

Rethinking the ‘third mission’: UK universities and regional engagement in challenging times

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Abstract: Drawing on the experiences and statements of two universities, this article sets out to relate current trends and discourses of engagement of UK higher education institutions with their regional environment in the context of major policy shifts in higher education and in regional governance. The “third mission” is considered as an aspect of what universities do in place and in relation to other place-based agencies. In this process of exploration, we attempt to identify adjustment behaviours and discourses in contrasting regional contexts and to relate them to the unequal power of universities and to their structural embeddedness in a local socio-economic and policy fabric.

Keywords: universities, regional engagement, embeddedness, third mission, marketisation

1. Introduction

Broadly defined the third stream of universities’ activities is concerned with the “generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside the academic environment” (Molas-Gallart et al. 2002, 2). And – as the focus of this special issue confirms – the significance of these activities as “third mission” has become of increasing interest not only to those working within higher education (HE), but also to those seeking to develop a public policy capable of enabling universities to contribute beyond the traditional spheres of research and teaching (see, e.g., Harding et al. 2007; OECD 2007; Yusuf and Nabeshima 2007).

Debates around the “third mission” are important because of the way in which they make it possible to think about universities as active social agents, but there is a danger that the language of “missions” may divert attention from some of the more mundane and everyday practices that define how universities interact with wider communities and interests. As John Goddard and Paul Vallance (2013) note, universities are embedded in environments in which they have developed close and enduring relations with wider governance and business networks, as well as other civil society organisations and social institutions. The nature of their local interactions is in large part determined by a complex system of relations with local policy networks and socio economic actors developed over time in ways that can be seen to help

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constitute a “strategic articulation of their third mission” (Pinheiro, Benneworth, and Jones 2012, 52) or as result of less coordinated logics of action understood here as routines, values and norms engrained in institutional habitus and in the relationships between higher education institutions (HEIs) and their local environment (Ball and Maroy 2009; Van Zanten 2009). From this perspective, the third mission is more a response to the placed realities of everyday institutional life than a noble endeavour driven by any overriding commitment to the public good as a defining characteristic of universities (Calhoun 2006).

It is on this dimension that the paper focuses, in a context of major policy shifts in higher education and in regional governance. The third mission is considered here as an aspect of what universities do in place and in relation to other place-based agencies. In this process of exploration, we will attempt to identify adjustment behaviours and discourses in contrasting regional contexts and to relate them to the unequal bargaining power and structural embeddedness of universities in local socio-economic and policy networks (Lebeau and Bennion 2014).

We do not want to dismiss the significance of the series of recent changes which some have identified as a drive towards the marketization of HE in the UK (see, e.g., Collini 2012; Brown and Carasso 2013; McGettigan 2013 among many others). But our focus here is rather different since we are concerned to explore how universities as social institutions (maybe even ‘businesses’) have evolved in their wider settings through these periods of reform and changing economic fortune. After briefly reflecting on the broader policy context, we turn to consider ways of locating universities as actors within their regional and local contexts before drawing on findings from two case studies of strategies and perceptions of universities’ transformative regional impacts, carried out as part of a larger project² and located in contrasting regional configurations; one – Northville University (NU) - in a large conurbation in England and the other – Lochside University (LU) - in a medium sized Scottish city-region.³

² Higher Education and Regional Transformation: Social and Cultural Perspectives (The HEART Project, ESRC Grant Reference Number: ES/E017894/1). Project involving four regional case studies in England and Scotland, based primarily on individual and group interviews with members of staff at each university and with local “stakeholders” (representatives of key partner agencies and organisations such as city councils, local schools, colleges and universities, as well as community, business, and regional development organisations).

We would like to acknowledge the contribution of other members of the research team (Michael Amoah, Alice Bennion, John Brennan and Ruth Williams) in helping us to develop our ideas, although we take full responsibility for the arguments presented here.

³ The regions, institutions and individuals have been given fictitious names in order to maintain the anonymity of our research participants, but also to reflect the use of case studies in our research as ‘instrumental’ illustrations, rather than ‘intrinsic’ insights into particular contexts.

The cases were chosen because in addition to their different regional economic and demographic environments, they reflect contrasting policy contexts for HE generally and regional engagement in particular (Arnott and Ozga 2010; Kitagawa and Lightowler 2013). While not immune to market-inspired trends, the Scottish context contrasts with the current English setup in that its approach to education is an expression of the devolved – Scottish National Party led – government’s commitment to a “discursive alignment of economic growth with the need for a flourishing, inclusive and fair society that addresses long-term problems of poverty” (Arnott and Ozga 2010, 346). Finally, Northville (a research intensive university, member of the Russell Group) and Lochside (former technical college, granted university status in 1994 under the *Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992) sit at the opposite ends of the strong status stratification – or “vertical diversification through reputation hierarchies” (Teichler 2008, 361) – which typifies the HE system in the UK.

2. Policy context

In the UK, the formalisation of the third mission as a policy concern only took shape in the late 1990s when it became subject to a dedicated funding stream for the UK Higher Education Funding Councils. This prompted the design of instruments aiming to quantify (levels of activity and impacts) and ultimately monetize activities ranging from patenting and licencing to social justice advocacy through measurements that could be “turned into a scoring and ranking mechanism that could shape funding” (Molas-Gallart et al. 2002, 55) . A funding allocation system was eventually adopted which made it an explicit requirement for universities to collect Third Stream activity data.⁴ These incentives came in addition to funding opportunities managed by local governments and (until 2010) by regional development agencies (RDAs) as part of knowledge exchange initiatives and regeneration strategies which combined to give the third mission of universities a strong territorial dimension expressed in most universities’ mission statements (Chatterton and Goddard 2000; Laredo 2007).

The increased marketisation of the UK HE over the last two decades alongside recent financial restrictions and reforms has in practice also been accompanied by rhetorical shifts in university strategies and communication about the “wider benefits” of HE, and about public and community engagement, as more emphasis has been placed “on short-term episodes of engagement” (Genus 2014, 504) with greater and immediate visibility rather than co-

⁴ In the UK, a Higher Education – Business and Community Interaction (HE-BCI) survey is run annually since 1999 by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).). The survey has informed funding allocation for third stream activities of universities through the Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) since 2006 (HEFCE 2011 b).

constructed local bottom up initiatives. Scott (2014) argues that the reforms have in effect shifted attention away from any regional contribution towards an obsession with national and global rankings. At the same time, in England at least, the dismantling of the structures of regional governance represented by the RDAs since 2010 has also removed some of the external pressures towards regional engagement (Charles, Kitagawa, and Uyarra 2014).

In some respects, the third mission (in particular its social dimension) of universities has been side-lined in policy debates in the UK in recent years, although it survives in the discourse around the 'impact' that is expected from research and knowledge exchange activities (e.g., HEFCE 2011a). Residual funding continues to be available for knowledge exchange on the basis of the Higher Education-Business and Community Interaction Survey, but overall the emphasis has been firmly placed in the last four years on student finance and fees. Even recent attempts to reposition universities and celebrate their contribution to well-being beyond the academy have tended to do so in terms that emphasise contributions to national economic renewal or technological innovation – not so much a mission, more a case for increased state investment (IPPR 2013; Witty 2013).

The regional engagement of contemporary UK Universities may in recent years have been shaped by the dynamics of a competitive HE sector and by the policy imperatives of expansion, but most of them actually emerged from the local dynamics of – and new social relations associated with – a rapidly industrialising society (Watson, 2007, Goddard and Vallance 2013) in the 19th century or more recently (the polytechnics, universities of the 1960s) in close association with local governance structures and demands of local policy/political elite networks. When considered in relation to the region or location they identify as their place, universities should therefore not be solely seen as agencies of broader policy agendas. They have a local history and are embedded in a web of relations that constitutes the subjective definition of 'their' region. It is this embeddedness that helps to define the third mission of universities in practice and in place (Cochrane and Williams 2013, Goddard and Vallance 2013).

3. Models of local and regional engagement

Various typologies and models of university 'engagement' or impact, have been devised in an attempt to identify the best ways of capturing the relationship between the 'engaged university' and its regional environment. Gaffikin and Morrissey (2008), for instance, suggested the following five models of university engagement:

- The *ivory tower* model whereby the institution is detached, which encourages ‘retreat from the world to optimize considered reflection’.
- The *non-partisan* model in which the institution is not totally detached but is circumspect about its involvement – ‘being ‘above’ the conflict is seen as safer than being ‘drawn into’ the conflict’.
- The *service* model whereby the institution takes a paternalistic approach to its engagement ensuring that the ‘power, status and discretion rest exclusively with the institution’.
- The *outreach* model which is similar to the service model except that there is a more organised approach to engaging with the community, although ‘knowledge transfer is seen to be largely one way’.
- The *engaged* model, which is based on ‘equal exchange between the academy and the community, and rooted in a mutually supportive partnership that fosters a formal strategic long-term collaborative arrangement’.

Such ideal-typical constructions are unlikely to be encountered in the real world where universities’ terms of engagement and interactions are driven by local configurations as much as strategies devised by university executive teams. Typologies combining institutional perspectives and considerations of regional contexts offer a more realistic picture of the multiple combinations available. For example, Boucher, Conway, and van der Meer developed the following four categories on the basis of empirical case studies from across Europe, highlighting “differences in the existence and level of competition and hierarchy effects in the relationship between universities and their regions” (2003, 891).

- Single player universities in peripheral regions: Encouraging entrepreneurship , Science and technology transfer;
- Multiplayer universities in peripheral regions: Regional consortia, Cultural networks, Regional promotion, Telematics networks’
- Traditional universities in core regions: Strategic planning and knowledge transfer; Sustainable development; Education and training and
- Newer technologically oriented universities in core regions: city regeneration; widening access to non-traditional students.

This association of contexts and types of engagement better reflects the diversity of the cases analysed in our research. Yet, what places a university in any one of these categories will be determined by an even more complex combination of factors than those listed here.

Universities vary because of their histories, values, aspirations and perceived reputation. The students who attend will also be different: where they come from, why they come, what they experience, and where they go after their degree. The balance between teaching and research (and its relevance to and reliance on the region) will also vary from university to university. Even in HE systems marked by tight controls of steering authorities, universities will also vary in terms of the rewards and incentives for staff, and the extent and nature of institutional change (Paradeise and Thoenig 2013).

Regions, too, vary not just because of their economic profile or the social and ethnic mix of their populations, but also according to the clarity of their boundaries: empirical studies have long revealed that the concept of regional engagement rests on multiple conceptualisations of the idea of a region, and shown that there may often be “considerable disjuncture between the service territories of universities and the regional boundaries defined by government” (Charles 2007, 8). Charles, Kitagawa, and Uyarra (2014, 338) highlight the ways in which the ‘regional’ identification of universities in England has evolved in response to changes in government structures but also the extent to which universities themselves actively imagine the spaces which they inhabit. In practice for many universities, the city or city region may be the most significant local context, even if a more extensive spatial politics may be mobilised where institutional benefits are identified (see, e.g. Cochrane and Williams 2013; Goddard and Vallance 2013).

4. The elusive nature of the third mission as strategic priority

As suggested earlier, the insecurity generated by reduced public investment in core activities of universities along with the uncertainty created by the liberalisation of the student recruitment (particularly in England) have produced a climate in which universities have tended to regroup their activities around a core teaching and research focus, and in particular those key performance indicators of quality identified in the latest White Paper on HE of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS 2011) . Although the language of “impact” has been given a very high profile in the reframing of the research agenda by the various funding councils in the UK, regional engagement of whatever type is barely touched upon in this White Paper and does not feature in key performance indicators of significance to universities’ standing in league tables, although here the differences in policy context between England and Scotland are significant. As Cochrane and Williams note, of the situation in England, “It would be hard to find any explicit reference to local or regional economies in statements emerging from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills or the Higher Education Funding Council for England since May 2010” (2013, 47), while Gallacher and Raffe (2012)

note the opportunities for the devolved Scottish government to develop initiatives of its own. This difference is also reflected in the contrasting emphases that emerge from a brief analysis of the two most recent strategic plans of our case study institutions (NU in England and LU in Scotland) over the past decade as new plans have been drafted in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 and changes in government funding priorities.

4.1 Northville: cautious engagement and positive rhetoric

Northville University has had a strong discourse of public and community engagement since its establishment as a civic university, but here we reflect on the ways in which this has been expressed in the two strategic plans developed for the period to 2015 (first published in 2005 and revised in 2009) and for the period to 2020 (first published in 2012)⁵. In both plans most references to local communities and the regional environment of the university fall under *Social Responsibility*, the third goal of the strategy behind *research* and *teaching/learning*. The prioritisation of research is consistent with the Russell group membership of NU and with its overall standing in the top 50 research universities in the world (Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2012/13), although in the second plan it is claimed that social responsibility is “already embedded” in the other goals (Northville University 2012, 15).

There are differences in emphasis between the two plans: the first makes more explicit and direct reference to other local institutions and agencies, while the second is couched in more general terms except where reference is made to activities for which the university has direct responsibility (including public events and the provision of legal and dental services), as well as also identifying international responsibilities. This reflects some of the wider shifts in context – as urban agencies have themselves faced significant challenges arising from the programme of austerity being pursued by central government. Practical objectives are more explicit in the plan drafted in 2005 for instance with specific measures to make sure undergraduate students take “supervised voluntary work of benefit to their local communities” (2005, 14) and purposefully designed outreach plans for “providing skills training for the unemployed in adjoining communities”, as well as “practical job creation schemes” (ibid.). In 2005, the university was also more explicit than in the later plan about the interrelationship between its success and that of the city region in which it was located. Its success was unequivocally tied to the success of the city region as “vital to the University’s own chances of realising its ambitions“(Northville University 2005, 15). The University indicated a strong commitment to working with City authorities to enhance the standing of Northville as a dynamic node in the

⁵ *Northville 2020, the Strategic Plan for Northville University* (2012, accessed from University website in May 2014) ; *Advancing the 2015 agenda. The Strategic Plan of NU (2005, 2009 Edition)*.

global knowledge economy” (ibid., 13). In 2012, this finds an expression in terms of a contribution to ‘economic well-being’, as well as ‘social well-being’ but measurable targets such as the number of hours spent by students on placement or volunteering for local authorities have disappeared.

Yet, in many respects, the broad framework remains similar. The overall engagement strategy of both plans could be summed up in terms of bringing excellence to local communities and connecting the local to the global in multiple ways. In the 2005 plan, there is a stated commitment to “championing equality and diversity in all activities and to promote educational and employment opportunities in its immediate neighbourhood”(Northville University 2005, 15); in 2012 this finds expression in the aim of “ensuring fairness to people – both students and staff through systems and practice” (Northville University 2012, 17) In both there is a stress on the importance of the university’s graduates developing strong value systems and being committed to social responsibility. In both there are references to the need to widen access to HE, with a particular focus on local communities. In both plans too, the university develops a discourse of social responsibility (promoting the good, ensuring fairness) as an overarching mission statement, broadly defined as making the University “a force for good, locally, nationally and internationally, by bringing knowledge to bear on the great issues facing the world in the 21st century, and by producing graduates prepared to exercise social leadership and environmental responsibility.” (Northville University 2005, 12).

4.2 Lochside: engagement vs. embeddedness

As a predominantly teaching institution in Scotland, Lochside University (LU) competes in a more local student market and is more directly dependent on government funding. As a direct consequence of its high level of embeddedness in the city’s social relations and place-related reputation, LU has developed an ambivalent relationship with the notion of engagement, perceived as a threat to its reputation as much as a necessary resource (Lebeau and Bennion 2014).

The first of the plans on which we focus was developed in 2007 and the second in 2012.⁶ There are significant differences between them: the earlier one seems more proactively set out in terms of local initiatives and community activities, while the later one places greater emphasis on research expertise, teaching, and particularly graduate attributes as core to the strategy. In the first there are explicit references to the development of “informal curriculum

⁶ Lochside University (2007) *Strategic Plan 2007-11* ; Lochside University (2011) *Strategic Plan 2011-15*; Lochside University (2012) *outcome agreement Academic Year 2012/13*.

that encourages learner engagement with the social and economic development of communities and organizations” (Lochside University 2007, 16) and “opportunities for credit based on community and organisation engagement” (Lochside University 2007, 16), as well as to “engage fully with local secondary schools to support and promote the aspirations of their pupils” (Lochside University 2007, 16). In the second, more emphasis is placed on research, with a commitment to “Increase the pervasiveness of the research and practice culture across all provision, while maintaining our world leading role in aspects of environmental sciences, and develop internationally leading groups in policing, forensics and criminal justice and in inclusive technologies for sustainability, well-being and security” (Lochside University 2011, 4).

Nevertheless in practice LU plans reflect the need to build from a local experience. In both there is a stress on working with employers to develop curriculum and learning as well as references to work-related learning. And even the apparent differences relate to the context in which the university finds itself – the level of dependency of the institution on local intakes and on public funding means it cannot avoid developing the relationships identified in the first plan, but to do so effectively it needs to position itself differently within the perceived hierarchy of university institutions in Scotland.

The two plans make clear reference to the expected outcomes set out by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) as part of their priorities in a reflection of the persisting high dependency of the University on teaching and other SFC grants. In the most recent plan, explicit references to inclusiveness and relevance to the local community and economy and to the ‘Scottish nation’ top the list under the *Employability and skills*, the *Access inclusion and progression* and the *Knowledge exchange* outcomes. This does not come as a huge surprise in the Scottish political context. But, as well as confirming LU’s dependence on state funding, these references also reflect its location within policy frameworks with strong authority over the terms of its engagement with local communities and the City of Lochside.

5. Strategic engagement vs logics of action

In section 3 we introduced some simple typologies which set out models of engagement and models of university relationship with their region. Here, we draw on those typologies to interpret and explore the experiences of Lochside and Northville Universities.

5.1 Lochside: Finding one’s niche in a city to reinvent

Like many manufacturing areas in the UK, Lochside's economy suffered badly from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. This led to significant structural changes with a shift from manufacturing to service-orientated business. Lochside is a city with a low employment rate and of high level of multiple deprivation by national standards (Scottish Government 2010) Students account for 16% of the population, the highest proportion of the four largest Scottish cities. There are two universities in the city, located within very close proximity to one another in the 'cultural quarter' and sharing some facilities. One is an established research intensive institution of 17,000 students while the other – LU, a former technical institute granted university status in 1994, which has around 5,000 students. The two institutions have both been drafted into most regeneration strategies of the last 20 years, in a context that shares many features of the "Multiplayer universities in peripheral regions" type identified by Boucher, Conway and van der Meer (2003, 894). In practice, LU is uncomfortably sandwiched between a more prestigious university (but training local nurses and teachers) and a large Further Education college with HE sections recruiting in its market.

LU is heavily rooted in the locality in terms of student and staff recruitment as well as research impact. This strong dependency has not always worked in its favour particularly in a context of increasing competition for students and research income. Perceived as "local" by stakeholders including business and community organisations, the university makes a big case of its commitment to the locality through statements and formal partnerships relating to raising aspiration, knowledge transfer, continuing professional development and cultural activities. In terms of the typology, LU has the features of a typical local university, strongly embedded in multiple criss-crossing local policy, economic and social networks.

It is also well connected to other local HEIs as a partner on research and development programmes. But however keen it is to be associated with others (more reputed in particular), LU has to develop a rhetoric stressing its own particular contribution to innovation and cultural enlightenment (as in typical type 4 contexts) in order to offset the negative effects of being the "local" institution. As a result, existing links, often resulting from long term relationships between members of staff across universities, were generally absent from official accounts of impact.

5.2. Northville: a global urban university

The context within which this university is located is a nested and overlapping one, focused around city, city region and wider region. In practice the core emphasis of the University's local vision largely relates to the city of Northville, which on occasion stretches to the city region.

As in the Lochside case, the University is located at the heart of the city and this is a key part of its identity. At the urban level involvement often follows from some formal imperative or expectation (e.g. involvement in local partnerships) or where the justification is rather more instrumental (e.g. in plans for development of the area around the University). NU can therefore be said to be strategically embedded in local policy and economic networks, while retaining a capacity to revert to a more detached attitude should local associations risk its reputation on the more global (and national) market.

The city region is home to a range of HEIs, but NU does not really compete directly with any of them for students or in terms of research expertise, allowing a more relaxed approach to partnership than in the case of LU. In practice, consistent with its strategic mission, the broad geographical reference of the university is the interspace between the global (being a world class research university) and the local, loosely conceived in terms of the “city” but also local communities. With 30% of its postgraduate students from outside the EU, Northville’s emphasis on communities also has to have a wider resonance, that of an ethical university reaching out to relevant communities wherever they are.

The stakeholders interviewed in Northville had no particular issue with this instrumental construction of NU’s local identity. In fact most saw a clear division of labour between the city’s many HEIs, and suggested that others should have less “stratospheric ambitions”. Far from the tensions observed in Lochside between the engagement agenda of LU, the expectations of local policy makers and certain grass-root practices, the world class ambitions of NU fit well with the stated ambitions of Northville and other regional agencies – aiming to build a world class city or a world class region. A confluence of interests around the global university/global city, doubled with strong cohesive ties between local authority and university at senior level allows the university to benefit from a helpful institutional environment to pursue its wider interests, including ambitious urban development projects in partnership with other HEIs.

NU presents some of the characteristics of a “service institution” in the terms developed by Gaffikin and Morrissey (2008). The university’s strong position in the city as organisation and employer, in addition to the multiplier effects of its numerous spin off activities allow it to present a strong rhetoric of engagement. Gaffikin and Morrissey (2008, 8) see a paternalistic stance in this approach, underpinned by the local power of the University. However, in the case of NU, the paternalistic tone is somehow lessened by the economic strength and dynamism of the city region and by a highly competitive local HE market. NU can therefore be seen as trading its reputation (as a “traditional” university in the terms used by Boucher, Conway and van der Meer, 2003) in all sorts of formal partnerships with other local HEIs of

lower ranking in league tables in order to be seen as contributing towards the economic success (or recovery in times of hardship) of a region capable of turning to other providers should the university be tempted by a more isolationist stance. In this sense, however strong internationally, the university needs the city region in multiple ways (capital investments related to its city centre location, urban life style attracting interest from students and staff internationally, socio economic problems as catalysts of community engagement initiatives) as much as the city needs NU's brand and transfer activities to attract investors in the local knowledge economy and contribute to further enhancing its forward-looking image and position as a "core city" in the UK economic landscape.

5.3 Structural embeddedness and logics of action: on the intended and non-intended drivers of local impact

Neither of our two cases fits neatly into the typologies presented in section 3, yet each shows patterns of engagement that reflect the flexible adaptation of British universities to their environment (as an expression of the 'third mission' in everyday and often mundane practice). This flexibility granted by a long tradition of autonomy is probably what differentiates them the most (certainly more than the economic features of their regional environment) from other European institutions used by Boucher, Conway, and van der Meer (2003) to develop their typology. Both might also be reimagined in terms identified by Goddard et al. (2014) as 'anchor' institutions in their localities.

The institutional logics of action we have identified should be placed in the quasi market context within which most of universities' activities (student and staff recruitment and research funding) have been operating in the UK (including Scotland, even if the fee regime is different) for more than 20 years as part of new approaches to the management of publicly funded institutions and in response to new social demands for HE (Brown and Carasso 2013). These logics (explicit or implicit decisions and actions) are therefore driven by the universities' market position or "competitive interdependencies" (Ball and Maroy 2009, 100) but they also result from their embeddedness in policy schemes and local socio-economic realities.

Here the embeddedness of universities should be understood in the sense of structural embeddedness at micro levels as defined by Granovetter, who noted that "actors do not decide as atoms outside a social context, nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy" (1985, 487). In this context, embeddedness refers to institutional and individual positions in local

policy and business networks and to the multiple ways in which the repertoires of action of universities (and their agents) are influenced by their location (Lebeau and Bennion 2013). Associated with the concept of 'logics of action' the search for patterns of embeddedness in the universities' repertoires of action locally reveals the range of external and internal constraints and opportunities affecting their attitude towards their immediate environment.

NU and LU and are not only diversely positioned in league tables, they also operate in different policy contexts, and entertain contrasting relationships with local actors on a number of issues depending on the space for manoeuvre left by their structural embeddedness in policy schemes and social relations. This is perceptible in strategic mission plans as well as in the range of place-related partnerships in which universities are involved. The strategic provision of key skills to core areas of the local economy and public services may offer institutions a more strategic and symbolic embeddedness on the long term than short term highly visible involvement on local development schemes (allowing the capture of supplementary public funding). Courses in Town Planning, Nursing and Social work offered by NU may not contribute directly to its international reputation, but they supply managers to local and regional services and make it more likely that the university is listened to when it matters at local level. As Greenaway, Salter and Hart showed through a concrete case study of hospital relocation in England, "local policy-making in an era of governance depends upon interpersonal networks" (2007, 732) leaving those, "who are able to draw upon or manipulate existing networks" with a solid bargaining power and an "advantage over those needing to build from the ground up" (734).

6. Conclusion

The regional logics of action of universities and their discourses of local engagement cannot be isolated from the high vertical inter-institutional differentiation characterising the sector in the UK and increasingly across Europe (Teixeira 2013; Teichler 2008). At the root of this stratification is the competitive (and now quasi market) nature of a system in which universities compete for resources and students, while remaining subject to fairly strong forms of central regulation (Teixeira 2013; Brown and Carasso 2013). The adaptive behaviour of institutions inherent in such a configuration (Van Vught 2008) is exacerbated in contexts of unprecedented squeeze of their direct income from the State, deregulation of their student intake, and scarcity of resources from third stream activities.

In such contexts, one would expect universities to minimize their involvement in the politics of place, particularly in the UK following major funding cuts and reorganisation of regional development programmes and governance. A close look at selected universities' strategies indicates how they have tended to regroup their activities around core functions and areas of strengths or in line with the policy inflections of their main funder. Local community engagement remains a significant element of the revised strategic plans of the case study universities presented here, yet a shift towards a more non-committal stance is clearly perceptible in times of budget cuts and restructuring of sub-national geographies of governance.

But a detour through the less tangible cultural and social dimensions of universities regional and local impacts reveals patterns of engagement beyond the normative rhetoric dominating economic strategies and the literature on universities' contribution to development. Although there is some evidence that universities can play a role, in partnership with other organisations, the extent of local development impact is more difficult to assess. In this context, Goddard and Vallance (2013) usefully suggest that it is necessary to explore the more complex (and possibly softer) role of universities and their staff within wider social innovation systems. Timescales can be very long and impact may be indirect, unintended and sometimes negative. The level of structural embeddedness of universities in their local environment needs to be understood in order to identify the wide range of their strategies and logics of action that may or may not be built upon policy frameworks.

As Thomas Gieryn puts it: "Place is, at once, the buildings, streets, monuments, and open spaces assembled at a certain geographic spot *and* actors' interpretations, representations, and identifications" (Gieryn 2000, 466-7). Universities may be unable to escape their placed geographies (at least in the short term) but what they do is often an important part of making up the places in which they find themselves. This is an aspect of their 'third mission' that universities often seem reluctant to acknowledge, except in promotional terms, yet it can be seen as a central aspect of the way in which they deliver on the 'third mission' in a series of micro and often unnoticed ways, less dramatically, but no less significantly, than is sometimes expressed in their more rhetorical claims. Indeed, the visionary language of 'missions' may get in the way of developing a fuller institutional understanding of the actually existing relationship between universities and their regional contexts.

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