

The New Regionalisation of UK Higher Education (0346)

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This paper seeks to progress debates about uneven geographies of higher education through a critical analysis of new and emerging regional alliances between universities. Our argument is that despite a critical body of literature reflecting a growing interest in the geographies of higher education at the global (Findlay et al., 2012; Gunn and Mintrom, 2013; Jöns and Hoyler, 2013; Paasi, 2005) and local scales (Addie et al., 2015; Benneworth et al., 2010; Cochrane and Williams, 2013; Goddard and Vallance, 2013), missing from these important debates are analyses of the unfolding regional geographies of higher education. This is a particularly significant omission, not least in the UK where, in pursuit of research and training excellence, universities which were previously organised into traditional regionally-based territorial alliances are forming new transregional consortia. Over the past decade, more than fifty transregional research and training consortia have been established in the UK, each operating at a variously defined regional scale. Nevertheless, regions and regional alliances have remained hitherto forgotten dimensions in accounts of the new relational geographies of higher education, with no meaningful attempt to account for their geographical basis.

This paper aims to contribute to work on the changing institutional geographies of higher education by providing a critical analysis of these new and emerging regional alliances. We contend that these regional geographies of higher education not only reveal how university-led research and training provision is being reorganised spatially, they provide important

pointers as to the intellectual and practical challenges posed by the construction of new regional (as well as other spatial) imaginaries. In undertaking this we envisage our paper to interface with non-trivial questions of theory. Not least is that our mapping of these new institutional geographies reveals a significant reorientation in the spatial organisation of higher education praxis, away from the relatively uniform pattern of regional space associated with territorial regionalism and the Keynesian logic for inclusive regional development towards increasingly complex configurations of regional space that result from embracing relational regionalism and the neoliberal free-market insistence on more intensively targeted, exclusive approaches to regional development. Moreover, and in contrast to other policy spheres, we find higher education to be more conducive to the weakening of fixed regional territories and the emergence of more resolutely relational configurations of networked regions. Our paper also reveals how these new institutional geographies are an embodiment of how regions are being intensely reworked – by strengthening and fixing some, weakening or dismantling others, and imagining new ones – to embrace the opportunities presented, and confront the challenges posed, by our increasingly globalised modern world. With the overall configuration of regions becoming ever more complex, fragmented, and, undoubtedly, uneven, our aim is to instil some coherence to this debate by proposing the metaphor of regional constellations.

To achieve this, the paper develops as follows. Following a brief introduction, Section 2 demonstrates the transition from inclusive Higher Education Research Associations (HERA) to a more exclusive brand of regionally-scaled research and equipment-sharing consortia (White Rose Consortium, N8, M5, GW4, SES and Eastern ARC). Presenting the map of research and equipment-sharing consortia reveals a new archipelagic geography of regional

collaboration, but what this fails to uncover is the different ways in which universities are mobilising the 'region'. In Section 3, we show the starting point for most consortia HEIs was a desire to make extant regions along more exclusive lines by identifying a set of elite universities location *in* the region (e.g. Yorkshire & Humberside is reimagined as the White Rose Consortium, the South West as GW4). Each new 'region' is shown to have elements of spatial contiguity but the driving force behind this new expression of regionalism are the large research intensive – Russell Group – universities who have the highest aspirations and most to gain from dismantling inclusive arrangements and reassembling more exclusive groupings. Furthermore, they are shown be map on to other more exclusive regional groupings – namely the city-regional geographies of the mid-2000s, recently reinvigorated in the guise of the Northern/Midlands/Severn Powerhouses.

A further 'new' regionalisation of higher education is then introduced, focusing on the formation of national networks of Doctoral Training Centres by UK Research Councils. Presenting maps of these new institutional geographies, the paper reveals a trend towards multi-institutional consortia, consortia becoming less localised, and the overall geography of doctoral training becoming more obviously multi-layered, less coherent, and increasingly messy. Perhaps most significant, the maps appear to show higher education being more conducive to the weakening of fixed regional territories and the emergence of resolutely relational configuration of more networked regional spaces than other policy spheres.

To investigate this further, Section 4 moves from questions of definition, identification and delimitation to questions of agency (who or what is behind the new regionalisation of higher

education), process (the actual mechanisms by which the new regionalisation of higher education is occurring), and specific interests (why has the new regionalisation of higher education taken the form it has). Drawing on a series of research interviews, it uncovers why HEIs have followed a 'survival of the fittest' route over inclusive within-region collaboration, before moving on, in Section 5, to examine five considerations for universities when deciding who to collaborate with, what to collaborate on, and how to collaborate in order to compete better. These are: (i) prestige and the reaffirmation of elite mission group universities; (ii) geography and spatial proximity; (iii) a desire to colonise expertise in specific research areas by creating a 'super-strength' alliance; (iv) partnering with universities which have research strengths in their areas of weakness to create a 'strong-across-the-board' alliance; and (v) institutional, historical, personal and professional ties. Following on from this, we consider the consequences for those institutions which find themselves off the research/research-training consortia map, before concluding with statements on how our research contributes empirically and conceptually to wider debates about the uneven geographies of higher education and its wider political significance.

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