

Member blog: The challenges facing higher education in the Northern Powerhouse

Despite the positivity around higher education institutions and their role in the Northern Powerhouse, there are several key challenges which local economic practitioners can support, advise and liaise on, says Jonathan Guest.

Universities and colleges delivering higher education play an important role in Northern urban and rural areas. They attract people, money and visitors to localities and provide a skilled labour market to local, regional and national businesses, amongst other benefits.

Groups like the N8 universities (Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York) are providing a voice for higher education in debates around the Northern Powerhouse. As well as adding value to the discourse, the N8 group is further highlighting the economic contribution of universities.

However, several challenges remain for higher education institutions on this agenda which local economic practitioners can support, advise and liaise on. Here is my take on these:

Brexit and the North of England

The challenges of Brexit are multi-faceted for higher education. There is potential reduction in foreign student numbers, changes in funding and collaboration as well as the perceived rejection of evidence and academic work by communities. Whilst overall the North of England voted to leave the European Union in large numbers, several urban areas of the North did not and furthermore, many younger people also did not. Universities need to confront these challenges and at the same time remain integral to the areas in which they are situated. The relationship with Europe and the deals that are brokered will shape how universities operate within their urban areas.

Apprenticeship levy

I have spoken to major British employers who are moving to recruiting staff through apprenticeships rather than higher education graduates. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for universities who will need to consider how to accommodate apprenticeships into their strategy, academic development and financials. However, many firms are not clear what to do with the apprenticeship levy and require further information. Universities are well placed to support and are also liable to pay the levy, so will appreciate the challenges that businesses could be facing.

Cold spots and economic gain

The North of England has 30 universities, many more colleges offering higher education provision, and eight research-intensive universities and which have the potential to change the economic and educational landscape in the North. However, there continue to be higher education 'cold spots' – areas which are often poorly connected, have economic activity challenges and few opportunities. All universities play a role in contributing to policy and decision-making around wider built and social infrastructure challenges. Making a difference to cold-spot areas, often those referred to as being 'left behind', can increase trust in higher education and change the trajectory of economic development.

Within the challenges presented for higher education provision there are several opportunities. Economic development practitioners can draw upon their specialist knowledge and resource base to help make a difference. Developing strategies to address these challenges is highly important, as is the evidence base to support decision-making. There is a constant push for universities to work with businesses. This is important, but so is their continued relationship with local and national decision-makers and contribution to research.

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