

Evaluation of the ESRC/DELNI/HEFCE/HEFCW/SFC Impact of Higher Education Institutions upon Regional Economies Initiative

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Executive summary

Background

The role that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play in society today has become increasingly important. HEIs represent an important source of new ideas, products and services critical to economic recovery and future regional competitiveness. However, until recently, relatively little has been known about their impact upon regional economies. While some reports have begun to explore specific activities between universities and businesses, the macro-level impact of HEIs upon regional economies has been barely addressed. As such the ESRC, Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Higher Education Funding Councils for England (HEFCE) and Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (DELNI) launched this Initiative in 2007 to undertake two key objectives:

1. To significantly advance understanding of the economic and social impact of HEIs on their host regions and on other regions in the UK.
2. To inform future policy formation by a wide range of stakeholders including the ESRC and the higher education funding councils, as well as devolved and central government departments and agencies.

In Stage One, five networks of researchers and policy makers consulted existing research to identify gaps in the evidence base regarding mechanisms through which HEIs could generate economic and social benefits. Building on the reports of these five networks, Stage Two invited research proposals for projects to extend understanding about the impact of HEIs on regions. Nine projects from an array of disciplines were funded to cover the five key themes, with two coordinators chosen to both unite projects and raise awareness of the overall Initiative.

Summary of evaluation methodology used

The evaluation assumed a multi-method approach involving the triangulation of both primary and secondary data through four phases:

1. Evidence review of documentation.
2. Online survey disseminated to over 300 individuals.
3. Depth interviews with the joint coordinators, all nine project holders, funders group members and stakeholders.
4. Analysis of all quantitative and qualitative data collated.

By reviewing each of the nine funded research projects, the evaluation assessed the economic and social impacts of each project individually as well as the portfolio of projects collectively.

Extent to which aims and objectives of Initiative were met

Overall, feedback received from survey respondents, funders and stakeholders was extremely positive and suggests that the Initiative has indeed achieved its two main objectives. The ways in which the Initiative's work has informed or impacted the work of others can be broken down into three main areas:

- **Impacting policy:** Developing understanding of the current context, adding to the existing evidence base and confirming existing theories and hypotheses. Certain reports have begun to influence policy debates and inform decision making.
- **Impacting funders:** Raising awareness of HE-business collaboration, guiding decisions, shaping new strategies, and demonstrating the importance of Higher Education (HE) investments.
- **Wider impacts:**
 - **Impacting universities:** Demonstrating the extent of academic engagement, instigating new avenues for research and informing HEI strategies.
 - **Impacting business:** Highlighting the need for new knowledge transfer partnership models and providing new evidence on student workforces.
 - **International impact:** Challenging thinking, enhancing knowledge, and informing European strategies on HE.

Contribution of individual projects

Despite the wide range of disciplines, the varying durations of the projects and the significantly different amount of funding awarded to the nine projects, each one has contributed considerably to the achievement of the overall Initiative. Eight of the nine projects were rated at 'Good' or above with one project rated as 'Outstanding'. Combined, these nine projects represent the most extensive study of the regional impact of HEIs to date.

Academic quality and achievements (strengths and weaknesses)

The Initiative has already led to a series of academic/scientific publications in respected journals as well as non-technical outputs; moreover, with further papers and reports forthcoming the impact by publication is set to grow considerably. In terms of academic engagement, the Initiative has fostered a growing community of scholars both around and through the projects, with perceived synergies between some projects despite the wide disciplinary span and different methodological approaches. Overall the evaluation indicates that the projects as well as the five thematic foci of the Initiative have indeed been a catalyst to higher education research.

Non-academic impact and engagement (strengths and weaknesses)

Beyond engaging academics and researchers, the nine projects had different but overlapping audiences. For the most part, the projects have succeeded in engaging with policy makers, with projects repeatedly cited as valuable. There are also examples of individual projects engaging with Local Authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), HE Funding Bodies and research councils through their continued work. Feedback suggests the Initiative has proved valuable;

informing and evidencing future engagement strategies. Although a number of the projects sought to engage local employers and businesses, this target group was less successfully engaged. As such, future initiatives may wish to explore additional ways to interact and engage with the business community given the relevance of the research findings for transferring knowledge, research, and expertise.

Capacity building achieved

Above all, the Initiative has succeeded in building capacity through an enhanced evidence base. Project holders are also optimistic that their research will continue to impact policy and academic research in the longer term as additional outputs are disseminated. The Initiative has also facilitated a new community of researchers by reinforcing links with some academics and providing introductions to others, especially those from different disciplines and regions. Indeed, some have even proceeded to undertake further collaborative work as a direct off-shoot of the Initiative. However, there are some concerns regarding the sustainability of the Initiative in the longer term. It was raised that unsuccessful applications for follow on funding may compromise the continuity of the Initiative as researchers pursue activity in other areas where funding is available. In addition, whilst findings from the research have, and will certainly continue to inform thinking and decision making, examples of impact are often subtle and not always easily identified.

Management of the investment / funding scheme

There was general agreement among the four funding agencies that the funding had been effectively disseminated and utilised by the projects. In addition, where additional funding became available during the Initiative, supplementary funds were awarded. The joint coordinators used additional resources to support dissemination activity and those who received Missing Links funding were able to advance their work further. Given the economic environment and that the four funding agencies had not previously collaborated on such a venture, the multiple ways in which projects have informed and impacted policy makers and stakeholders' work indicates a positive and valuable investment. However, the benefits of the investment will be most appreciated by those who best leverage findings from the Initiative to inform and advise their decisions moving forwards.

Future priorities and areas for development

Despite the Initiative's numerous successes, a number of areas were identified throughout the evaluation as potential areas for consideration and future development.

- **Commissioning process:** Certain funders would have liked to make a greater direct contribution to the project selection process, which focused predominantly on an assessment of the academic quality of proposals.
- **Management and timing:** Given that many processes and approaches were new to collaborators, they would have benefited from more communication upfront to clarify processes, timescales and provide assistance where delays occurred.
- *Funding:* In the future, where additional funding becomes available, eligibility criteria could be better communicated to optimise the benefits of the funds.

- **Value add of funders group/ steering group:** Those convening future steering groups should ensure all participants are fully engaged throughout the course of the initiative and that meeting agendas are appropriate to all participants.
- **Branding and dissemination:** Additional support from funders for online promotion would and could in future help raise awareness, whilst tailored outputs would enable better engagement of target audiences.
- **Future guidance for ESRC and funders:** Funders should consider reviewing how the research has informed their work and identify ways to further optimise the outputs moving forward to obtain even greater return on their investment.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

By commissioning nine unique research projects in different regions and focused on diverse issues, a whole new platform of evidence has now been established. The nine individual projects worked well together and definite strands of synergy were present. The Initiative achieved a good balance of qualitative and quantitative projects which provided strong scientific diversity and enabled cross fertilisation of ideas.

Synergies achieved can in part be attributed to the work of the joint coordinators. Investment in this role provided significant added value to the whole Initiative and meant that the network was far more effective than if the nine projects had been conducted in silos. The fact that two individuals were awarded joint leadership provided even greater benefit. Their different leadership styles and approaches proved highly complementary and ensured all aspects of the Initiative were well managed.

The numerous ways in which projects informed and impacted the work of policy makers and wider stakeholders suggests a positive and valuable investment. The competitive bidding process among a new community of researchers meant the nine research proposals were costed economically, providing significant outputs for the overall investment. In the current climate of fiscal constraints and scrutinised strategies, the Initiative's outputs have not only advanced understanding on the value of investment in HE, but also helped support and build business cases crucial for strategy development.

The extent to which the Initiative informs future policy formation will be evidenced in the longer term as outputs are still being released into the public domain. However, it is likely that upcoming research will continue to feed into policy and have a lasting impact. In particular, this research now provides a baseline of evidence that previously did not exist. Nevertheless, the sustainability and continued impact of this work are dependent on the extent to which policy makers and practitioners actually use it, and that business and the third sector are made aware of it. Moreover the international community has much to learn from the Initiative's approach to collaboration as well as the research findings.

Recommendations

Overall, our evaluation finds this Initiative to have been a successful venture. However, to support both the continued success of this Initiative as well as the success of future ventures, we

present below recommendations for the ESRC as well as funders and project holders of future initiatives.

ESRC

Recommendation: Consider providing funding to support the Initiative's sustainability.

Summary: To maintain the Initiative's profile and ensure it is sustainable in the long term, consider releasing additional funding to support maintenance of the website as well as continuation of the community of researchers.

Recommendation: Consider revising future commissioning processes to involve funders more in the decision making process.

Summary: To enable funders to have a more direct role in the decision making process without compromising assessment of the academic quality of bids, consider revising the process. This could include adding a stage enabling funders to review bids for their relevance to the overall initiative whilst academic peer review assesses bids for academic quality.

Recommendation: Ensure ESRC processes are clearly communicated.

Summary: To support those who have not previously worked with the ESRC before, it may help to ensure processes and approaches are communicated as early and clearly as possible to optimise their engagement.

Future Funders/ Steering Group Members

Recommendation: Ensure appropriate members are engaged and that the agenda is suitable for all.

Summary: To ensure funders receive greatest returns from their investment, they need to engage with the venture as much as possible. It is also imperative that the right individuals commit to the funding/ steering group and that meeting agendas address issues that are pertinent to all. To gain greater credibility and engagement with target audiences from the outset, representatives from business, third sector, mission groups, research councils etc could also be involved.

Future Project Holders

Recommendation: Tailor outputs and dissemination methods to better target audiences.

Summary: Future ventures could consider tailoring outputs to make them more accessible to diverse audiences. For example, publishing executive summaries in trade journals to engage business or convening workshops with policy makers to discuss and inform policy issues directly. Promotion of the dedicated website could be better supported through links from funders and stakeholder sites.

Table 1: Recommendation