

LEADERSHIP

Town-gown engagement can be chaotic but universities should be local civic leaders



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Spare a thought for the universities in your area. It is true that, unlike local government, higher education is not experiencing a financial meltdown. But universities are certainly coming under pressure, not least through questions about the contribution these institutions make to the cities in which they are based.

For example, research by the Centre for Cities shows that Cambridge has now established a solid lead as Britain's most unequal city. Cities Outlook 2018 shows that Cambridge has, again, pushed Oxford into second place in the unequal cities stakes.

In some localities there is growing concern that university expansion plans, while potentially resulting in benefits for the individual students taking degrees, pay insufficient attention to the likely impact of these developments on adjacent neighbourhoods and the city as a whole.

It follows that local government should give a warm welcome to the Civic University Commission. Launched in March and chaired by Lord Kerslake (Crossbench), former head of the civil service, the commission is currently gathering written and oral evidence on the local impact, for good or ill, of British universities.

The commission is holding hearings in Manchester, Nottingham and Sheffield in June and is due to report in



Cambridge: academic excellence in Britain's most unequal city

October. It aims to throw new light on how universities can balance their important international role – in both research and student recruitment – with the requirement to benefit people living in the areas in which they are located.

In my recent book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, I devote a chapter to the theme of university engagement in place-based leadership. Much of the thinking within it stemmed from my experience working as dean of the College of Urban Planning & Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). A major public university with more than 30,000 students, UIC has been actively involved in engaged scholarship in the city for more than 30 years.

UIC, like other public universities in the US, is seen not just as an important anchor institution capable of bringing socio-economic and cultural benefits to the local community, but also as an important civic leader.

Crucially, these public universities encourage and reward scholars who engage actively with pressing public policy challenges in their area. This emphasis on working

directly with off campus actors to co-create new insights and policy suggestions is not a peripheral concern; it lies at the heart of academic life.

Here's an example. Earlier this month the Great Cities Institute at UIC published an excellent report revealing new insight into the socio-economic dynamics creating rising inequality in Chicago. The study, *Revitalizing Manufacturing and Expanding Opportunities for Chicago's Black and Latino Communities*, shows not just why some neighbourhoods have astonishingly high levels of joblessness among young people, but also offers practical proposals on bolstering manufacturing in these areas to lift economic prosperity and tackle social disadvantage.

Here in Bristol the two local universities – the University of the West of England, Bristol and the University of Bristol – are working closely with Bristol City Council mayor Marvin Rees (Lab) and other civic leaders on the development of the city office's approach to urban governance.

This approach, which is now in preparation and which

includes the universities making a significant contribution to the One City Plan for Bristol, is far from perfect. But it is encouraging to be able to record the development of a range of creative university-city collaborations in the past two years.

My experience in the US leaves me in no doubt that university-city collaborations are able to not only generate innovative proposals for localities, but also advance understanding by delivering world-class research.

How to move forward? First, local authority leaders should consider whether they are spending enough time discussing forward strategy with their local vice chancellors.

Second, since boosting town-gown collaboration is a two-way street, vice chancellors could ask themselves the same question. They could check their diaries to see how many times they have visited city hall to talk through challenges and possibilities in recent months.

Not surprisingly, scholars in many universities are just getting on and collaborating with off campus actors to co-create student projects and action/research studies.

This is well and good but, in the absence of strong institutional leadership, it is unsurprising to find that in many localities university engagement with local communities continues to be fragmented and chaotic.

Success depends on both vice chancellors and local authority leaders not just recognising the mutual benefits of collaboration, but putting solid funding into town-gown partnership working.

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