

Putting systems leadership in its place: the potential of universities

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Places need to make the most of universities and other large anchor institutions. But they should also understand, welcome and involve challengers to the established order. These actors can be equally passionate about and committed to place – but more agile and flexible in experimenting and demonstrating new approaches.

The role of universities in place-based systems leadership

Systems leadership occurs when collective action takes place across traditional institutional boundaries to improve the lives of those working, living and using those systems.

Growing interest in the potential of systems leadership approaches to improve public services is encouraging, but the debate is currently underplaying a critical factor: place.

Focusing on particular places with different challenges and different configurations of public services helps ground leadership in the specifics. Only when people with institutional power form relationships that span traditional organisational boundaries in a given place, and begin to align strategically, can systems leadership begin.

But change is difficult. It tests people's relationships and resolve. As different institutional rules and cultures come into

contact, the potential rewards of systems leadership are often lost.¹

Given this challenge, universities have the potential to play a critical role in the places where they are located because they can help span traditional boundaries and support collaboration to create better systems leadership.

This anchor-role of universities has even more potential in institutionally 'thin' places, which tend to be more economically fragile and more dependent on universities as a source of employment and support for local growth.²

Managing risks

Encouraging universities or other large anchor institutions to take on a bigger role does not come without risks, however.

For example, while the involvement of anchor institutions can help accelerate change, these changes will often be incremental and overwhelmingly benefit established local elites – whether public or business sector. There is no guarantee that benefits will be shared inclusively, let alone prioritise marginalised communities.

One way to mitigate this kind of risk is for public sector leaders to embrace and support arms length challenger arrangements, smaller specialist institutions, and/or community based organisations. These will interrogate and test the approaches of incumbent anchors and help

¹ Marlow, D., L. Kempton, and M. Tewdwr-Jones (2019), '[Inclusive Future Growth in England's Cities and Regions: Realising the Transformational University Dividend?](#)'.

² Goddard, J. et al (2014), '[Universities as anchor institutions in cities in a turbulent funding environment: vulnerable institutions and vulnerable places in England](#)'.

trial new interventions. This has been a feature of the approach with the Newcastle Helix project summarised below.

Newcastle Helix: a case study
Led by Newcastle University and Newcastle City Council, the £350m Newcastle Helix project has created a new 24 acre ‘knowledge quarter’ that brings academia, business, the public sector and communities into closer partnership in a formerly marginalised district.

The site is home to two closely linked UKRI-funded National Innovation Centres, for Data and Ageing, which are new actors in city leadership. The activities of the Innovation Centre for Ageing are grounded in local community co-production through a citizen network known as VOICE, whose members contribute experience, ideas, insights and vision to its work. New actors are continually joining the leadership system through this open community space. They work across the ecosystem to improve the focus, quality, relevance and impact of research, stimulate and shape social and technological innovation, and enjoy lifelong learning.

Another important point is that the role and contribution of public institutions in local leadership must be determined by the needs of the place itself, rather than the preferences of participating institutions.

For the larger anchor university, there is a menu of roles, responsibilities and activities that they need to assume in order to make a genuine contribution to systems leadership in their place. These are illustrated below in the Urban Living

Framework. Completing these tasks is a precondition for sustainable, inclusive growth in any ambitious place.

The Urban Living Framework



[Source: Marlow et al, 2019]

In Newcastle, two universities, three NHS trusts, and the city council are using the Urban Living Framework to inform a Newcastle Agreement. Building on VOICE and the Innovation Centres, it supports a vision of the city as a place for healthy ageing. The people involved are gathering evidence of needs and opportunities from a diverse range of community perspectives through a local needs assessment centred around themes of people, prosperity and planet.

Realising the potential

Our research suggests that places seeking transformational change require inclusive and diverse local leadership that cuts across and beyond traditional institutional boundaries. Universities can play an important role in that local leadership, but

their contribution must be determined by the place rather than the institutions themselves. Realising the potential of universities as genuine anchors in place is complex and long-term, and policies aimed at tackling place-based disparities need to recognise and manage this complexity.

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