

Pulling their weight

Anchors of their local communities, universities can be the counterbalance to placeless power, says Robin Hambleton

It is heartening to see that the US “engaged campus” movement is finally making firm landfall in the UK.

Nine English universities are involved in six pilot “Leading Places” initiatives that started work earlier this year in Brighton, Bristol, Coventry, Gloucestershire, Manchester and Newcastle.

The aim is to strengthen collaborative leadership between universities and other socially committed public agencies – and, just as important, to generate insights into how to expand the role of universities in “place-based leadership”.

But what’s new? Some may feel that UK universities already extol the virtues of public engagement in their localities, and that much is already being achieved. They would, up to a point, be right.

For example, the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement continues to document many imaginative town-gown initiatives and has become an invaluable resource for scholars who want to collaborate with off-campus communities.

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But the Leading Places initiatives could break new ground because their focus is on the development of civic leadership, not public engagement as such. They hold out the promise of giving a boost to the idea that universities can make a much more positive impact than they currently do on the quality of life in specific localities.

There are already many inspirational examples of universities doing this. Portland State University in Oregon is a good example. Its motto – Let knowledge serve the city – sets the tone. Over more than 20 years, university leaders and faculty have embedded awareness of the need for environmentally sustainable ways of living into all teaching and research programmes – and into campus management and development.

Wim Wiewel, Portland State’s president, is a well-known public figure who plays a major role in the leadership of the city. For example, the university was central to the creation of a major cross-cutting partnership, known as All Hands Raised, bringing together many partners in an effort to improve the economic

health of the Portland area and reduce achievement gaps in its school system.

In my last position, as dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I was impressed with the high level of civic engagement shown by staff and students. Engaged scholarship is highly valued there, as signalled by its presence in promotion criteria.

If the UK government follows through on its expressed intention to strengthen sub-national governance in England, this reconfiguration of power could provide new opportunities for universities to strengthen not just their contribution to place-based leadership, but also their scholarship and their relevance.

In Bristol, for example, the two local universities are engaged with the mayor, the city council and other stakeholders in an action-research project designed to enhance the quality of civic leadership in the city and the city region. The Bristol Civic Leadership Project has examined the impact of introducing mayoral governance into the city in 2012, and has made recommendations on how to improve leadership and decision-making.

One risk is that universities could become mere servants of power. If, for example, they interpret their role in terms merely of promoting economic development, they will damage their reputations for encouraging enlightened thought. Scholars and students, however, are well aware that tackling issues such as urban inequality is also essential to the creation of a better society.

Universities are anchor institutions with the potential to counter what I call “placeless power”, the kinds of power wielded by those who are not expected to care about the consequences of their decisions for particular places. Such placeless leaders have gained extraordinary power, and this is a downside of globalisation. If communities are to prosper, locals need to be enabled to expand their democratic control over what happens in their area.

If devolution of power in England can provide new opportunities for universities to lend their considerable weight and expertise to such local decision-making, then both they and their communities will be better off.

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