of engagement is not dissociated from the discourse on employability. Their discourses and activities around community support, civic engagement and active citizenship also seem more explicit and very diverse (in terms of the range of actions).
- A transformative approach: these universities also tend to have a self-assigned mission of cultural regeneration (raising aspirations, entrepreneurial culture,) and build their engagement rhetoric around the issue of the depreciated image of the city or region they are associated with.

### **The role of universities in tackling social inequalities and relative disadvantage**

- Within the project's four sub-regions, widening participation activities tend to provide social mobility opportunities for the few without necessarily altering patterns of inequality that affect the many.
- In sub-regions with several higher education providers, a social stratification of institutions may map onto and reinforce wider patterns of inequality.
- However, by its contribution to regional economic development and by increasing local employment and consumption levels, a local university may bring advantages to all within its sub-region.
- By their impact on the local economy and labour market, universities may be changing who the 'winners' and 'losers' are without necessarily impacting on overall levels of inequality and relative disadvantage.
- At least one of the case study universities saw its role in tackling inequalities and disadvantage as very long term and inter-generational, seeking to be 'open' to all and broadening its notions of 'access' beyond course enrolments to include, knowledge, expertise and facilities.

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