How to benchmark university-community interactions

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NOTE:
This chapter was originally published by NIACE but with the merger into the Learning and Work Institute the rights have reverted to the authors. This chapter originally appeared as


Introduction

There is an increasing recognition that there is a need to rebalance the contributions that universities make to society. The so-called third mission for universities, also described as external engagement, has evolved considerably in the past quarter century, although the roots of engagement go back to the origins of most universities. In 1982, an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report produced by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation explored all dimensions of community engagement, with business, government, the third sector and society (OECD, 1982). However, the third mission has increasingly become equated with commercialisation, patents and licensing, a trend enforced by the easy measurement associated with these variables. This chapter explores the ways in which measurement and benchmarking tools can be used to assess the wider contributions that universities make including engagement with ‘harder-to-reach’ groups such as smaller, potentially non-innovative firms, voluntary organisations, smaller charities and disadvantaged communities.

In part the desire to measure community engagement is being driven by increased government interest in, and in some cases funding for, engagement and hence a desire to assess the impact of such activity and investment. Some of this funding has been in the form of core programmatic support for engagement as in the UK, whilst other countries have seen ad hoc government schemes and the opening up of support for regeneration to university participants. At the same time the increased level of activity leads both universities and their partners to seek improvement and to look for ways to benchmark themselves against other universities and other university systems. This search for improvement has been encouraged by a number of international fora and projects, including the OECD.

This however presents considerable challenges as to what you measure and compare. A characteristic of university-community engagement is the proliferation of different schemes and programmes and the diversity of impacts and benefits realised. Some university activities can be readily codified, measured and hence compared, but the diversity of activities covered by
engagement with the community presents great difficulties of comparison as well as fundamental problems of measurement.

A number of studies in recent years have tried to develop indicators and benchmarking tools for university engagement. Many of the earliest attempts to provide indicators have emerged from business engagement where standardisation of the outputs and simple financial measures give the opportunity to provide easily comparable measures. Over time though more effort has been placed in expanding on these simple metrics to cover a wider set of relationships beyond the business community and wider set of project types. This chapter examines a number of different approaches to measurement and benchmarking and explores some of the strengths and weaknesses, but then examines in greater detail one particular approach initially developed in the UK and modified for the PASCAL Universities and Regional Engagement (PURE) project.

**Key issues in university community engagement**

Whilst it may be difficult for a large educational institution such as a university to be truly disengaged from society and its local community, the debate about university-community engagement in recent years has focused on the extent to which engagement is seen by universities as a core element of their mission, alongside teaching and research (Goddard et al, 1994; ACU, 2001; Kellogg Commission, 1999). Individual staff and students may undertake community service, but does the university as a corporate body seek to support such activities and recognise, as the American Association of State Colleges and Universities puts it, that they have duties as ‘stewards of place’: ‘answering the call to join with public and private partners in their communities to take advantage of opportunities and confront challenges’ (AASCU, 2002, 7). In some countries there is a long history of this kind of engagement: in the US the roots of engagement lie in the Morrill Act of 1862 which established the land grant colleges (McDowell, 2003) whilst in the UK the civic universities of the 19th century were mainly established by local interests to support local industry (Sanderson, 1972). The dominance of national funding in the post war years particularly in the growth of a new generation of universities led to a downplaying of local and regional engagement within the mission, a process which governments have sought to rebalance in more recent years. In part this emerges from a mutuality of purpose in that universities benefit from the growth and success of their local surroundings, and their research and teaching can benefit from the engagement with real world problems, but also a sense of obligation reinforced by policymakers that universities as publicly funded institutions should address some of the challenges facing society.

Defining university community engagement is however not straightforward as the ‘community’ is a multifaceted concept based on place, or the functions of the university (Goedegebuure and van der Lee, 2006), or other interests and needs. Even the apparently simple definition of a geographical community or region for a university is fraught with difficulties as universities choose to define their regions according to different criteria, and differently for distinct activities (Charles, 2003). A further difficulty is the wide range of activities covered which includes strategies for economic and social regional development, service learning, collaboration with business, social and cultural activities, support for local health and welfare and physical urban regeneration (Goedegebuure and van der Lee, 2006, Charles and Benneworth, 2001). The nature of community engagement for an individual university will be shaped by the history and disciplinary profile of the university itself, but also the nature of the local community, its needs and enunciated demands, and the incentives and funding
made available to support such activities from the national as well as local level. Thus comparison between universities is difficult as there is no reason for two universities to have similar profiles of engagement given the likely variations in institutional and local context.

The measurement of university community engagement is also a fundamentally complex and difficult task, and is still at a formative stage (Hart et al 2009). Indicators are a means of measuring that which is codifiable and measureable, whereas much university community engagement defies measurement and is highly heterogeneous. So the development of indicators is problematic, unlike in other aspects of university activities where there are relatively clear, repeatable and codifiable outputs. In teaching for example there are standard units of work (lectures, seminars) and of outputs (students, graduates, degrees or modules examined). Research also yields some standardised performance measures in the form of research grants, levels of income, publication outputs etc. Whilst there are problems with assessing quality, only partly addressed by citation counts etc, at least all universities are seeking similar kinds of inputs and outputs. For community engagement the outputs may be highly disparate, and the kind of engagement as a process also very varied.

A particular difficulty with community oriented activities is the difference in perspective between the university and the community. From whose perspective should we measure engagement projects? A project that delivered research income and publications might be positively viewed by a university, but if it was expected to deliver improvements to services in a community and didn’t, then the community might take a very different view.

Governments in recent years have been interested in measuring community engagement following on from the considerable effort placed on measuring business engagement. In the latter case there are a few codified and well established indicators such as patents licences, spin off firms etc which can be measured, and more importantly counted and compared across universities and even across national boundaries.

In business engagement the codification of relationships partly emerges for legal reasons. In order to establish clear ownership of intellectual property, universities need to patent ideas, which can then be licensed to firms. Knowledge may be handed over freely but in such a case the firm would not be able to take out intellectual property protection and could not therefore protect its own investment. So legal agreements are necessary for successful knowledge transfer (in some areas) and hence the codification provides easy to measure metrics, especially if, like patents, they are placed in the public domain. As patents are public documents and are searchable on databases then details of university patent holdings are public knowledge and databases can be assembled by researchers without needing universities to provide the information. Universities also have a financial duty to monitor the numbers of patents as they are both expenses and potential assets, and as such are monitored closely, whereas softer forms of interaction are not required to be monitored and therefore usually monitored on an ad hoc basis if at all. Engagement with business is often also supported by public programmes and hence is subject to audit and formal monitoring by the funding organisation, but even here there are problems with capturing knowledge exchange.

Another dimension of the measurement task is the contrast between quantitative and qualitative measures. There are several problems with quantitative indicators which derives from the need for such indicators to be repeatable, measurable and codifiable. The focus on measurement (and auditability) requires such indicators to reflect what has already happened, so as such they reflect...
past actions and policies rather than current strategies. The emphasis on deliverables or outputs reflects what has been achieved rather than the intentions. This is exacerbated sometimes by the significant time-lags in ultimate success, so actions taken now may not yield outcomes for several years, and measured outcomes today may be the result of very different policies than those in place now.

Quantitative indicators may be highly influenced by the structure of universities and inputs such as the quality of students. Large well resourced universities may have higher impacts on some indicators even if adjusted by scale as the available budget for engagement activity rises above threshold levels which allow greater impacts. It is also easier to measure absolute outputs rather than value added which again tends to emphasise the larger and better resourced institutions.

Quantitative indicators often don’t even measure what is intended but are only crude surrogates for what needs to be measured, and there is a risk of seeking to deliver the required indicators rather than the desired outcomes.

Finally, significant economic impacts may require risk-taking, and hence there is a likelihood of short-term failure and poor performance even if the approach is correct.

Qualitative assessments also have shortcomings though. Whilst many studies focus on identifying ‘good practices’, these may depend heavily on the context, so the relative success of one approach may be difficult to judge if abstracted from the institutional situation. Most qualitative evaluation is also akin to description, and generalisation is difficult.

Both quantitative and qualitative assessments suffer from a problem of scale. At what scale should measurement take place, and what measurements can be applied across a wide range of departments and activities? Many activities are undertaken by parts of the university only, or are small elements within the work of a department, and hence tend to be unmeasured or unreported to the centre of the university. The efforts of individuals may be significant but go unnoticed within their departments.

**Previous approaches**

There have been a number of different approaches to the issue of measurement and benchmarking of university community engagement in recent years. Analysis of previous projects and tools gives a simple classification of approaches:

- **Survey approaches** – Where indicators can be codified and reliably collected from one year to the next, there has been scope for regular surveys, primarily in the area of business links. This includes the annual survey of the Association of University Technology Managers (AUTM, 2009) in North America, and the Higher Education Business and Community Interaction Survey undertaken by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2008) in the UK. The latter includes some metrics relating to community engagement as well as business linkages. Mollas-Gallart et al (2002) have also proposed a very similar set of indicators.

- **Project analysis and templates** – Much interest in community engagement is focused at the project level and some groups have developed formal templates for collecting data on
projects for comparison and benchmarking. Two examples from the UK include the Russell Group engagement tool (CCC, 2004) and Salford University’s (Powell et al no date) project. The UPBEAT project has collected data and stories about successful engagement projects from a wide range of universities internationally using templates for presentation of information about widely diverse cases.

- Institutional reviews by questionnaire – At an institutional rather than project level a number of bodies have developed a process for assessing university strategies for engagement as well as actions and outcomes using some form of template or questionnaire. So the OECD Institutional Management in Higher Education programme has a process for assessing regional engagement of universities in case study regions where the universities have to provide information on their strategies and actions against a self assessment questionnaire format, and are then subject to peer review by a panel (OECD 2007). The Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA) has developed a benchmarking approach based on a series of instruments including an institutional questionnaire, partners perception surveys and good practice cases (Garlick and Langworthy 2008).

- Institutional indicators – A more formal approach to benchmarking at an institutional level is to use a set of indicators or key performance indicators at university level. Some institutions have developed this approach and monitor their performance against these indicators (e.g. RMIT University, University of Western Sydney).

- Benchmarking – The final category is a benchmarking approach where a range of indicators are used in an approach which is comparative and can be seen as part of a wider benchmarking process (Charles and Benneworth 2002; CIC, 2005).

In these different approaches we can contrast audit, benchmarking and evaluation. Audit usually involves the description and simple measurement of interventions to see what has been done, or whether what was promised was delivered, and is usually represented by surveys relying on quantitative measures and template descriptions of projects. Evaluation is concerned with assessing whether the best outcome was realised and which approaches work best and may include standard indicators and surveys as well as institutional reviews. Benchmarking by contrast tends to be focused on a process of self-improvement and the collection of information that allows an organisation to compare itself with others in ways that show opportunities for change. Such benchmarking usually requires a combination of quantitative indicators as well as comparison of practices and thus often builds upon other forms of analysis.

Looking in more detail at some of these different approaches we can assess the strengths and weaknesses.

In terms of surveys of quantitative indicators, the UK uses an annual survey, the Higher Education – Business and Community Interaction Survey, originally developed by two of the authors (Charles and Conway 2002), but based heavily on standard indicators used by the AUTM in North America and earlier ad hoc surveys in the UK. This makes full use of those standardised indicators such as patent licences which have been well developed over time and are reasonably comparable internationally, but also includes a wider set of new quantitative indicators and some qualitative questions also. Initial work on the very first survey found that many universities struggled to complete novel questions due to the limitations of their databases, and we may presume varying degrees of
accuracy in response depending on the maturity of the indicator. Some benchmarking questions from the HEFCE Charles and Benneworth (2002) tool were included in the survey, but we cannot make assumptions about the ways in which they were answered, so they may not have been answered by reflection among a mixed group of staff as would be suggested in a benchmarking exercise. The nature of surveys is such that we normally regard all answers as equally reliable, but here we know the reliability of response varies between questions, and that some of the questions are only rough proxies of the core issues. It remains however an effective way of collecting some standardised information across a national university sector.

A completely different approach is the project level and frameworks for the preparation of case studies of individual projects. The UPBEAT project led by the University of Salford takes this approach and provides a template for the evaluation and comparison of project-level activity. The project has developed tools for the preparation of project case studies but also their assessment against a grid which displays four qualities – academic business acumen, social networking intelligence, individual performance and foresight enabling skill – against a six-point scale. The focus here is to identify success stories and assist the transfer of experience to encourage good practice, but it avoids the collection of standard performance data.

Institutional reviews also tend to focus on templates and questionnaires, and in some cases come close to benchmarking, although mainly focusing on audits, lists and descriptions, with examples of good practice often identified without real comparison across a range of institutions. There is a tendency to rely on peer review to identify good practice, and use of a consistent peer-review team makes cross-regional comparisons possible (Garlick and Langworthy, 2008) but it is often practically difficult to use the same reviewers across a number of cases so consistency may be hard to achieve. A key disadvantage is the effect of the home system and culture on reviewers (Garlick and Langworthy, 2008), which may blinker perspectives. Good institutional reviews will use some standardised indicators, and many universities are developing their own indicators to monitor progress over time, but there is a great tendency to reinvent the wheel and to develop case-specific lists of indicators.

This all leads to a desire for some standardised approaches to comparison across institutions in different contexts, but which are sensitive to the weaknesses of simplistic metrics and where the focus of the activity is a culture of improvement and communication rather than the production of league tables, and this is where benchmarking can play an important role.

The example of the HEFCE/ PURE approach
The approach used in the PURE study originated as a tool developed for the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2001, with the support of Universities UK (Charles and Benneworth, 2002), to identify and communicate the regional contributions made by universities in England. The project focused on the existing activities of universities in their regions, and examples of good practice and the results were published in a series of reports each covering one of the English regions, with a national overview report (‘The Regional Mission’ reports are available from Universities UK, including Charles and Benneworth, 2001). Alongside this descriptive activity a benchmarking tool was developed to help universities develop a process and apply a set of criteria to help prioritise their engagement activities.
The objective of the tool was to give individual universities a means of assessing their regional impact. The key challenge is to highlight not just linear relations between a university and its region, but also a wide range of strategic interactions. Strategic priorities for regional engagement should be regional development processes which link between, for example, economic development and educational attainment, or community regeneration and the formation of new firms.

The tool assesses whether or not, across a broad range of processes, a university contributes significantly to regional development. It does not assess how well managed the university is, nor its success in educational or research terms. Not every university will want to contribute in all possible ways identified. All universities will have a combination of strengths and areas of lower contribution. The latter may be strategic choices rather than weaknesses. What is important is that universities seeking to contribute to particular regional development processes should aim to achieve good practice.

The university benchmarking tool therefore has four functions:

- to assess improvements in the strategy, performance and outcomes of university-regional engagement by providing a set of indicators that can be reviewed at different points of time to see how well the university addresses regional development processes and how this might change over time,
- to help the university set its own strategic priorities by examining how well it performs across a range of different areas so senior management can decide whether to devote resources to strengthening existing strengths or building up areas with a poor performance,
- to support joint strategies within a regional partnership, by allowing comparison between universities within a region and the identification of mutual or complementary strengths,
- to enable comparisons to be made between universities and regions through the mapping of indicators either at an individual university level or for groups of universities.

The benchmarking tool has several elements:

- Analysis of existing quantitative indicators, and the development of new quantitative measures of core, regionally-oriented activities.
- Benchmarking questions on aspects of institutional management and culture related to promoting regional engagement.
- Questions on the main themes of regional economic and social development. For each of these, good practice in the support of regional processes is the benchmark to be attained.

The tool was primarily for use at an institutional level, but certain aspects may be applied to sub-units such as campuses or faculties. It is designed to be implemented within cross-functional and cross-departmental groups in a university, and to involve staff at all levels and students.

A five-point scale represents the spectrum from poor to good practice, which can be used to produce scores for groups of indicators. Institutions can use these results, with the quantitative data,
to identify areas in which they are performing well. This can be extended to internal analysis of which departments or units are achieving good practice.

More importantly, the process of benchmarking can stimulate discussion and internal assessment of where to focus effort, for the benefit of both the region and the university. Such discussions could consider:

- What are the mechanisms within the university to establish a consensus on strategic priorities for regional development.
- What mechanisms can be established within the university to link existing regionally-focused activities and add value to them.
- What mechanisms exist within the university to balance its different geographical roles and create synergy between them.
- What mechanisms exist within the region to consider issues such as health, culture, the economy, and community regeneration, in a joined-up way.
- What mechanisms can be established to bring together those involved in the regional development process such as regional governments and agencies, community groups and central government, so they can prioritise which regional needs should be addressed.

A distinct aspect of the tool is its focus around regional development processes, so rather than a set of indicators relating to a university’s activities, the questions are grouped according to regional development priorities and are mainly seen from the perspective of the region. Rather than asking whether what the university does is relevant to the region the tool asks whether what the university does addresses the needs of a region. As such seven main groups of processes were identified that underpin regional competitiveness:

- Enhancing regional infrastructure – supporting the regional infrastructure, regulatory frameworks and underlying quality of environment and lifestyles. This includes the university helping the region to identify where improvements can be made, or providing direct input to the quality of the local environment.
- Human capital development processes – supporting the development of human capital through education and training both within the university and in other organisations. The emphasis here is on how the university adds to the stock of human capital by facilitating the development of people in the region, and retains both local and non-local graduates. (The education of people from outside the region who then leave it does not add to the stock of human capital in the region, and therefore is not relevant for this process. However it may be important at national level, and it does add to regional GDP.)
- Business development processes – the creation and attraction of new firms, as well as support for developing new products, processes and markets for existing firms.
- Interactive learning and social capital development processes – encouraging co-operation between firms and other institutions to generate technological, commercial and social
benefits. Regional collaboration and learning between organisations are important in regional success. Universities can promote the application of knowledge through regional partnerships, and encourage networking and the building of trust.

- Community development processes – ensuring that the benefits of enhanced business competitiveness are widely shared within the community, and that the health and welfare of the population are maximised.

- Cultural development – the creation, enhancement and reproduction of regional cultures, underpinning the other processes above, and interpreting culture both as activities that enrich the quality of life and as patterns of social conventions, norms and values that constitute regional identities.

- Promoting sustainability – long-term regional development must be underpinned by processes seeking to improve sustainability, even though some of these objectives may appear to conflict with business development objectives.

These seven processes form the framework for the questions in the benchmarking tool and ensure that the activities of the university can be related back to perceived needs of the region rather than the internal interests of the university.

**Modifications and developments**

For the Pascal Universities and Regional Engagement (PURE) project there was a need to have a benchmarking tool which allowed for some comparison between universities both within and between regions, as well as coverage of a wide range of forms of engagement and activities. The international nature of the project was a particular challenge as different national HE systems tend to emphasise different forms of engagement and the benchmarking needed to be sensitive to these differences. It was decided that the HEFCE benchmarking tool provided the right balance of relative simplicity of comparison, breadth of coverage and focus on improvement processes, but it needed to be modified from a focus on the UK, and needed some further development in certain areas.

In order to meet the requirements of the project therefore the tool was edited and enhanced. The coverage of topics was increased slightly with additional questions, including a new section on internal university processes. This particularly strengthened the community aspects of engagement relative to the existing emphasis on business engagement. Some of the wording was also modified to remove references to specific UK institutions or practices, and to increase the international applicability.

The example below shows the format of the questions used in the tool. Each one is identified as being either a practice or performance benchmark, and is provided with a brief rationale for its selection, expected source of data and good practice statement. The university team is then expected to select their position on the scale of 1-5 depending on how well the statements in the table describe their university. Three statements are provided so allowing the participants to also select a position between these three. The statements were selected so as to give an extremely good practice as level 5 on the scale, no activity or only very indifferent activity as 1, and an intermediate position as 3. This way the participants are given reasonably objective criteria for the
grading of the university, rather than just poor to good, and a limited number of statements from which to select.
Example benchmark from the tool

**Benchmark 5.2 Support for community-based regeneration**

**Type**  
Practice.

**Rationale**

Considerable support is required to address the problems of disadvantaged communities in many cities and rural areas. Much of this is provided through government programmes that require partnerships to deliver assistance. Universities can provide support in a number of ways, through expertise based on research into the nature of community problems and regeneration policies, through direct services, through educational programmes, and as neighbours and landlords in many inner city areas. The benchmark examines whether the university seeks to provide integrated support for needy communities, and uses resources in a way that meets needs and maximises partnerships while also supporting the university’s mission.

**Sources of data**

Internal assessment.

**Good practice**

Good practice goes beyond support for individual departments wishing to engage in community regeneration, and prioritises specific target communities for integrated support from the institution as a whole. Support may be provided within a compact involving a wide variety of departments and schemes. In the case of neighbouring communities this may extend to using the university estates strategy as a pump primer for physical regeneration. Senior staff within the university may seek to take leadership roles in regeneration partnerships or companies, and ensure that expertise from the university is made available to the community and other local partners.

**Levels**

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<td>No engagement with community regeneration schemes, apart from individual efforts.</td>
<td>Some representation of the university on local partnerships at senior management level, but with limited implementation capability. Main focus is on research role and possible property development role.</td>
<td>Active and creative engagement with community programmes, with the university taking a leadership position and applying a wide variety of resources. Community regeneration seen as a mainstream activity with role for access policy, link to student community action, and staff involvement as part of staff development.</td>
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Conclusions
The nature of university community engagement as a complex relationship covering a wide range of activities and contributions to the community requires a benchmarking approach that addresses that complexity through a multifaceted instrument and an inclusive form of assessment. A great many tools and approaches for assessment have been developed but it is argued here that a benchmarking methodology can overcome some of the difficulties and draw on some aspects of other approaches.

The choice of approach, whether audit, evaluation or benchmarking depends however on the objectives of the study and the role played by the assessor. An external assessment to make comparisons for funding purposes will usually draw on standardised indicators and some form of survey approach where the data can be audited, but this will usually fail to capture the richness of engagement or identify ways to improve performance except along narrow tracks. The particular benefits of the benchmarking approach is as part of a culture of self improvement within the university and within a strategic discussion with regional partners where decisions can be made as to which areas of engagement are necessary for the community, which need to be improved or ignored, and how two or more universities might negotiate mutually complementary programmes.

This kind of approach is very much at odds with league tables and raw indicators where size of institution may skew results and limited quantitative indicators, usually involving business tend to dominate the rankings. Instead there is a focus on the process by which the university examines its approach and prioritisation rather than a slavish attention to metrics.

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