



## **Learning Cities: the role of the ‘region – intensive’ university**

### **A Policy Briefing from PASCAL International Observatory**

*Worldwide perspectives for local possibilities*

#### **Purpose**

Earlier policy briefings from PASCAL International Observatory have highlighted the importance of learning for the future of cities and of city authorities themselves demanding more of the universities and other higher education institutions within their regions. This briefing is focussed on the development of an effective regional role in regional development by these higher education institutions themselves.

#### **Strategies and mission priorities for higher education providers**

The character of any higher education institution is the outcome of the pressures arising in the different area, market and institutional contexts in which it operates. An HEI is constrained by the funding regime in which it is placed and the level of resources it is able to attract. It is also dependent on a number of institutional policy choices relating crucially to

the emphasis placed on research relative to teaching, the emphasis placed on the pursuit of international standing relative to national or regional orientation and the extent to which regional engagement activities are recognised and incorporated into resource allocation and management practices within the institution. The judgements made by higher education providers on these issues are likely to lead them to prioritise the elements in their mission – research, teaching and regional/community engagement – in different ways as they seek to define their role and place in the world of higher education.

The responses of HEIs to these pressures can be categorised in several ways. It is suggested, for example, that they might look to position themselves in one of a number of broad categories referred to as elite institutions, research-intensive institutions, teaching institutions and regional institutions. To these may be added some with a particular specialism in an aspect of science, or as schools of music or art, whilst others again are ‘short-cycle’ providers offering mainly vocational degree programmes. These categories can be associated with the priority ‘mission’ of the institution, set out in table 1 below:

Table 1: Main categories of higher education providers

<b>Category</b>	<b>Mission priority order</b>
Research intensive	(International) Research, teaching, region
Teaching	Teaching, research, region
Regional intensive	Region, teaching, (applied) research
Specialist	All in specialist field
Short cycle	Vocational training, region

All categories espouse each ‘mission’ to some extent: the distinction between categories rests on the relative priority afforded to each. The focus here is with those providers who position themselves as ‘regional intensive universities’ for whom serving the city and region in which they are located is the primary feature of their mission and role.

### **The concept of a ‘regional intensive’ university**

The concept of a regional university is not a new one. Gleeson (2011) traces the origins of regional and community engagement to the founding of the land-grant universities in the US after the passing of the Morrill Act by the US Federal government in 1862. The land-grant tradition uses public money to bring the benefits of education and applied science to facilitate development and adjustment to change. Whilst, as Gleeson shows, there were many other factors which have influenced the emergence of community engagement in universities and colleges over the years, the importance of HEIs for the economic development of regions has become widely recognised, based largely around the role of knowledge creation and knowledge transfer as a driver for business and product innovation.

Now the purpose and role of universities is being extended to the co-creation, exchange and mobilisation of knowledge through systematic approaches to university – community research partnerships, seen to be of mutual benefit both to the university and to the wider local and regional community. This broader and deeper relationship between universities and their regions lies behind the notion of a ‘regional-intensive’ university as used here.

In some countries a concept of this sort has been embedded in legislation. In Sweden, for example, changes in higher education legislation during the 1990s, whilst giving universities more autonomy over their internal affairs, placed greater responsibility on them to work with their communities, in particular with industry and business. Regional universities themselves have formed associations, for example in Australia and South Africa, to help higher education better adopt and contribute to government regional policies in these countries. Elsewhere, governments have funded initiatives to promote good practice in regional engagement, such as the CUPP programme in the UK.

### **The role of the regional intensive university**

Regional policy, by definition, is about place and community. Regional cities and communities develop their social and economic identity around place. They compete for business and economic development, infrastructure and services, and they promote and support local sporting, social and cultural organisations and activities. Increasingly local universities are recognised as assets for their communities, not only to provide accessible high quality educational opportunities, but also to contribute to local economic, social and cultural development. The significance for regional development placed on innovation, knowledge creation, human resource development and social capital in achieving regional growth and development has increased the expectations of universities and accorded higher education institutions a significant role in their regions.

So how is this role fulfilled? The key facets of the role of a successful regional university are summarised below. They embrace:

- ⌚ Increasing educational opportunities for both school leavers and mature students through partnerships with local schools and colleges;
- ⌚ Lifting aspirations and promoting educational progression through early engagement programmes with parents and young people in school;
- ⌚ Establishing alternative selection processes and entry pathways into university programmes to recruit able students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the region who would otherwise be lost the higher education;
- ⌚ Improving local productivity through workforce development, research, innovation and infrastructure development through partnerships with local government and business;

- ⌚ Addressing social and environmental issues faced by the region through research and knowledge exchange programmes;
- ⌚ Facilitating the development of arts, culture, sport and recreation through promoting and supporting creative ideas, and encouraging the involvement of its academic staff, providing venues and facilities for attracting visiting speakers, artists and writers.

### **Strengths of ‘regional – intensive’ universities**

It is possible to identify some aspects of engagement which are crucial to the fulfilment of the ‘regional intensive’ concept, and which might be held to mark the distinctiveness of the regional role. Prominent amongst these are:

***Being close to the government and public authorities within their region, and with the not-for-profit sector.*** This ‘closeness’ might be expressed through the signing of memoranda of understanding and service level agreements with key bodies in the region which specify the kinds of contribution and volumes of services to be offered.

***Being close to their local economies and business communities.***

Regionally intensive universities are particularly well placed to provide degree programmes of direct relevance to the needs of local employers, and through informal local labour market intelligence, to develop programmes in anticipation of changing skills requirements. There was evidence of this in the region where new degree programmes in ‘public service’ were being devised in consultation with public authorities aimed at helping breakdown traditional service boundaries and encouraging a more holistic approach to innovation in public services provision.

The regional-intensive university is able to relate successfully to both a predominantly SME-based economy, and to larger businesses. For the former, patient relationship building with small businesses, can develop from student placements, modest problem solving, to more substantial applied research and consultancy for product development. It could also provide business services, such as product testing, to support local business as well as enriching the student experience. Partnerships with larger companies can sustain relationships, mainly around staff development, and the provision of specific research collaborations.

This closeness to business was also valuable in increasing social capital within the business community, facilitating relationships between businesses in the region, and sustaining a problem-solving ‘self-help’ group of businesses and university staff. The knowledge and trust developed between a regional-intensive university and the regional business community leads not only to a sensitivity to emerging skills needs but also opens up a flexibility in course design to address them not always evident in other types of institution.

### ***Being close to their communities.***

Maintaining campuses in local areas across the region was important in allowing access to higher education for people who would otherwise be unable to do so. A regional intensive university is able to offer innovative outreach programmes and student support to help students not only 'get in', but also 'get through' higher education programmes through modular structuring of courses, allowing flexible timetables for delivery, and timescales for completion of degree programmes. A high proportion of students in regional universities are likely to be drawn from the region, and to continue to live and work in the region. Regional intensive universities therefore make a direct impact on the skills available in the region in a way that other institutions with geographically much wider student flows cannot do.

Being located in local campuses also provides for the enrichment of local social and cultural life through public lectures and events, knowledge festivals and contributions to the local media in a way that is more difficult on a centralised city-centre campus. The local campus can be a community resource for supporting local community and civic groups and associations.

### ***Being close to schools and colleges within the region***

For the regional intensive university the progression it offers its students depend on close links between regional-intensive universities and the schools and colleges within their region. It needs to be clear what the value added to this progression is arising from its university status.

### **Developing the regional-intensive university ethos**

For all the benefits regional intensive universities can offer to their regions the regionally-focussed university remains in an uncertain position in many countries within prevailing national, and increasingly international, policies and perspectives in higher education. A regional intensive university needs to be both a regional actor and a 'scientific' actor, bringing advanced research and knowledge to local innovation processes. Whilst it is important to get people 'in' and 'through' higher education it is also important to allow students in the regional community to 'get on'. The regionally intensive university's connections with the wider research community both nationally and internationally are therefore vitally important. As Konwitz (2011) has pointed out, because universities are uniquely **not** bounded by jurisdictional limits, they have the scope to bring otherwise disparate groups together to address issues of priority for the region, and can sustain a leadership role in taking the regional response forward. As one university senior manager in put it 'the university has to go outside the region in order to bring benefits back in'.

Regional intensive universities need to maximise the opportunities which arise from the need for applied research at the regional level through participation in national and international research programmes, and the promotion of their own research profiles and opportunities at post-graduate level. National policies on the funding of research in many countries often do not make this life easy for HEIs who are not 'research intensive'. But the very patient relationship building that has served many regional intensive universities and regional stakeholders well in many respects, can also be extended to the wider research community, bridging the gap between 'blue skies' and applied research and promoting local innovation and business incubation and spin outs in the process.

### **International learning for local development**

Universities are seen as important in regional development, and regional engagement is increasingly expected of universities in justification for public funding. Regional engagement is now accepted as part of what universities do, but it is clear there remain very different patterns of engagement by institutions within a region. But regional-intensive universities are particularly well placed to respond to emerging skills needs for innovative public services, in their ability to build relationships with particular sectors, especially the SMEs of the local business community, and to provide access and support for participation in higher education to many who would otherwise not be able to do so. They can offer applied research and consultancy to local business and build social capital within the business community. They may be particularly successful in using student placements to improve the understanding of the higher education contribution within an often sceptical local business and community. But all this is enhanced if the regional-intensive university also makes serious efforts to connect with national and international research opportunities to 'bring this back in' to inform local development and innovation.

\*This policy insight is based on a paper by John Tibbitt given at the PASCAL Conference in Brest in October 2012, and which will be published shortly in Carlot, C., Filloque, J-M, Osborne, M. and Welsh, P. (Eds.) (2014) *The role of Higher Education in regional and community development and in the time of economic crisis*. Leicester: NIACE (In Press)).

### **Further reading and references**

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