

Enabling Universities to Engage Better in their Place: An Outline Toolkit

UPEN Regional and Devolved
Administration Sub-Committee

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Abstract

This Toolkit sees Place from various stakeholder perspectives and sets out the findings of a UPEN survey on Place, discussing what works for HEIs in terms of maximising best practice. The Toolkit collates member responses as a practical aid to support HEIs considering enhancing their engagement with the Place agenda and policy. It operates at three levels:

- Strategic – Setting out the relationship an institution has with their local/regional/other sub-national policy stakeholders and interlocutors.
- Operational – Showing how Place affects academic policy engagement for a particular area of work or an HEI overall.
- Specific Engagement – How an institution is already acting or planning to support the engagement/contribution of academic expertise with relevant policy development around Place and Levelling Up.

The Toolkit is designed to be as light touch as possible and has been configured to highlight what has worked. It is, therefore, a distillation of specific points of best practice, grouped and ordered. Questions of, for example, how to engage with the private sector in a specific area are considered the preserve of HEI-based experience and expertise in that Place.



About UPEN

The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) is a community of UK universities, academics, and policy professionals committed to increasing the impact of research on public policy at a local, regional, national, and international level

The mission of UPEN is to harness the collective research power and leading expertise of UK academic institutions to make a real difference to policymaking. UPEN does this by offering a dedicated contact point for policy professionals (e.g. civil servants, politicians, funders) and supporting them to better engage with universities across the UK to meet their evidence needs. It also works to build a more sophisticated understanding for the policy world of academic life, research processes, and reward and incentive structures. Since its inception in 2018, UPEN has been driving towards its goals to support better decision-making by increasing equal access, or 'democratising', the opportunities for academic-policy engagement and diversifying the evidence presented to inform public policy beyond the 'usual suspects' within mainstream organisations and well-worn channels. UPEN does this in a variety of ways, including acting as a dedicated contact for policy professionals

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to seek and receive expert advice, organising knowledge-exchange events with key stakeholders from universities, UK government, parliament, devolved bodies, and local authorities, and working together to identify mechanisms to take forward specific projects and share best practices. Through seven sub-committees, UPEN covers areas of academic-policy engagement related to Areas of Research Interest (ARI), Communications, Devolved and Regional Engagement, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), International, Futures and Professional Development.

UPEN's Regional and Devolved Administration Sub-Committee aims to support its members to engage with and make progress on devolved and place-related issues vis-à-vis academic-policy engagement. This includes working together on the challenges identified by colleagues in the survey informing this report, specifically regarding the optimal use of funding lines and the betterment of Place.



Introduction

This outline toolkit is the result of a survey of UPEN members on how they engage with the Places in which they operate. This information was then mined and distilled and it became apparent that engagement regarding Place was happening at three main levels, namely the strategic, the operational, and specifically involving an HEI at a more immediate local level. The result is a resource that UPEN member HEIs can use to optimise their relationship with Place.

The aim of this toolkit, then, is to help and enable UPEN member HEIs to make an active contribution to Places where they are situated by providing them with a mechanism for the development of an engagement strategy with associated operationalisation and delivery. The ambition for Place-based research, community, and policy engagement has natural fit, links, and synergies both to University/HEI Civic Mission and policy relevance to the Levelling up/Plan for Growth Strategies.

The Importance of Place to Government and HEIs

As the Government stated in 2021, 'Place matters.'^[1] Given the importance of this, how do universities engage with it and how successful are they at doing so? These questions are essential to understanding both the function and presence of universities where they are, as well as their relevance locally and at other levels. The Toolkit will address these issues. It is the result of intensive prolonged discussion between colleagues from different universities and a survey of UPEN members. These results show how individual universities interact with their Place and how Place is so integral to their being.

The policy literature relating to Place is large, engaging with many different themes. For example, the Levelling Up White Paper^[2] covers: the English devolution dimension; the dimension of Place Strategy; the built environment dimension; transport; and skills. All other considerations in the White Paper flow from these dimensions, whether they relate to relative deprivation, urban geography, funding flows, or anything else.

Universities in their Places are also civic institutions as much as they are educational ones. As Ray Kerslake has put it: 'Universities have an irreplaceable and unique role in helping their host communities thrive – and their own success is bound up with the success of the places that gave birth to them.'^[3] The economic contribution of universities as anchor institutions in Place is considerable.^[4] As the CBI has put it: 'Universities have the expertise and infrastructure to revitalise local and regional economies, acting as a local hub for business ideas, supporting urban planning and assisting with the resilience of SMEs and start-ups.'^[5]

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The Place of the Local/Locale in University Planning, then, is a central one, as Place is an underpinning concept in an increasing number of University Strategies. A good example of this is the University of Wolverhampton's new Strategic Plan to 2030. Place is central to it, thus: 'We believe that universities are about transforming society by ensuring the needs of their Place and people are at the heart of what they do.'^[6] In Scotland, the University of Edinburgh also has a Strategy 2030, where Place is articulated as city and region: 'We sustain a deep allegiance and commitment to the interests of the city and region in which we are based, alongside our national and international efforts, ensuring relevance to all.'^[7]

How the Toolkit Emerged

Universities have an integral civic engagement mission built into them and there are also important Policy considerations to the work that they do in the Places in which they are situated. The material that follows is the result of a survey conducted in late 2021 among the UPEN membership.

Some 26 HEIs have responded, either to the individual questions or to feed back comments and contributions as members of the UPEN Regional and Devolved Administration Sub-committee. Responses came from:

- Brunel University;
- Cardiff University;
- Eastern Arc (a regional research consortium that comprises the Universities of East Anglia (UEA), Essex and Kent);
- Glasgow Caledonian University;
- Goldsmiths, University of London;
- Keele University;
- Lancaster University;
- Nottingham Trent University;
- Queen's University Belfast;
- The Open University;
- The Scottish Policy and Research Exchange;
- Ulster University;
- University College London;
- University of Cambridge;
- University of Edinburgh;
- University of Exeter;
- University of Huddersfield;
- University of Leeds;
- University of Liverpool;
- University of Reading;
- University of Stirling;
- University of Strathclyde;
- University of South Wales; and
- University of Wolverhampton.

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The responses, in their various forms, were to three questions, namely:

- What is the relationship your institution has with their local/regional/other sub-national policy stakeholders and interlocutors?
- If and How does 'Place' affect academic policy engagement for your particular area of work or for your HEI overall?
- How is your institution as a UPEN member already or planning to support the engagement/contribution of academic expertise with relevant policy development around 'Place' and 'levelling up'?

The Toolkit that emerged was based upon the responses to these questions.

The HEI Place Toolkit

The broad process encapsulated by the Toolkit is made up of three parts: framing, organise, and delivering. These are applied across three levels, namely the strategic, operational, and specific engagement.

The first part of the Toolkit is Strategic and sets out the relationship an institution has with their local/regional/other sub-national policy stakeholders and interlocutors. This is based on the first question of the survey and enables an institution both to develop a Place Strategy and to develop the infrastructure and interpersonal relationships to take forward the policy engagement of the institution.

The second part of the Toolkit is Operational and shows how Place affects academic policy engagement for a particular area of work or an HEI overall. This part enables the strategy of the first part but also provides the functionality of value added identified and utilised through expertise within a given university to feed into the process.

The third part relates to specific engagement, notably how a UPEN member institution is already acting or planning to support the engagement/contribution of academic expertise with relevant policy development around Place and Levelling Up. It allows for focus from the Strategic and Operational levels to Policy but also enables an individual University-focused approach to understanding the policy relevance of engaging with Levelling Up and the Plan for Growth, harnessing University and subject matter processes, and setting the scene for Pan-University Processes.



As mentioned above, there are three processes that intersect with the three questions, namely to frame, organise, and deliver. The first of these sets the scene in each case and allows us to understand the context in each part. Importantly, the framing comes specifically from the HEI Responses so they are based in hard-won real world experience and reflects what does and does not work.

The second process is to organise, as a planning process, and the third area is to be able to deliver. The first area here is on action to be taken. This relates to fit to the top down and bottom up processes overall and so is different from the functions undertaken as part of the organise process, and which is more team based.



<p>1. Strategic Framing</p> <p>The relationship an institution has with their local/ regional/ other sub-national policy stakeholders and interlocutors</p>	<p>a) Develop a Place Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Development as part of this a 'place-based' approach to create knowledge on how to close inequality gaps, tackle poverty and deprivation ii. The University as Anchor Institution - Embedding the Civic Mission: demonstrate commitment to civic responsibilities - Co-design as per 1b) <p>b) Develop the infrastructure and interpersonal relationships to take forward the policy engagement of the institution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Work with local government/devolved administrations, e.g. excellent relationship with local councils ranging including planning departments, children's services, heritage, and transport, through civic and partnership agreements ii. Shape a coherent local innovation policy and achieve benefits to the economy through partnerships with LEPs, and successor bodies iii. Work with the Private Sector iv. Work with the Third sector v. Establishing partnerships with other universities/HEIs - See also 3d) vi. Develop International engagement. Relevance to Place in other countries might be topical here vii. Develop and take part in events, variously singly or jointly
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2. Operational Organisation

How Place affects academic policy engagement for a particular area of work or an HEI overall

a) Understanding Parameters of Policy Engagement

- i. Think of Place as the preferred medium for engagement with stakeholders and beneficiaries overall
- ii. Understand the legislative context vis-à-vis institutional responsibilities
- iii. Understanding local priorities and characteristics, e.g. deprivation, real world challenges, etc.
- iv. The deep roots a University has in the Local Economy and the importance of critical mass (NB - APPG)
- v. Consider the value of community engagement/social engagement
- vi. Convene partnerships that can support and be relevant to Government policy for the area in question
- vii. Embed Place into research projects and Centre activity at all levels
- viii. Understand outputs, e.g. briefings, reports, evaluations
- ix. Understand and incorporate Impact and KE

b) Value is added by identified and utilised expertise with a given university

- i. Value can be added through mechanisms like data, research, and modelling
- ii. Take up roles as Board Members, for example on Chambers of Commerce
- iii. Work with the local NHS Trust and local hospitals
- iv. Work with SMEs and make them a point of focus, thereby creating asymmetric and beneficial outcomes
- v. Consider links outside the usual geographical area, e.g. other regions, if it adds value

3. Engagement and Delivery

How a UPEN member Institution is already or planning to support the engagement/contribution of academic expertise with relevant policy development around Place and Levelling Up

a) Understand the policy relevance of engaging with Levelling Up and the Plan for Growth

- i. The six themes of the Plan for Growth and the twelve aims of Levelling Up
- ii. Engage in Collaborative Place-Based Responses to Economic Recovery Post-COVID 19
- iii. Ensuring that everyone involved knows and understands how to navigate entry points to/for Policy Engagement

b) University Processes

- i. Utilise development support and training
- ii. Access funding streams to further the role and importance of Place
- iii. Understand that ECRs have a role to play
- iv. Understand that students and studentships have a role to play

c) Subject matter processes

- i. Use business schools to engage outside the institution and link to Research and Development
- ii. Enhance the improvement of the high street as a Place
- iii. Understand the needs of culture, heritage, and the creative industries, e.g. Arts and Humanities aspects of Place
- iv. Engage with new ways of assessing health and wellbeing within the Borough, e.g. understanding inequality needs
- v. Understand the role and importance of sustainability more generally, e.g. Recycling or food waste
- vi. Expertise from policy engagement centres and institutes

d) Pan-University Processes

- i. Work with others through networks like UPEN and CAPE, concentrating on what works - Link also to 1b)

Conclusion

In terms of the relationship between Place and Policy, the dividends accruing to universities through strong engagement are considerable. Universities sit at a unique interface between the public, private, and third sectors and are well-placed to collaborate effectively with all three. Moreover, universities have a unique presence in Place. Existing within a Place in one regard, yet separate from it in another, universities also exist as Places in their own right and split-site campuses reinforce this trend still further.

Universities impact upon and are impacted by their Place or Places. They do this variously through local and community engagement, through working with local businesses and their fora, with LEPs, and, many, through combined authorities. They also engender impact through engagement with Central Government and Parliament, often with national or even international effect. Regardless of putative changes to the means of assessing impact, the broad trend is set to continue.

Clearly, devolution, the importance of the local dimension, and the role of partnerships offer excellent opportunities for universities. Indeed, as we have seen, funding mechanisms for universities are both ongoing and emerging and are sure to facilitate Policy relevant engagement with the themes above.

The toolkit developed here will play an important role in the engagement with Policy and the furtherance of Impact with regard to Place. The experience gained from colleagues across the UK's universities is important and will help others across the sector. The role of UPEN in bringing this together has been an important, indeed pivotal, one.

Finally, it is fitting to end as this report started: 'Place matters'. It does so for more than where people work; it does so because of identity, where they are born, and from where their family hails. Place also matters because, where opportunity is offered and embraced, it forms the basis of national recovery and renewal.



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Toolkit Diagram:

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