

PASCAL Report to the Essex Region

PURE Work 2009-2010

A. Distinctive and unique features of Essex

The PURE project sharply illuminates an obvious fact: each region has its own individual and special character, history and circumstances. Understanding this is essential to getting full value from PURE. It enables well-judged sharing of experience with other regions, concentrating on what relates best to regional circumstances. What are the special features of Essex?

As for other UK local authority areas, relations with central government in the highly centralised UK system are problematic. Essex was within the Eastern England Regional Development Authority (EEDA), one of the nine English regions now being abolished by the Coalition Administration. South-East England is a difficult place to break into regions. The huge London metropolis greatly influences Essex as in part a satellite commuter sub-system. There has also been the excision of two urban areas as separate unitary authorities.

In the new environment Essex is again clearly 'a region'. However, central government is massively reducing public expenditure, notably in grants to local authorities. The macro-environment is thus difficult, given the direct impact also of the global financial crisis on the local economy. A centralist tradition, and failure fully to trust and support local government, is changing with talk of localisation. The squeeze on finances makes it hard to look far forward and invest in long-term planning. Yet this is more necessary than ever.

The two universities in Essex differ in character. They connect with their regions in different ways. Much happens through diverse one-off and 'local' arrangements. Anglia Ruskin University is rather more locally anchored and perhaps committed to engagement with the region than the University of Essex. Historically there has been a lack of structure for regular consultation and joint planning between the universities and the region, but this is changing with the establishment of the Essex Economic Board and the emerging Local Enterprise Partnership.

The county has not benefited much from the modern UK higher education orientation towards 'the entrepreneurial university', 'relevant curriculum', employer engagement and more applied research, in a country where third mission and engagement are well understood and often practised, and where 'third stream' funding has grown over ten years. Essex started in PURE from a low formally recognised engagement base.

Involvement in PURE has however assisted a closer working relationship between Essex County Council and the resident universities, with senior level commitment to change.

B. Formal and informal means of engagement

Essex and Kent initially linked to PURE as an estuarine extension of the Gateway development region, then as whole counties, but on 50% of normal input and support.

Essex engaged vigorously and optimistically. There was strong in-principle Authority commitment, and a good 2009 Action Plan. Engagement with PURE detailing progress reduced significantly in 2010. The need and potential for stronger and more formal engagement remain evident. These are accentuated by the need for radical systemic change in the new economic and resource environment. PURE could serve as a vehicle and focus.

Also essential are regular means of working together to sustain engagement. Essex seeks to be innovative, using an Integrated County Strategy. There are different links with stakeholders such as the Partnership Forum and Development Board, and a wish to align and connect development efforts.

The universities and the Authority can cite useful local partnerships, some ad hoc, some more extended. PURE discussion has reinforced the commitment of those actively involved to make engagement systemic and sustainable. At present no new engagement can be directly attributed to joining PURE. There is however a change in the measurable impact of the region's relationship with the universities. .

The need for radical new approaches to development with very constrained resources is obvious and acute. This is well recognised at different levels. High-level commitment is needed to consulting and working in regular partnership on the part of the leadership on both sides. The region must be clear what it needs to achieve through PURE in the new environment, in terms of creating the necessary means to systemic and sustainable engagement for development.

In this event it should be possible to develop, exploit and embed engagement by continuing to work with PURE. 2009-10 can be seen as moving one rather than two years into the project, on the basis of a half-resource commitment.

C. Benefits and prospective future gains from international networking

The PURE HEI and draft region benchmarking tools are a way to take stock and, from a basis of knowledge, to monitor and enhance progress in getting value from region-HEI partnership.

Essex has yet to gain this benefit. The universities were reluctant to take part., possibly because of the competitive national university environment. As other PURE regions have come to use both tools and learn from the results, the potential for Essex to share and gain from this experience has increased.

Benchmarking in PURE is not for competitive comparison with others. Glasgow institutions share the same national policy environment. They have trialled benchmarking, with productive results, as have Melbourne universities in an equally competitive environment. There, the universities as well as the region have used the tools, connecting the outcomes. Some intend repeating the process periodically, building on the baseline now created, and acting on the findings to fill gaps and avoid duplication.

Two years is not long to gain value from benchmarking. Essex and the universities could take on benchmarking in 2011. From this, each party can adapt internally to engage better. Mutually useful collaborative action can follow.

Within the PURE network there are other ways of helping the region to develop better by exchanging experience. Essex can use the network to forge bilateral links with other chosen regions (as has Kent with Jamtland), and perhaps to work together in EU project partnerships.

Several PURE clusters will be active in 2011. Almost all are relevant to Essex, which has identified innovation and renewal, green jobs and skills, tertiary systems including further education institutions, and perhaps cultural and creative industries.

D. Getting more value from engagement between the region and the universities

To engage effectively, each partner must calculate what makes engagement fruitful to for its own situation and purposes, as well as what is in the wider long-term interest. Recalculation is needed in the new UK conditions pertaining from late 2010.

As well as a favourably oriented public sector and as yet less clearly committed universities, it is necessary to involve the private sector – business, finance, industry including SMEs – and the third, voluntary or non-governmental sector on which a 'smaller-State Big Society' relies.

Practical steps are needed to achieve this. We advise the following:

Seek means to continue using PURE in 2011 as if it was the 2nd year of involvement.

Agree policy priorities that can be advanced through engagement. Obvious areas are renewable energy, advanced supply chain development, chemical and technical industry focus, in line with Essex economic development planning priorities.

Essex expressed interest in PURE clusters on regional innovation and renewal, green skills and jobs, tertiary systems and possible creative and cultural industries. It can gain from at least listening in on these, and monitoring projects in these areas.

For the Essex region as a whole

Create a new architecture for cooperation, with joint planning based on an overall regional strategy. Develop mechanisms for consultation and cooperation across all sectors.

Create a multi-stakeholder Regional Coordinating Group for PURE as visualised in the 2009 Action Plan. If necessary draw on PURE models and experience elsewhere.

Create a wider Forum, enabling stakeholders to sustain momentum, share examples of good practice, and pursue collaborative working and funding opportunities. An open conference and planning day in 2011 is recommended.

Include representatives from civil society organisations, the cultural sector and different parts of the business community including SMEs, drawing inspiration for further development from PURE work elsewhere

Include the colleges of further education, with their key role in skills development and meeting new and innovative labour market needs, in regional planning.

Nurture a new organisational culture and structure in both the universities and the public sector. As a starting point to stronger relationships, set out mutual benefits to be won from cooperation between higher education, the public sector, and industry.

For the universities

Plug more closely into local urban and regional communities and the economy. Employers and universities need to consult each other about future employment challenges, planning for graduates not yet to be found on the labour market.

Try to collaborate and engage, in deliberate complementary ways, with the needs of the region through EEB and other relevant fora. PURE can advise on modes of inter-university cooperation, and arrangements which will help to embed a culture of engagement.

Anglia Ruskin should undertake area by area benchmarking review of its engagement work. Essex should similarly build on its initial 2010 work area by area, to induce active review and planning in each academic area.

Make this a basis for continuing self-evaluation and monitoring, and improved action. Clear university leadership is essential, together with arrangements and reward systems for individuals and groups that support system-wide engagement.

A consortium of higher education institutions may be possible within the wider Thames Gateway Region, including both Essex and Kent. This will provide a good forum for the Essex universities, which are few in number and diverse in character, to consult and collaborate. PURE can advise on the basis of consortium experience elsewhere.

E. Evidence that the work of PURE will be sustained in the future

The work of many projects disappears when the contract ends. Given Essex's hesitant progress, a near-future indicator will be sustainable linkages managing immediately important and beneficial time-bounded projects that yield direct shared gains.

The tough new political and resource environment demands a strong network and Regional Coordinating Group. A continuing forum, with related mechanisms for working together, will enable the region and the universities to secure tangible and sustainable benefit