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The ivory tower and beyond: Bradford University at the heart of its communities

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What is community engagement?

It is important to distinguish community engagement (CE) from other university outreach activities – e.g. widening participation, lifelong learning, knowledge transfer, cultural activities, volunteering, and research and consultancy. While all these activities are valuable ways in which the university contributes to its locality, community engagement differs in both its goals and the character of the relationship that the university aims to build. Community engagement builds partnerships and shared objectives based on mutually recognised and valued community and university competences. This is at the core of the effort to break down barriers between academia and the community, encouraging mutual respect and building shared approaches to challenges facing the district.

How to measure it?

Our measurement tool is based on four principles: Reciprocity, Externalities, Access and Partnership (REAP).

Reciprocity

There is a flow of knowledge, information and benefits in both directions between the university and its community partners in all activities which they agree to embark on together.

Externalities

There are benefits outside of those accruing to the partners and these should contribute to building social trust and social networks in the Bradford district. Through these we seek to enhance sustainability, well-being and local cohesion, and ultimately to contribute to the building of a learning- and knowledge-based society.

Access

Partners have access to university facilities and resources as opposed to receiving a one-off provision of goods or services.

Partnership

Partnerships deepen and develop through the extended reciprocity and improved access. They are an output and outcome of community engagement activities, which should eventually also become key inputs to improving and enhancing those activities.

Beyond number-crunching

We felt that a pure quantitative (economic or numeric) measure could not capture the importance of this area of work. Community engagement is not market activity – most

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of it is not even ‘near market’ – that is, something which could be sold or measured by proxy estimates such as ‘willingness to pay’. Community engagement in its purest form seeks to provide some benefit to the community that is not an accidental by-product in the pursuit of some other aim. Reciprocity means that the university engages literally with the community so that the knowledge base of the academics involved is informed by new information from the members of the community they engage with. Community engagement is not a ‘free service’ to the community, like community development, but is based on these non-market forms of reciprocity. Attributing a monetary value to such an enterprise, or to collect data through surveys and other mechanisms which assume it has such a value, would compromise reciprocity, leading the community to wonder whether there is a ‘hidden’ economic agenda.

The most difficult component to ‘measure’ is that of externalities. We argue that these are mostly in the form of enhanced social capital – or informal and formal social interactions, associations and networks which generate trust and well-being for individuals and society.

Measuring the broader impact of university-community engagement outside participant partnerships is a very difficult task, and would require a serious investment by universities and local authorities in data collection and conceptual clarification of the meaning of social capital, particularly at the level of communities. The REAP tool encourages ongoing systematisation and self-evaluation of goals set by university and community members involved in particular activities. It encourages constant self reflection and ‘measurements’ of activities, which have been defined by participants. Participants might do this by baseline interviews of those who they wish to influence. They might include quantitative elements, such as how many people attend events. But these would be supplemented by qualitative measures, which assess how those who attended gained from their attendance.

REAP does not establish a model of self evaluation which is applicable across all university-community activities, but an

approach to ongoing evaluation guided by the four components of REAP. It aims to avoid costly end of project evaluations or costly (and it argues, ultimately unconvincing in terms of measuring qualitative progress) data collection procedures. Rather, it advocates a self reflection and systematisation culture, through which each activity or project sets its own goals and measurement procedures.

The REAP approach in practice

Our measurement tool is essentially a means of self-assessment, planning, monitoring and reviewing of community engagement activities. It is intended as a guide to thinking through potential partnerships using a practical breakdown of the component parts of REAP. It is to be used actively and creatively whenever a partnership is begun, with potential projects and collaborations weighted according to the four REAP criteria to decide whether a project will meet those criteria. It should be used through the project life to assess progress through indicators and milestones set by partners, and finally to self-evaluate the outputs and outcomes of the project. Qualitative evidence should be rigorously gathered through interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and participant observation as the programme of activities develops. Costs of activities should be calculated and these can be set against income raised to cover those costs. But the team is not advocating evaluation on the basis of income generated. The REAP tool is based on building strong qualitative indicators of ongoing progress towards agreed goals, outputs and outcomes.

REAP and community engagement in Bradford

The REAP self-evaluation and measurement tool was developed as part of the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) award to the university 2004–2006.

The HEIF funding enabled Bradford to broaden its scope of community engagement work and to enhance its existing work. REAP aimed to foster a new culture of working with communities. The first step for the REAP authors was to map the existing work and create a database for the university of its history of CE activities. The authors discovered that each school had a very unique approach to working with communities, dependent on a number of factors, such as individual staff and student interests, internal (school and university) and external drivers.

Economic factors played a particular role. For some, any work with communities is seen as a potential income-generating opportunity and may only be worth undertaking if the economic returns are great enough. Schools such as Infor-

matics, Engineering and Management have a more developed marketing potential and history, and clearer sense of product. There were a variety of projects developed by the university which had relevance to local individuals, businesses, organisations and government. But how to make these accessible to local communities was not normally part of the culture of university schools' thinking.

Where there has been a conscious effort to open up a university project or course to the local communities it is **normally** the result of interests of an individual or group of staff members who are involved in the community in their own time. Examples include the Manningham Corridors Project in partnership with Manningham Means Business, a major initiative by the School of Management to engage with the local communities.¹ The same is also true in SAGE (School of Archaeology and the Environment) where some academics' involvement with local history societies had led to collaboration with the university to strengthen a local history network.

The increasing emphasis placed on the provision for life-long learning has meant that more relationships had developed with communities, particularly with schools and community groups. SLED (School of Lifelong Learning and Development) had been particularly active in developing these relationships. Within the School of Social and International Studies, the Department of Social Studies and Humanities had a history of researching ethnicity, gender, youth and other social divisions in the locality – but with little actual consultation and involvement of the local communities in the design and carrying out of research. Academics also sometimes acted as consultants on issues of interest in the locality. For example, staff from the Department of Social Studies acted as consultants to local government on issues such as youth participation and local electoral reform.

The School of Health was one of the most embedded schools in the locality with local partnerships with the local health service, primary health care trusts, and with community and voluntary groups such as Sharing Voices, Bradford Mind, and other local health service users. An innovation in the way the university worked with communities was the Programme for a Peaceful City, which was established by the Department of Peace Studies in 2001 and extended its work in the wake of the Bradford riots in July of that year. It aimed to build an interface between the community and academics to discuss and address the problems of community inter-

¹ This project was pioneered by one member of staff in the locality and aims to support economic regeneration through research and hosting knowledge-sharing between businesses and the university.

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action in the district of Bradford. The PPC was always based on the idea of working ‘with’ not ‘to’ the community. Bradford District has a vibrant history of community organising, but it also faces many problems of how to build interaction between communities of different social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds within a context of high levels of poverty and unemployment.

From this brief survey, we conclude that the university's work with communities has often been instrumental (such as recruitment), sometimes promotional about the university's profile, sometimes a source of research and consultancy opportunity, sometimes as a source of income generation, but was largely eclectic and *ad hoc*. However, the relationships built up by the School of Health and the Programme for a Peaceful City provided a source for a new, more strategic approach to CE work, which had at its core the principles outlined earlier in this article.

During the two years of HEIF funding, the University of Bradford experimented with a new approach to CE and REAP was developed in tandem with this tool. The university appointed six community associations who would act as catalysts to link communities with the university and to develop collaborations where appropriate. REAP was used by each of the associates in pilot projects, helping to modify the REAP tool.²

As HEIF funding has ended, the university has lost all but three of its community associates. Some impetus has gone out of the CE process, which we hope will be recovered as the new university vice chancellor develops his agenda around this area of work. The university is at present particularly active in the promotion of its Ecovercity initiative, which aims to use REAP as a measurement tool. In the meantime, the most vibrant of the university CE initiatives remains the Programme for a Peaceful City, and we outline what it does and how it makes use of REAP.

² This process can be explored in detail in the final REAP report.

Programme for a Peaceful City (PPC)

PPC continues to bring together academics and practitioners to reflect on key contemporary debates. Key to its work are the REAP principles. The PPC recognises that society needs different types of knowledge and we also facilitate reflection spaces that explore dialogue and deliberation – and how we negotiate difference in complex and unequal urban spaces. Activities are prioritised where reciprocity is acknowledged.

The activities below all begin with discussions that explore reciprocity and set an agenda for assessing and systematising whether in practice it unfolds in the course of the activity. Each activity also aims to ensure that it contributes something to the wider Bradford District, rather than just those involved directly in the activity itself. The Thinkspace aims to ensure that all the individuals attending are at the same time committed to taking the learning through their networks out into the wider urban setting. We agree how this can be assessed in a cost effective way by Thinkspace members. Thinkspace's big challenge is how to interest academics in learning from community activists. Innovations like this have to be fostered and nurtured before they are more widely embedded. REAP encourages an active approach to reflection and monitoring of activities, ensuring a clear rationale for activities, a clear mutual agreement between those engaged from the university and the community, and a commitment to developing the most cost effective and meaningful way of assessing impact. This will involve quantifying numbers attending events against the costs of the events. But it also involves qualitative assessment in the course of the activities, using quick interviews, focus groups, and event evaluations, to ensure that expected outcomes are taking place. Some of the current activities of the PPC are listed below.

Belfast Exchange

The PPC and partners worked with the Institute of Conflict Research (Belfast) in 2007 and 2008 to organise an exchange visit to Belfast to explore whether learning from Northern Ireland would be useful with regard to the state's current response to violence in the UK, such as the July 7 bombings. Six Bradford Muslims attended a seminar in Belfast in November 2007. We then hosted eight guests from Northern Ireland along with 40 local participants in February 2008 to explore two key thematic areas – human rights and preventing violence. Guests from Northern Ireland included former paramilitaries and human rights activists such as Bernadette Devlin McAliskey. Local participants included activists and senior police officers. The event was

funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and was also supported by Bradford Youth Development Partnership and the Hamara Centre in Leeds. Reciprocity was built through the PPC's own learning around disagreements in Bradford District on how to respond to the Preventing Violent Extremism agenda of the UK government. Our Bradford partners gained knowledge of the Northern Ireland context, but also a safe space to discuss their own preoccupations with the UK government's agenda. Externalities were many given that our partners had many connections through which to disseminate the learning and discussion, but also the February 2008 seminar brought in other agencies, including the police, to participate in the discussion and to reflect on ways to build greater trust around preventing a violent extremism agenda and to ensure that it was applied with respect for civil and human rights.

Thinkspace

The PPC has established a Thinkspace with academics from a range of universities and practitioners from Bradford and beyond to explore issues of dialogue, diversity and participation. Practitioners are involved from organisations such as Diversity Exchange, Schools Linking, Mediation Northern Ireland, Bradford Youth Service, and Manningham Mills Community Association. Academics (from Professors to PhD students) are involved from Manchester University and Leeds University alongside University of Bradford academics from the School of Health and Peace Studies.

Local Partners

The PPC has continued to work with local partners on a range of events such as an open space discussion with the Diversity Exchange in December 2007 asking local practitioners to explore 'What really matters to you about Bradford?'

We also worked with academics in Social Sciences and Humanities and the Equity Partnership (which supports Bradford's lesbian, gay and bisexual communities) to facilitate a discussion on the tension between religious belief and sexual orientation.

Disseminating research

Key work also involves making more research available to local external partners and to open up academic seminars to practitioners. The PPC works particularly closely with the International Centre for Participation Studies (ICPS) but also with research centres in Social Sciences and Humanities, Bradford Centre for International Development (BCID) and the School of Health.

Public events re. religion and secularism

The PPC works in partnership with organisations such as the Islamic Society of Britain (local branch) and Bradford Churches for Dialogue and Diversity to bring exciting speakers to the university as we continue to explore religious and secular issues. We have recently been liaising with a representative of the British Humanist Society to discuss future ideas. Speakers in 2007-8 have included Dr Reza Shah-Kazemi, Asim Zubcevic from the University of Sarajevo and Professor Ziauddin Sardar.

Conclusion

We advocate working **with** communities, and with a willingness to make academic knowledge and expertise available to the communities of Bradford. This is combined with the recognition that academics can benefit in their research and teaching from the knowledge and experience of the communities around them. This approach can, we argue, demonstrate the benefits of higher education to the wider

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population. Universities should become less intimidating, elitist and impenetrable, and increasingly valued by their local communities. By looking ‘beyond the ivory tower’, universities can help to build a learning- and knowledge-based society for the many, not just the few. As social networks and social trust are enhanced over time, social capital will accumulate. This is likely to contribute to more cohesive, equitable and democratic local communities where greater self-confidence and mutual trust creates improved capacity to analyse and address local problems and conflicts, and to access the skills and knowledge which makes this possible.

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