

Title: Inter-university collaboration and the policy implications of an ageing society

Category – Case Study

Objectives of presentation

The presentation aims to showcase the potential offered by a new model of collaboration in resolving complex issues, and enabling a proactive policy response.

The case study focuses on the issue of demographic change, and the role of public policy in shaping whether such change produces beneficial or deleterious economic effects.

Specifically, the presentation will:

1. Examine the role of collaboration between universities, and between research users and producers in addressing complex multi-disciplinary challenges, such as the implications of demographic change;
2. Illustrate how this collaborative approach can produce research to support evidence-based policy development ;
3. Review the outcomes of the dissemination and engagement programme with Local Economic Partnerships and Government departments.

Approach / Methodology

The context of this research is significant:

- Economic conditions: austerity, unemployment; constrained growth;
- Demographic transitions: ageing; migration;
- Policy directions and institutional change: rebalancing; Big Society; localism and Local Enterprise Partnerships.

The approach featured collaboration at three levels, and this was critical to shaping the focus of the research and ensuring its translation / impact potential. Multi-level collaboration has been instrumental to the successful dissemination of the research.

1. Collaboration between local users and commissioners

This research responded to a collective need identified by The Northern Way City Regions Forum. Following publication of demographic projections for the North of England¹, significant intelligence gaps were identified, including understanding the spatial and economic impacts of demographic change.

2. Collaboration between universities

Responding to this demand, the N8 partnership of research universities assembled a multi-disciplinary team to examine these issues.

An initial scoping workshop, involving academics, the commissioners (The Northern Way) and three Government Departments (BIS, CLG and DWP), discussed ideas to respond to the research users².

¹ Boden P. and Rees P. (2010) Demographic change and its impact upon the Northern Way regions. Paper presented and published at the Symposium on Economic Development in the Northern England Session 3, Turning Points, 1330-1415 25-26 March 2010, The Lowry Centre, Salford. Online at: <http://www.thenorthernway.co.uk/page.asp?id=822>

² This is analogous to the approach taken in science and technology related disciplines in the N8 universities, where virtual research centres have been created in order to match industrial research needs ("the necessary") with new ideas and solutions ("the possible") from across the 8 universities.

The resulting programme comprised four inter-related 'best with best' studies involving demographers, geographers, and labour market, entrepreneurship, health and housing experts from six universities. An overall synthesis report was also produced.

3. Collaboration between research team and research users

A key feature was the role of an Advisory Board which provided crucial policy, from inception, to production and dissemination. Three Government departments, city regions, regional observatories and the NHS were represented on the Board. This increased the policy relevance of the research by providing insights into current priorities for national and local Government, and allowed strong routes to engagement and dissemination through each member championing the work in their own organisation.

Results and Summary of key findings

The case study illustrates a successful and novel model of inter-university collaboration. It also highlights important lessons; these will be a focus of the presentation, and include:

- the importance of having N8 as a strategic framework at institutional level;
- VC support, which validated such activity, was crucial;
- having colleagues who were prepared to work together – and recognising strengths of each team, in tight timetables, was critical;
- the importance of leadership

The research revealed:

- the North is distinctive compared with national context:
- common aggregate trends across North: population growth, ageing, and increasing diversity;
- spatial diversity in scale and rate of demographic change - Urban-Rural, and Core-periphery;
- differential spatial impact of economic and demographic interactions;
- opportunities from demographic change: mobilising people, investing in innovation, entrepreneurship, new market opportunities; and
- challenges, particularly the need to understanding the position in different areas, immigration and labour supply, risks of increasing inequality, impacts on social and unpaid carers.

Recommendations include:

- promoting mobilisation of wealth to ensure that the wealth concentrated in the over 50's is deployed to maximise economic benefits in the North;
 - supporting home ownership and adaptation as an economic driver;
 - exploiting new growth sectors for example via personalisation and sophisticated remote health monitoring systems; and
 - new growth sectors servicing the very old with more specialist residential care.
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Implications and Recommendations

The collaborative model has ensured the research attracts high levels of policy interest. Demographic trends, especially an ageing population, create opportunities for business growth and creation, and economic activity. There will be new growth sectors, including those servicing the very old, and a market for personal services.

There is potential to unleash entrepreneurship in the population of the North, by maximising the growth among the over 50s. This is especially true in the lifestyle and quality of life, life enhancement and assisted living markets.

There are considerable opportunities to exploit and incentivise the social capital embodied in the over 50's, combined with an interest among these cohorts in creating new social enterprises, especially in arts, entertainment, recreation and education. With appropriate policy support, social enterprises could play an important role in "re-balancing" the Northern economy.

Recommendations: The adoption of a multi-disciplinary and collaborative research model has highlighted the important and value of;

- Strategies to create a fusion of disciplinary expertise required to address "grand challenge" issues such as ageing are adopted
- The absorptive capacity of local and national institutions is taken into account as this influences levels of engagement, dissemination and impact of research
- That a strategy is put in place to plan and manage successful collaboration between national and local research users and producers
- Where relevant, research users are involved at the inception, production and dissemination stages of the research

A key element of the conference paper will be to explore the learning from this case study in more detail in order to inform future translational research projects, particularly those targeted at public sector research users.

We will also explore how to target private sector groups, and are currently working with the CBI to understand the dissemination opportunities.

Areas for development / Further Research

1. To what extent have the individual dissemination events with Local Economic Partnerships and Government Departments enabled these organisations "to use this knowledge better"³
2. What are the levels / evidence of impact from this research among the research community?
3. How can the barriers encountered in this project be overcome in the future ?
4. How can we better engage business on long term issues that will impact on their markets and profitability?

³ HEFCE definition of knowledge exchange highlighted in Higher Education Innovation Funding policy (2011-12 to 2014-15)