

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this paper has emerged from the work of Shelton (2000, 2003), Bernhardt, Kawagley and Hill (2000), Boylan and McSwan (1998), Bryden and Boylan (2004) and others on 'place-based' and 'consequential' education in rural areas, prompting the question: if place-based and consequential education is 'good' for primary and secondary school education in rural contexts, why not also for further and higher education? Beyond that, several recent papers on the changing role of universities in general (Ehrlich, 2000), the role of universities in regional development, and on related issues of Innovation and (Regional) Innovation Systems (Thomas, 2000; Edquist, 2004) have fed my curiosity to deepen this question. Finally, my own recent move from an old established city-based university (Aberdeen) to a new or emerging 'networked' university spread around the perimeter of the most sparsely populated and 'rural' region of the UK (The University of the Highlands and Islands) has given a very practical and applied context for these issues. The paper raises rather than solves issues. It is based only tangentially on my own recent research and publications, and so it presents little or no new empirical data. Nevertheless, I believe that the issues raised are increasingly universal issues, and therefore worthy of intellectual examination.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN SOCIETY

My main referent here is the work of Davydd Greenwood at Cornell University, because his analysis and arguments chime with my own general position about the role of the 'expert' in 'society', rural or otherwise (Greenwood, 1995; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Greenwood, 2002). I will refer to some other sources, but these tend to take a more 'top-down' view of the role of the 'expert' and hence, universities in general – academics 'teach' and engage in 'knowledge transfer' to other actors, who are passive learners! The latter is the dominant idea in most of the literature.

Citing the empirical work of Marginson and Considine (2000) and Slaughter and Leslie (1997), Greenwood (2002) argues that:

Corporate management strategies ... increasingly treat universities as fee-for-service providers, students and research contractors as client/customers, and faculty as wage laborers... These management changes must be understood in more than polemical terms. My particular conclusion ... is that, under these changing conditions, the role of

universities in regional and community development is not favored, indeed it may weaken even more. Effective regional and local development strategies involving public universities as key partners will not emerge spontaneously from the increasingly corporate management strategies being applied to universities. Intentional redesign of structures and relationships is required to make regional development an important university focus.

Of course it follows *ex definitio* that universities must seek to be ‘universal’ in their knowledge base. However, universal knowledge must always be based on the particular. On other occasions, I have referred to the parallel work of major novelists, and in particular the works of George Mackay Brown and Alastair Macleod. While Mackay Brown’s works are rooted in his native Orkney Islands, that of Alastair MacLeod is rooted in the very particular (Scottish-origin) community of Cape Breton in eastern Canada. As one reviewer pointed out when a rare MacLeod novel was published, MacLeod’s work is indeed about the particular society, but the messages are universal. Much the same case can be made of George MacKay Brown’s works.

Moreover, universities have been, and normally remain, city-based institutions. The main exceptions to this seem to have had similar value-based roots. First of all the Jeffersonian Land-Grant universities in the USA. Secondly, although not universities in any conventional sense, the Grundtvig-inspired Folk High Schools in Denmark (Fain, 1971; Danish Ministry of Education, 2006). Third, the Regional High Schools in Norway from the 1970s¹. All three were deliberately placed in rural areas, and had a mission to ‘educate’ rural and less privileged people, even if it was a ‘top-down’ idea of education. Land Grants had a particular mission of ‘extension’ which was about spreading knowledge to the rural population. The Folk High Schools were not universities in the normal sense of the word, but they were aimed mainly at holistic education for life in the adult population as well as youth, and had an ‘extension’ philosophy and practice as well.

Despite such innovations, Greenwood (2002) argues that things have got worse because of ‘managerialism’ and market-like norms and behaviour:

Little in the political economy of public universities directly obligates them to their regional environment. In many senses, universities are within regions and communities, but not of them. Many public universities seem to me analogous to enclave tourism developments where some job creation and other economic activities are created locally but most of the funds come from outside the region and most of the wealth generated leaves the local area, even the country. Thus thinking about universities in the context of regional development and promoting this role requires major changes in orientation, management, funding, and even in the conception of what and whom a public university is for.

This argument seems to have been reinforced lately in empirical work on regional innovation systems which explicitly assessed the rural dimensions. Thus an innovation system was considered to exist in Scotland by a recent report on the Scottish Innovation System², but it was considered to be weak or absent in the predominately rural regions of the Highlands, Islands and the South-West. Elsewhere it was dominated by public

¹ The regional high schools in Norway were established after a proposal from the Ottosen Committee. The Parliament agreed to pilot three such high schools in 1969 - Stavanger, Molde and Kristiansand. The proposal went to permanent management in 1975. In 1994 the regional high schools were joined with the other state high schools to create 26 state high schools. See: http://nifu.pdc.no/index.php?seks_id=6128

² The full report can be accessed at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/89713/0021562.pdf>

sector Research & Development (R&D), large corporate R&D, and a few city-based universities (Atterton, 2007). Other work on European Union (EU) innovation systems has argued that to the extent that university-led research and knowledge transfer functions are an important part of any regional innovation system, their impact decays rapidly with distance from the core cities in which they are normally based (Rodriguez-Pose & Refolo, 2003; Anselin et al., 2000). Finally, Bryden, Hart et al.'s study (2004) of the dynamics of rural areas in Europe found only one rural region of the sixteen studied in four European Union countries which showed any real evidence of a strong university influence on economic performance.

One question is whether we should *expect* universities to take any particular interest in their surrounding localities and regions. After all, their function can be seen as educating an elite in something called 'universal knowledge' and undertaking basic research on issues of national and international importance, wherever they are located. On what does the answer to this question depend? One important factor concerns the governance and financing of universities. Who decides, and on what grounds? And who pays for universities and what influence do they have on outputs and outcomes? On the first question, academics often retain considerable power, even if 'managerialism' has made that power less accountable and more concentrated. Sometimes, however, academics in powerful positions can make a difference to the approach of their university in its region, as in the case of Professor John Goddard, now Vice-Chancellor of Newcastle University in England, but a long-time proponent of a 'regional university' in his former position as Director of the Centre for Urban and Regional Development (CURDS) at Newcastle (Goddard, 1997; Goddard, Charles, et al., 1994; Goddard, Atkins et al., 1997). So too, can the nature of University Courts or Councils, as in the case of the Wisconsin system in the USA, where the strong network of extension agents at county level, together with county level involvement in governance, has enabled Wisconsin to withstand the normal State-level attacks on extension activities and budgets. But in the general case, the resourcing of universities and the power wielded by the dominant funders will have a crucial influence on the university authorities' perception of their key 'customers'.

With respect to funding, there are large differences between universities, between countries, and even 'regions' or 'states' within Federal jurisdictions. The central role of the national Funding Councils in the UK, for example, contrasts with the mixed Federal-State-private funding of Cornell University in the USA, or indeed the Land Grant Universities in general. But there are also large differences between universities in the same nation: some like Oxford and Cambridge have large private income from their own accumulated assets over hundreds of years, others, and especially the 'new' universities like the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) have practically no property or other independent income or assets. Private funding provides a cushion against external forces, but also puts the institutions concerned in a strong competitive position to buy expertise and hence attract research and teaching income, as well as legacies or endowments. In the UK, the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the 1980s with its metrics of research performance and subsequent creation of three distinct 'classes' of university¹, reinforced by related funding for

¹ The 'top' research based universities of 'international standing' such as Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh and called the 'Russell League', a middle group of usually older universities with strong national and some internationally recognised research clusters, and the rest with practically no strong research clusters, which contains most of the 'new' universities.

general research activities, has been a major driver of university priorities. Performance in the RAE, unlike teaching performance, has a major impact on the relative income from general public funding for the universities, and it also affects the ability to attract competitive research funding and postgraduate research students. The RAE is part of what Greenwood (2002) calls 'new managerialism', and it is also one of the factors leading universities to recruit internationally recognized research staff and to focus on RAE outputs which stress publication in refereed international Journals. This in turn creates a bias against outputs which are or may be regarded as 'parochial', and regionally specific, or non-refereed outputs, even if the RAE guidelines suggest that such outputs are acceptable. In practice the RAE assessors tend to downgrade Journals and outputs containing the word 'rural' since the related disciplines regard these as automatically of lower quality. Compare, for example, the status of *Sociologia Ruralis* with that of 'Sociology', or that of the 'Journal of Rural Studies' with that of 'Environment and Planning A'.

Such mechanisms, and they are particularly strong and evident in the UK system, act as a powerful disincentive for universities to become involved in their rural hinterlands, far less put resources into 'outreach' or extension activities aimed at rural communities. Equally, they insert a bias against the hiring of academic staff who specialise in knowledge pertaining to their surrounding region, through the devaluation of such knowledge.

Greenwood (2002, citing Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996; Flyvberg, 2001) distinguishes three kinds of knowledge; *theoria*, *techne*, and *phronesis*. Greenwood (2002) argues that there are no *a priori* grounds for suggesting that any one of these is superior to any other:

[a]ll are valid forms of knowing in particular contexts". Theoria "centers fundamentally on contemplative ways of knowing aimed at understanding the eternal and unchangeable operations of the world. The sources of theoria are multiple: speculative, analytical, logical, and experiential but the focus is always on eternal truths beyond their materialization in concrete situations ...

Techne, on the other hand is; "a form of knowledge that inherently action-oriented, inherently productive. *Techne* engages in the analysis of what should be done in the world in order to increase human happiness." Experimentation is central to *Techne*, as are "moral/ethical/social designs and preferences". To Flyvberg (2001) "*Techne* is thus craft and art, and as an activity it is concrete, variable, and context-dependent. The objective of *Techne* is application of technical knowledge and skills according to a pragmatic instrumental rationality, what Foucault calls 'a practical rationality governed by a conscious goal'." The praxis of *Techne* first involves setting the conscious goal, which is generally to improve human welfare and involves moral and ethical choices. It involves engagement with local stakeholders, but while practitioners often have a close and collaborative relationship to the subjects of their work; "they are first and foremost professional experts who do things 'for' not 'with' the local problem owners."

Phronesis is a more complex concept; "Formally defined by Aristotle as internally consistent reasoning which deals with all possible particulars" and to Greenwood; "best understood as the design of action through collaborative knowledge construction with the legitimate problem owners". The knowledge-creation process is collaborative between researchers and local stakeholders, and they work together to understand the

problem and design solutions. “Thus, *phronesis* involves an egalitarian engagement across knowledge systems and diverse experiences” (Greenwood, 2002).

To Greenwood, “the question becomes how to promote *phronesis* in universities” in a context where “many university professors, students, and administrators, used to thinking of a university education and job as a validation of their superiority over other citizens, (find) ... this more collaborative model ... hard to learn.” However, “more university activities based on *phronesis* would dramatically change the political climate universities operate in. The attacks on universities, on their inefficiency, and the calls for more business-like management would evaporate if universities were operating in an authentically collaborative mode with extra-university problem owners, who, after all are taxpayers and voters”. (Greenwood, 2002).

DOES THIS MATTER FOR RURAL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT?

Greenwood’s analysis seems to me to be extremely pertinent to the university based in, or attempting to start life in, rural regions, since it suggests that unless particular care is taken in the design and focus of such a university (or indeed any other kind of post-school educational institution) it is liable to be sucked down the conventional route (i.e. focus on *theoria* and *techne*). The idea of ‘development’, rural or otherwise, has in any case tended to be a ‘top down’ idea, where norms are set by experts or by people or entities without any local system where the ‘subjects’ of a ‘development programme’ live. This is despite initiatives and even movements arguing for, and practicing, ‘participatory approaches’. In the end of the day, large decisions, within the large funding bodies, and having both negative and positive impacts, are mainly based on *techne*, infused by some usually implicit *theoria*! It arises because the funders of ‘development’, like the funders of universities, have their own norms and rules, infusing ‘managerialism’ with ‘performance indicators’ or equivalent. In the case of university funding, such indicators, norms and rules as set by mainstream universities and their managers, and they determine levels of university funding, particularly for research. As Greenwood argues, these indicators, norms and rules explain why universities generally ignore *Phronesis*.

However, the issue is not only a ‘rural’ issue. Greenwood is rightly critical of the hermetic and self serving nature of the majority of social science and humanities ‘disciplines’. To him we need multidisciplinary or cross-disciplinary approaches to solve the real world problems of regions, ‘places’ and people:

Typical local/regional problems center on economic development and job creation, improved social services, the problems of youth, migration, social incorporation, and the like. These are what Russell Ackoff calls complex multi-disciplinary “messes” (Ackoff, 1999). Examples might be amelioration of groundwater contamination caused by industrial and agricultural pollution, urban and regional planning, assimilation of immigrant populations into local communities, the inability of regions to get resources and attention from national governments or the European Union, work redesign and worker safety, freedom of dress or religious practice in public schools, etc. These are complex, dynamic, multidisciplinary problems that have scientific, technical, social scientific and humanistic dimensions. They do not yield to typical disciplinary nostrums and they do not map onto the current Tayloristic division of labor in universities. Yet these are precisely the kinds of problems that graduates of universities will face in their work lives and that local, regional, and national governments consider to be urgent.

THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS(UHI) (IN FORMATION)

When the idea of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) as a collaborative venture involving all the small Further Education and Training Colleges in and around this most sparsely populated UK region took hold in the 1980s, it was infused with ideas of local stakeholder and community engagement, reflected in the governance structure, especially the UHI Foundation and Board of Governors. This initial enthusiasm for engagement with local communities has not however been reflected to any real extent in its more recent Mission and Vision statements, and indeed UHI has not to my knowledge ever proposed that it should have an ‘outreach’ function in relation to the constituent communities of its ‘region’. Indeed, UHI has increasingly felt that it needs to play the conventional academic game. It has established Faculties, and even appointed Deans, even if the latter are so far responsible for few staff. It is making entries (if a few) to the 2008 UK Research Assessment Exercise. It is being perpetually evaluated by the conventional academic bureaucracies like the (National) Quality Assessment Agency (QAA) and the Scottish Funding Council for Higher and Further Education. Having been initially frustrated by opposition from universities such as Aberdeen, it can now only proceed towards university status with the Universities of Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Strathclyde as official (if sometimes reluctant) ‘mentors’. The QAA, unfamiliar with the idea of a ‘networked’ University of a Federal nature, is insisting on conventional governance models which almost certainly imply centralisation and loss of local autonomy.

Nevertheless, the individual colleges and institutes that form the larger UHI network do tend in some cases at least to be relatively well connected to their localities. Thus the North Atlantic Fisheries College in Shetland has a strong link with the fishing industry; the Orkney College has specialisms in heritage, culture and tourism; North Highland College has specialisms in the nuclear industry and Scottish history; Lews Castle College in Sustainable Rural Development; Sabhal Mor Ostaig (The Gaelic College on Skye) in Gaelic medium teaching, Gaelic language and culture, and media studies; and Perth College in Mountain Studies. In addition, UHI has a theological college and the UHI Policy web, the latter focusing on issues of how public policies can be better designed for remote and rural regions, as well as a Sustainable Development Research Centre (SRDC), Environmental Research Institute (ERI), and a Marine Science Research Institute (SAMS). Such activities encourage hope that UHI’s connections with its region and localities can remain strong as it moves into an exciting phase of ‘joining up’ further and higher education.

This is a brief snapshot of some of the challenges faced by a new ‘rural’ university¹ in one of the remoter and more sparsely populated regions of the EU. It can be seen how *Theoria* and *Techne* are in danger of taking over the UHI at the expense of *Phronesis*, as they have in other UK universities, almost all of which are city-based. While the original ideas for UHI were rather replete with language of *Phronesis*, the pressure of funding and quality control agencies in the quest for full university status have ensured

¹ The Highlands and Islands is a ‘predominately rural’ area according to the OECD classification. It is one of the most sparsely populated regions in the European Union, and has no major city within its boundaries, or particularly close to them. The largest and only ‘city’ in the region is Inverness with around 70,000 inhabitants.

that this became a lower priority, in contrast with the wishes of local people and communities, and indeed, the existing 'place-based' nature of at least some activities of its constituent colleges and institutes.

It would be nice, but trite, to argue that this pressure to lose regional and local connectivity is due to centralised funding. Centralised funding does undoubtedly give too much power to the centralised agencies, and too little to local stakeholders. However, the experience of the USA suggests that other forces are at work: notably, the choices of those in power ('academic bureaucrats' or 'managers'), and of academics. One could speculate that one reason for this is the fact that academic promotion requires a portfolio of conventional outputs, especially (in the UK) RAE outputs, which sucks academics into the conventional behaviours. Another reason may be the failure of the regional and local agencies to take sufficient advantage of their regional and local Higher and Further Education institutions, or to cooperate closely with them. However, more work may be needed on this topic.

The 'UHI' type problem would not be so severe if the established universities were engaged with their rural and urban hinterlands, but the same problem afflicts them, and there is the added issue (and evidence) of 'distance decay' of their impacts. Even in the USA, the old idea and practice of 'outreach' has significantly weakened. And the Folk High School movement, once so strong in rural Denmark, also seems to be weakening. So we might expect rural regions and actors to be somewhat more isolated from the 'knowledge systems' that are said to drive the 'knowledge economy'.

CONCLUSION

On the one hand, the need for specifically 'rural' (place based, consequential) education has been recognised in the past by initiatives such as the Land Grants and related extension work and in the present by those whose vision supports the kind of rural and place based school education discussed by Jack Shelton and others, as well as initiatives such as a UHI, the implicit emphasis on '*phronesis*' in such initiatives is under attack generally by funding bodies, academic managers and academic bureaucracies in general, and by the political system's views of the role of universities in society and economy. The systems established by these bodies are unsympathetic to 'particularism' that is often associated with 'rural' studies and concerns, even unjustly so.

The argument of this paper is that this in turn challenges the role of the university in its region, and hence 'rural' universities, forcing those that exist to adapt to the universalistic norms established by the funding system and their city peers, and those that are emerging rural Further Education and Higher Education institutions to do likewise. Resistance is possible, but it needs a very strong value-based approach within the academic leadership, and strong support by regional funding agencies and, at the political level, communities.

This poses a double challenge to the rural university that wishes to contribute strongly its region's development and quality of life, while at the same time being recognised as 'excellent' by its peers. On the one hand, it must engage in (currently unfashionable) practices such as outreach and participatory knowledge-building activities that are a key part of *phronesis*. On the other hand, it must engage in the (currently fashionable)

universalistic *theoria* and *techne* activities that gain central funding for teaching, research and knowledge ‘transfer’, and a place in the league table of established universities. Such a university that is seeking to become established and recognised, as in the case of the UHI, must also do all this with significantly fewer of its own resources, and greater delivery costs, than the ‘old’ mainly city-based universities. It is here that the regional development agencies, authorities and programmes need to step in and provide support. This, however, requires such bodies to suspend their normal *modus operandi* which are very much geared towards ‘*techne*’ type ‘outputs’.

Facing such challenges, the maintenance of existing rural university related activities such as outreach and the folk high schools, as well as the establishment of new ones like UHI, is bound to be a considerable struggle. Equally, it is very hard to see how rural areas ‘beyond the commuting belt’ of the larger towns and cities can be innovative and develop new sources of income and quality of life without their presence. At the same time, it should not be assumed that any struggle to forge or retain strong connections with their rural hinterlands can be sustained in the face of powerful opposing forces in the academic bureaucracies, funding bodies, and even within the increasingly narrowly specialised academic community itself.

For those of us who are interested - indeed engaged - in the role of the academy in the development of rural regions, the issues raised here seem to be a potentially fruitful area for comparative research.

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Key words: Higher Education; Leadership; Research and Development