Higher education and its communities

Hillier Yvonne, *University of Brighton, UK*

Government policy encourages universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) and their communities to work together in building economically successful societies. They engage with their communities and businesses through knowledge exchange, 'third stream', and traditional activities of research and the education of students (Saunders, Payne and Davies, 2007, UUK, 2007, Webb, 2011). Such community engagement is not a new phenomenon (Webb, 2011).

Partnerships between a university and its communities exist within a complex set of often competing policy demands. Policies are created and implemented through processes which are contested and struggled over, by people with differing levels of power and agency and implemented by other people who have varying levels of commitment and ability to act upon situations that are complex, dynamic and controversial.

> The validity and feasibility [of policies] are assessed in communities of people who are knowledgeable about the problem at hand, and who are all too conscious of the political, financial and practical constraints that define the situation for which they bear responsibility (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003: 14).

Stakeholders responsible for or indeed affected by policy implementation have differing perspectives on what the problem or issue is in the first place. Hoppe (2010) encourages an approach which invests resources in establishing the nature of problems. The collaboration of a university and its community partners could address issues that are 'wicked', ie that can only be managed, not solved. The identification of the nature of any issue and the testing out of its management provides huge potential for a collaborative working relationship that brings together knowledge and experience of research and practice.

This paper outlines a series of research projects undertaken as part of a university community engagement programme (CUPP) with its local communities in a deprived coastal town on the south coast of England. This area, like many coastal towns in England, suffers from numerous and often complex multiple levels of deprivation including unemployment, poverty, low levels of educational achievement, mental health problems and health problems. For example, one ward in the town has one of the highest claimant counts in two super output areas (SOAs) (Church et al, 2010) representing an example of a 'wicked' problem facing the community.

The Learning and Skills Research Group collaborates with community members in Hastings and researchers from the University of Brighton. Researchers have analysed the factors influencing the poor levels of educational achievement by young people in Hastings and examined transitions to further learning by young school leavers, (Ore Valley Forum Project, 2009, HEFCE, 2010). These studies established

that educational interventions are affecting a change in the achievement of young people but it was not possible to attribute any one intervention directly to this success. The research showed that young people who have poor experiences of school and few qualifications can be drawn back into formal education. A subsequent study examined how educational regeneration is affecting parents and families with young children. Parents were asked to help undertake the research, following their successful participation in a local authority project with the charity Turning Point (Turning Point 2011). The project examined if parents acquire knowledge and skills about their children's development and education which affects their own involvement in educational activities (Hillier, 2013). The local authority subsequently funded two projects where clusters of schools in the county examined learning in the home. Each of these projects used questionnaires for parent researchers to discuss aspects of learning with parents of children in receipt of free school meals who were underachieving. The schools then undertook small scale intervention activities to foster better parental engagement and understanding of what support they could give their children at home (ESCC, 2013).

The relationship between university and its communities can be understood through the lens of social capita in terms of what people know about living in the world. Implicit in this notion of social capital is the existence of moral obligations, norms and social values and trust. Some groups share a larger portion of social capital, wield more power and direct the value of norms which affect other groups. Jackson (2010) suggests that 'relational capital' will help understand us how we live our lives in our local/globalised world. Relational capital recognises different voices, histories and memories (Jackson, 2010:250)

There are challenges for continuing the relationship of university researchers and the local community. Community engagement is not valued highly compared with the high stakes demands of the REF in England, or teaching and learning requirements, particularly when students have higher fees. We need to foster communities where we develop shared understandings and knowledge, acknowledging and using differing perspectives. Our relational capital may help sustain the work of community and university partnerships.

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