

Universities and Social Transformation: a Regional Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The direct economic impact of higher education was until relatively recently seen as of little relevance to its wider ambitions to educate students and pursue research – to produce and disseminate knowledge, if not for its own sake, at least to provide trained and intellectually competent individuals for elite and middle class employment. In this context, the economic justification for universities was constructed at an almost abstract level – higher spending on universities seemed to be associated with greater national economic success, but no one was quite sure why, except that investment in human capital was a ‘good thing’.

Today, however, the expectations are rather different. The geographical focus has shifted, or at any rate become more differentiated – a few universities are identified as national champions in a global higher education market place, while the rest are enjoined to focus on regional priorities, making the regions within which they are located more competitive and innovative. The role of universities in urban and regional economic development and regeneration is increasingly widely recognised.

The recent emphasis on the knowledge economy and on creativity has helped to reinforce this, and the direct employment and investment impacts are hard to ignore, particularly when the impact of the economic multiplier is taken into account. While the effect of the expansion of higher education over the last two decades on ‘widening participation’ may be uncertain, the localised impact of student spending on housing and other goods and services (including cultural activities) has been associated with regeneration and economic revitalisation.

There is a danger, however, that the new (and increasingly instrumental) understanding of universities as drivers of economic change and employment creation may distract attention from their broader social role. Drawing on approaches first developed in work relating to post Apartheid South Africa, this paper mobilises wider notions to consider the role of British universities in social transformation at regional level.

This 'more than economic' approach makes it possible to consider the how universities, whether in response to strategic priorities or simply as more or less unintended consequences of other activities, influence local and regional social relations. It also makes it possible to critically assess their impact, instead of being trapped in a dominant narrative which simply assumes that the economic (and therefore the social) impact of higher education must be positive.

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Key Words: universities, social transformation, regions