

Partnering for Place: A Catalyst for Levelling Up and Innovation

Exploring Partnership Quality between Public Sector and Higher Education Institutions in the Liverpool City Region from an Executive’s perspective.

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Literature Review

The literature review discusses the critical role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in regional development and public sector partnerships, particularly within the framework of the UK government's 'Levelling Up' policy (2024). This policy emphasises **place-based partnerships to address regional disparities and drive innovation**, with a focus on areas like the Liverpool City Region. The policy identifies the **Research and Development (R&D) sector as pivotal for achieving significant growth targets by 2030**, aiming to stimulate innovation and productivity beyond the South East. Additionally, it highlights the role of educational institutions in improving primary education standards and enhancing **regional skills through high-quality training collaborations with local employers and educational providers**. Universities like Liverpool John Moores are seen as essential in reducing health disparities and improving regional well-being through local health research and skilled professional development.

Benneworth and Osborne (2014) discuss university engagement, categorising various activities and highlighting the need for **universities to prioritise community engagement within their core missions**. They call for government support to enhance knowledge transfer, skill development, and innovation. Rodríguez-Pose and Wilkie (2017) discuss the shift towards **decentralised governance, which empowers local authorities to implement tailored economic development strategies**. They stress the importance of effective place-based strategies, while also noting challenges like implementation scale and coordination. Successful strategies require collaboration between local governments and universities, with a focus on strategic planning that connects local economies and stakeholders. Key themes include the role of HEIs as knowledge hubs and mechanisms for knowledge exchange, as discussed by Perkmann et al. (2013), and the interaction between academia, industry, and government in driving innovation, highlighted by the Triple Helix Model (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). The Engaged Scholar approach (Boyer, 1990) also underscores the importance of HEIs in solving societal problems through strategic partnerships.

Methodology

This research employs a **qualitative approach to explore the dynamics of partnerships** between the public sector and higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Liverpool City Region. An **opportunity sampling technique** will target executive leaders, the most senior individuals focusing on strategic issues and institutional performance, to gather in-depth, nuanced perspectives. Data will be collected through **online semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders** from both the public sector and HEIs, examining their views on partnership quality, collaboration drivers, challenges, barriers, and the impact on regional levelling up and innovation. Interview questions will address themes such as **the challenges of community engagement, examples of good practice in university engagement with socially excluded communities, the influence of regulatory frameworks, and strategies to enhance university-community collaboration**, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of executive perspectives on fostering regional development and innovation through public sector partnerships.

Study Aims

1. To assess the current **state of partnerships between the public sector and HEIs in the Liverpool City Region** from the perspective of executive leadership.
2. To identify the drivers that contribute to **effective collaboration for levelling up** and innovation.
3. To explore the executive leadership perspective on **impact of these partnerships on regional development** and community engagement.
4. To provide executive leadership recommendations for **enhancing partnership quality and maximising their contribution** to the levelling up agenda and innovation initiatives.

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Background

The Liverpool City Region (LCR) seeks to stand as a vibrant hub of economic and cultural activity, yet faces persistent challenges in achieving equitable growth and innovation across its communities. The vision of the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) is to foster a thriving, inclusive region (LCRCA, Social Value Framework, 2023) where all residents can benefit from economic opportunities and societal progress. One key aspect of realising this vision is the quality of partnerships formed between the public sector and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). HEIs stimulate and contribute to the regional economy through job creation, attracting investments, and fostering entrepreneurship (Goldstein & Renault, 2004) and play a pivotal role in driving innovation, economic development, and social mobility.

Expected Outcomes

This research aims to elucidate the dynamics of partnerships between the public sector and HEIs in the Liverpool City Region, identifying factors that enhance or hinder effective collaboration. The findings will detail the impact of these partnerships on executive leaders, levelling up agendas, and innovation, providing practical recommendations to improve partnership quality and executive leadership contributions to regional development. The study's outcomes will significantly inform policy-making, strategic planning, and practice within the region and beyond, helping decision-makers optimise resources, leverage strengths, and address challenges to achieve inclusive growth and innovation. Additionally, the research will contribute to the broader discourse on partnership governance and regional development, offering insights relevant to other UK regions facing similar challenges.

