

HOW CAN UNIVERSITIES SUPPORT DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES?

Universities can support disadvantaged communities by providing access to opportunities and facilities, resources and expertise. This study shows how universities are successfully engaging with these communities, and highlights the potential for universities to do more and to do it better.

Key points

- Most universities thought community engagement was important. Many were actively involved in local organisations concerned with community development and economic regeneration.
- Universities had established links with schools and colleges in disadvantaged communities as a key part of their efforts to widen participation in higher education.
- Some universities developed outreach programmes which had been effective in reaching disadvantaged and marginalised groups and individuals. In addition to educational courses, university outreach included arts, culture and sports activities.
- Student placements and projects in community settings provided valuable learning opportunities, and can help community organisations by providing an additional resource.
- Some academics developed collaborative research with disadvantaged communities, based on mutual benefit.
- Student volunteering was widespread, well-established and popular. It is an important community resource, and also promotes students' personal development. Staff volunteering was much less developed, but had considerable potential.
- Universities could do more to support disadvantaged communities by using their distinctive position as leading local institutions, and by recognising the role they can play as major employers and their involvement in local economic development.
- Some universities were much more active than others in supporting disadvantaged communities. Institutional commitment to this is a key factor, together with a good understanding of needs, opportunities and relationships, and policies to support these activities.

The research

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SEPTEMBER 2012

BACKGROUND

This study shows what universities can do to support disadvantaged communities in a difficult economic climate.

Universities provide educational, cultural, social and recreational opportunities and facilities. They have substantial resources and are located throughout the UK. A university is an important asset that can be a valuable source of support for disadvantaged communities. It can promote social mobility through educational provision, provide access to its facilities, and encourage its students and staff to help local organisations. These relationships are mutually beneficial: teaching, learning and research are enriched through partnerships with communities.

This study aimed to find out how universities are responding to the needs of disadvantaged communities. Researchers carried out a questionnaire survey of all UK universities, while follow-up visits to almost 30 universities looked at examples of good practice.

Policies and relationships

Widening participation policies, community engagement initiatives and a new emphasis on research 'impact' have helped to promote and develop relationships between universities and communities. This survey found that most universities consider community engagement to be important. Some had drawn up engagement strategies which made explicit reference to supporting disadvantaged communities. Many universities were formally represented on local development organisations and were involved with community groups near their campuses.

Widening participation

The Government requires universities to increase the intake of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Initiatives to encourage applications from schools and colleges in disadvantaged communities have had some success, and expansion of the higher education sector has extended opportunity.

Universities provide means-tested bursaries and scholarships. Some had established support services to increase student retention, particularly geared to the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These services include additional assistance from tutors and mentors, help with finance and employment and tailored study skills support.

Provision in the community

More than two-thirds of universities offered outreach education to local disadvantaged groups. Much of this took place as part of widening participation programmes, especially educational activities in local schools. In addition some universities had made considerable efforts to provide opportunities to learn in the community, attracting people with limited educational experience.

The Universities Heads of the Valleys Institute in South Wales delivers a wide range of courses at local colleges, community venues, workplaces and at two newly-built centres in Ebbw Vale and Merthyr Tydfil. The Institute is based on a partnership between the University of Wales, Newport and the University of Glamorgan, working with four further education colleges. It is expected to play a major part in the economic regeneration of the former coalfield and is supported by the Welsh Assembly Government, the European Social Fund and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

Nearly three-quarters of universities were involved in arts and cultural outreach with disadvantaged communities. A wide range of activities included work based on university museums, galleries and arts centres. Sports outreach was also important, including coaching in the community and opening up access to university sports facilities.

Student learning in community settings

Student placements and projects in community settings can provide valuable learning opportunities, and can also help to support community organisations. Many placements were linked to vocational courses, such as community and social work education, teaching qualifications and medicine. But there were also innovative degree courses which included work with communities, in subjects such as English, drama and music. About two-thirds of law courses offered students the opportunity to do *pro bono* work in the community.

In Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster run a very successful 'Science Shop'. This provides a brokerage service, linking students requiring course-related project placements with community organisations seeking help with their activities and projects. The Science Shop facilitates more than 100 projects a year, involving several hundred students from a range of disciplines.

There is a lot of scope for the further development of opportunities to learn in community settings. These experiences can help to make students more employable and, at a time of austerity, can make a particularly useful contribution to the work of community organisations.

Research with disadvantaged communities

Collaborative research *with* communities rather than *on* them can be a valuable source of support for disadvantaged communities. In many cases, such research had developed as a result of the interest, connections and commitment of individual academics. However, some universities offered institutional support; a good example is Brighton University's partnership programme.

The Community University Partnership Programme (Cupp) at Brighton University was established in 2003 to facilitate and sustain supportive relationships with the community. A key feature is the Cupp Helpdesk, which provides a 'way in' to the university for local organisations interested in joint research or wanting to make use of university resources.

Community-based research included work on debt, rural development, health, homelessness and environmental issues. Process is important: this kind of research requires approaches and methods that encourage reciprocity and mutual respect.

Student and staff volunteering

Voluntary work by students is an important community resource and also promotes students' personal development. The survey found it was popular and organised: nearly three-quarters of universities had volunteering schemes to link students with volunteering opportunities. Many of these schemes were student-led, well-established and had run for a long time. Student volunteering covered a wide range of activities, including work in local schools, environmental activities and community support.

Staff volunteering was much less developed – only a third of universities had formal arrangements for staff to have time off for voluntary work. There is scope to develop staff volunteering in universities as a way of demonstrating a university's commitment to its staff and to the community.

Doing more to support disadvantaged communities

Universities can do more. They can play an important and distinctive leadership role, promote debate on the challenges facing their area, and ensure that the concerns of disadvantaged communities are heard and taken into account. Universities can also become involved in local regeneration. Liverpool Hope University, for example, has supported regeneration projects alongside the development of its inner city campus.

Although there is research on the economic impact of universities, little attention has been paid to the specific impacts on disadvantaged communities, especially in relation to job opportunities. Universities provide many entry-level jobs and could be proactive in recruiting local unemployed people. They could also set an example to other employers by promoting good practice, such as ensuring that all employees are paid at least the Living Wage (£7.20 per hour, outside London). Such initiatives connect with concepts of corporate social responsibility and could be part of a university's community engagement strategy.

Institutional commitment and successful engagement

Institutional commitment is a major factor in successful community engagement. Funding for these activities is certainly important, as is leadership and the development of policies to encourage and enable community involvement. Universities need a good understanding of community concerns and needs. They should also consider community perceptions: communities may not know much about their local university and expect little from it. Communities also need a clear 'way in' to the university, so they can develop relationships and make use of opportunities and resources.

Successful development of good links between a university and disadvantaged communities requires coordination, focus and strategic oversight. But bureaucratic structures must not get in the way of initiative or undermine enthusiasm and creativity.

Conclusions and implications

Many universities supported disadvantaged communities through their involvement with local organisations, student volunteering and widening participation programmes, and also through their teaching and research activities. However, practice is very uneven and there is a great deal of scope for further development. Universities can do more, and can do it better.

The policy implications are:

- *For universities*, there are real opportunities to support disadvantaged communities in many ways, and good examples of effective practice that can be copied. Universities need to be committed to this, organised to deliver it, and prepared to take risks and respond to opportunities.
- *Government and the funding councils* need to encourage and support universities to play their part in supporting disadvantaged communities. That encouragement could take various forms, including an expressed Government commitment, funding support for sustainable university initiatives, and interventions to help universities learn from and encourage each other.

This study has not been able to cover everything and gaps need to be filled to take this work forward. Further research is needed to explore:

- how disadvantaged communities are responding to the support they receive from universities. How beneficial is it, and in what ways? How have relationships been established and developed? What are their strengths and limitations?
- what efforts have been made to evaluate the work of universities in disadvantaged communities. What evaluative methods are most appropriate and how can evaluation be used to help shape practice?
- the possibilities for recruiting university employees from disadvantaged communities and ensure that more of the economic impact of universities reaches these communities. What practical interventions can be developed? What are the barriers to implementation – and how can they be overcome?

This research aims to stimulate wide-ranging debate. Ultimately, a discussion is needed about what universities are for. A key part of that must be concerned with connections and impact, and particularly how a university can be a community asset and help to serve, support and nurture communities in need.

About the project

This research was carried out by Fred Robinson and Ian Zass-Ogilvie, St Chad's College, Durham University, and Ray Hudson, Durham University. It is based on a questionnaire survey of universities across the UK and visits to nearly 30 universities. The questionnaire survey achieved a high response rate of 85 per cent, providing good coverage of policy and practice.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report, **How can universities support disadvantaged communities?** by Fred Robinson, Ian Zass-Ogilvie and Ray Hudson, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

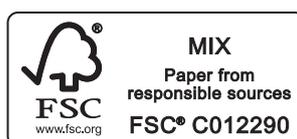
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