

PASCAL Report to the Kent Region

PURE Work 2009-2010

A. Distinctive and unique features of Kent

The PURE project sharply illuminates an obvious fact: that each region has its own individual and special character. Understanding this is essential to get full value from PURE. It enables well-judged sharing of experience with other regions, connecting with whatever relates best to your circumstances. What are Kent's special features?

As an English PURE region Kent is a significant county. It has a proud history and a well-known identity – an internationally widely known brand. It enjoys a strong track record in administration. It is influential in the UK local authority world. As a PASCAL founding member it plays an influential role in the Observatory's development. These are relevant strengths for Kent as a PURE region.

On the other hand, relations with central government in the highly centralised UK system are problematic. Kent was within the SE England Regional Development Authority (RDA), one of the nine English regions now being abolished by the Coalition Administration. This RDA region was an unnatural artefact, wrapped around a London metropolis which greatly influences Kent as in part a satellite commuter sub-system. Nevertheless the RDA had the 'regional development' role for Kent. Less serious, given local goodwill, has been the excision of key areas within historic counties as separate unitary authorities.

In the new environment Kent is unambiguously again 'a region'. However, central government is massively reducing public expenditure, nowhere more seriously than in grants to local authorities. The macro-environment for Kent within PURE is thus exceedingly difficult, given the direct impact also of the global financial crisis (GFC) on the local economy. A centralist tradition, and failure fully to trust and support local government, is only nominally altered by talk of localisation. The squeeze on finances makes it hard for even a forward-looking Authority to invest in long-term planning.

The universities in Kent are not as well and obviously connected with their regions as are many UK universities. Canterbury Christchurch University is more committed to engagement than the more prestigious sixties University of Kent, also located in Canterbury. Greenwich with a share Medway presence belongs more to SE London, and seems unenthusiastic about wider local partnership.

The county has benefited little from the UK's modern higher education orientation towards 'the entrepreneurial university', 'relevant curriculum', employer engagement and research. Paradoxically, the region is in a country where third mission and engagement are well understood and often practised, and where 'third stream' funding has grown over ten years. Kent started in PURE from a low engagement base. A promising exception is the recent HEFCE-backed SECC pathfinder project.

B. Formal and informal means of engagement

What has happened for Kent within PURE, and what might happen now? Kent was linked with Essex initially as an estuarine extension of the Gateway development region, but then instead as the whole county, but only 50% of normal input and support.

This slowed down the start of work in PURE. In terms of resource and effort Kent is halfway through the normal two-year cycle. Great need, and potential, for engagement remain evident. They are accentuated by the need for radical systemic change in the new economic and resource environment. Of all PURE regional leaderships, Kent most clearly grasps that 'such a good crisis cannot be let go to waste'.

Which of Kent's policy priorities can now be advanced through engagement? What projects can be started that will help to build more sustainable engagement with the universities and be of value in themselves?

There are obvious candidates: renewable energy and the green economy, creative and other SME industrial innovation, and the social inclusion and rural development agendas.

It is essential for all partners to see some quick returns. It is also essential to move in the right direction, in line with Authority long-term strategic planning.

Creating and learning to use the means of working together may be almost invisible, but is essential to sustain engagement. When Kent joined PURE there were no formal and regular means of dialogue and joint planning with the universities, and rather few informal links. Informally the universities could recite a number of useful local partnerships, some ad hoc and some more extended. There was no evident high-level commitment, and a sense that the senior university in particular was preoccupied with international profile and not locally connected.

The 2nd CDG Kent visit in May 2010 saw the start of a potentially productive process. There is significant interest across different Authority portfolios in working with the expertise of universities; and similar interest within the university groups convened. Kent's earlier involvement with PASCAL used an inter-departmental PASCAL group, showing the Authority's capacity to work across portfolio boundaries and avoid the common 'silo trap'.

The next step is to bring these two key parties together and create a basis for continuing collaboration within an agreed framework. There is the potential to build from this, to achieve common purposes and work for important policy objectives.

At present however, no new engagement can be attributed to joining PURE. This is not the case for other regions which have been fully involved for nearly two years. It

is not possible to measure any impact, or changes in the region's relationship with the universities.

On the other hand, the need and potential is now recognised at different levels. It would be possible to continue developing and exploiting engagement through PURE on the basis of being one rather than two years into the project.

C. Benefits and prospective future gains from international networking

The PURE HEI and draft region benchmarking tools are a valuable way of taking stock and, from a basis of knowledge, monitoring and enhancing progress in getting value from region-HEI partnership.

Kent is one of several PURE regions which have yet to put these tools to use. Its universities displayed more active aversion, possibly because of the very competitive national university environment. Kent County Council has undertaken to co-ordinate its own regional benchmarking.

Benchmarking in PURE is not for competitive comparison with others. Glasgow institutions, which share the same policy environment, have recently begun trialling benchmarking, with productive results. Melbourne is in an equally fierce competitive environment. There, the universities as well as the region have used the tools; some intend repeating the process periodically to build on the baseline now created, and to act on the findings in terms of filling gaps and avoiding duplication.

Two years is a short time for all regions and universities to see and gain value from PURE benchmarking. There is ground to think that both Kent and the three main universities could take on benchmarking in 2011, with other PURE regions extracting increasing value 'internally' for each party and from collaborative action arising.

Within the PURE network there are other ways of helping the region to develop better by exchanging experience. Kent has demonstrated this in its continuing work, as a PASCAL regional member, with Jamtland, Victoria and Scotland. Some of this can be connected with and amplified through their participation as PURE regions.

As a vigorously outward-looking and internationally oriented Authority Kent can also both gain and contribute: in links with present and prospective nearby regions in France and the Low Countries; and with regions further away, in Europe and other continents.

Several PURE clusters will be active in 2011. Almost all are relevant at least in listening post and watching brief terms. This applies to innovation and renewal, green jobs and skills, also to rural areas, social inclusion, creative industries, and tertiary systems. Ongoing PURE work should include further education institutions, where much skill development important for economic renewal takes place.

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

To engage effectively, each partner must calculate what arrangements hinder and assist fruitful engagement.

In Kent, as well as the essential primary stakeholders, a favourably oriented public sector and a less clearly committed HE sector, it is ever more necessary to involve also the private sector – business, finance, industry including SMEs – and the third, voluntary or non-governmental sector on which a ‘smaller-State Big Society’ relies.

A set of practical steps is needed to achieve this. We advise the following:

For the Kent region as a whole

Create a multi-stakeholder Regional Coordinating Group for PURE

Build a wider Forum, enabling stakeholders to sustain momentum, share examples of good practice, and pursue collaborative working and funding opportunities, with an initial conference day in 2011

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

Following the separate meetings in May 2010, bring the two main sectors together in a full three-day CDG schedule, and include civil organisations, social and cultural organisations and the business sector

Include the colleges of further education with their key role in skills development.

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

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

Internationalism unavoidable especially given Kent’s location, should be strengthened in partnership. Kent has Kent Brussels House; the University of Kent has a campus in Brussels. French Nord-Pas de Calais and the Flemish region in Belgium are close, with good PASCAL and PURE contacts; Nordic links are also strong.

For the universities

Universities must be plugged in closer to the local community and economy. Employers and universities need to consult each other about future employment challenges, and plan for graduates not yet to be found on the labour market.

The University of Kent should balance its international and pure research focus with relating more to the people and needs of Kent. The three universities should try to collaborate and engage, in deliberate complementary ways, with the needs of the region.

Christchurch does relate to the Kent public sector, injecting academic support into projects. Its community-based work involves lifelong learning and community regeneration, with pro-active planning in chosen professional areas. The University for the Creative Arts should find meaning in its campus localities; the creative industries are a fast growing priority for further development, generating new jobs and aiding graduate retention.

Some in the universities question the validity and desirability of the 'knowledge economy' and of 'social capital'. More discussion is needed, with self-evaluation and monitoring benchmarking. Clear university leadership is required, with arrangements and reward systems 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 universities, which are few in number and diverse in character, to consult and collaborate.

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

The work of many projects disappears with the end of the contract. The slow pace of take-up in Kent means that a key indicator for the near future will be sustainable formal linkages, underpinned by immediately important and beneficial time-bounded projects through which the shared gains of engagement are seen.

We advise Kent to seek every possible means to continue working through PURE in 2011 as if that were its 2nd year of involvement, following steps set out in the PURE strategy as particularised in section D above.

This might include revisiting the action plan drafted in 2009, notably:

HEIs' contribute to higher level skills and the development of policy options

Increased linkages of the research of Kent-based HEIs with local economic policy development

Kent's place in the wider impact of Thames Gateway developments [and the new post-Election context including changes to greater London].

Strategic development partnerships with other PURE regions

Broadening co-operative working between HEI's, regional government and private and voluntary sectors for a sustainable economic base.

Responding practically to these challenges in the tough new political and resource environment means building, from a dedicated Kent PURE network or Regional Coordinating Group, a continuing forum, with related mechanisms for working together. For both the region and its HEIs, this will be the first tangible measure of productive and sustainable effort.