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Mutualising the university: Achieving community impact through an ecosystem

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Abstract   Public dissatisfaction with academic research, coupled with the rising costs of higher education (HE) and reduced government funding, are forcing academics to convince society of the benefits of their research. This article argues that pressures on higher education institutions (HEIs) in a market model create a need to be responsive to students and employers, and to demonstrate institutional impact. However, the assessment of this impact tends to be based on quantifiable data, statistics, etc. of the kind which work well for natural sciences, but pose challenges for social sciences. Thus, areas of impact are often overlooked which may be more immediate in their effect, and deliver benefits which go beyond those claimed for the current impact model. They derive from activities that involve formal learning in the curriculum, pre-labour market entry and executive education; informal extra-curricular activities; organisational benefit generated by individual students' activities and by the co-creation of knowledge in jointly tailored programmes; a range of enterprise activities supporting student innovation and creativity; and public engagement, creating a space for debate and the exchange of views. Recognising this broad nature of impact across a range of contexts, the authors of this article suggest two mechanisms which might be helpful in thinking about identifying wider impact. The first, *mutuality*, involves co-operation between HEIs and their communities in a series of relationships, reaching beyond the transactional. The second, the development of an HEI-centred *ecosystem* – an intentional collaborative community –, provides a vehicle which harnesses synergy to enhance impact on a set of stakeholders across a variety of dimensions. The authors describe the characteristics of an ecosystem developed for an HEI in the United Kingdom (UK).

Keywords   impact; mutuality; ecosystem; engagement; employability; stakeholders

Résumé   Mutualiser l'université : exercer un impact sur la collectivité via un écosystème – Le mécontentement général envers la recherche universitaire, auquel s'ajoutent les frais croissants de l'enseignement supérieur et la réduction du financement public, contraint aujourd'hui les chercheurs à convaincre la société du bien-fondé de leurs travaux. Les auteurs de cet article constatent que les pressions exercées sur les institutions d'enseignement supérieur dans un modèle de marché créent la nécessité d'être réactif envers les étudiants et les employeurs, et de démontrer l'impact de l'institution. L'évaluation de cet impact a néanmoins tendance à reposer sur des données quantifiables, des statistiques et autres, qui par nature s'appliquent aisément aux sciences naturelles, mais posent des défis pour les sciences sociales. Certains domaines d'impact sont ainsi fréquemment négligés, qui éventuellement ont un effet plus immédiat et apportent des avantages dépassant ceux déclarés pour le modèle de marché. Ils découlent de facteurs variés : activités impliquant l'apprentissage formel dans le cadre du programme d'études, entrée anticipée sur le marché du travail avant l'activité professionnelle, et formation continue des cadres ; activités informelles hors programme ; avantage organisationnel généré par les activités individuelles des étudiants et par la cocréation de connaissances dans des programmes élaborés en commun ; activités entrepreneuriales favorisant l'innovation et la créativité chez les étudiants ; enfin engagement public créant un espace de débat et d'échange. Tenant compte de cette grande diversité d'impacts dans de nombreux contextes, les auteurs de l'article proposent deux mécanismes susceptibles de faciliter la réflexion sur l'identification d'un impact plus vaste. Le premier de ces mécanismes, à savoir la mutualité, implique une coopération entre les institutions d'enseignement supérieur et leurs collectivités, à travers un

ensemble de relations dépassant le niveau transactionnel. Le second, qui consiste en l'élaboration d'un écosystème centré sur l'institution – ou communauté volontaire de collaboration –, fournit un vecteur qui capte la synergie et renforce l'impact sur un ensemble d'acteurs dans une grande variété de dimensions. Les auteurs décrivent les caractéristiques d'un écosystème élaboré pour une institution d'enseignement supérieur au Royaume-Uni de Grande-Bretagne.

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Introduction

Drawing on our own experiences in a metropolitan, research-intensive higher education institution (HEI) in the United Kingdom (UK), we argue in this article that, in contrast to the current emphasis on marketisation in UK higher education (HE), a strategy based on mutualisation and the development of a HEI-centred ecosystem[1] may be a more effective response to today's challenges of keeping a HEI up and running. Such a strategy draws together different elements of institutional practice, creating a system in which interconnectedness and interdependency contribute to an impact which is broader and more effective than that offered by the dominant knowledge transfer model.

This article first outlines the problems HEIs face in demonstrating impact beyond the traditional metrics, and argues that the nature of impact has often been too narrowly cast. The focus of the impact debate, perhaps as a result of the expansion HE and therefore of research and publications, has been on the impact deriving from research. Public dissatisfaction with academic research, coupled with the rising costs of HE and reduced government funding, are pressuring academics to demonstrate how their research benefits society (Niederman et al. 2015). Mats Alvesson et al. argue that there is

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[1] "Mutualisation" or "mutuality" views people as partners rather than users, emphasising cooperation and high-trust relationships. An "ecosystem", in this context, refers to a complex relationship between interconnected elements of an organisation and its environment. These concepts are discussed in more detail in the course of our argument.

an enduring disconnection between the generation and dissemination of knowledge in social science and the pressing needs of a society facing major challenges (Alvesson et al. 2017, p. 5),

and that any impact that is valued is

acclaimed for its ability to open up new markets, new consumerist attractions, and new wealth-creating opportunities for business – enhancing the benefits of the few with little regard for the well-being of the many (ibid., p. 34).

Such a perspective, which links research impact with private good, coupled with the current emphasis on the private economic benefits of HE, may act to constrain the exploration of the range of impacts that HEIs might have on their stakeholders. It inhibits the development of a holistic perspective on impacts, and excludes consideration of the wider social and public benefits offered by HEIs. Yet, some of the environmental changes that currently afflict HE may be characterised as pushing institutions towards *mutuality*. In contrast to the individualism and competitiveness of the market, mutuality involves co-operation between HEIs and their communities in a series of relationships "marked by mutual positive regard, trust and active engagement on both sides" (Dobrow et al. 2012, p. 214). This increase in mutuality can be enacted by the development of an *ecosystem* as a way in which some institutions may develop a more holistic impact strategy.

The higher education environment

Changes in the economic context and in participation rates have affected the global HE environment. Higher education has become more of a trans-national business, adopting an industrial focus. Maren Elfert points out that

the dominant purpose of learning is presented by OECD [the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] as the acquisition of skills and competencies to meet labour market needs in the broader context of a competitive knowledge society (Elfert 2015, p. 95).

As in many jurisdictions, HE in the UK has seen a major policy shift away from being viewed as a public good towards being regarded as a private benefit designed to enhance individual returns, best delivered through the creation of a market model. Mike Neary claims that legislation has confirmed the role of the university as "a trader and supplier of educational services to the student in what amounts to a direct, individual contractual relationship" (Neary

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2016, p. 690). The dominance of the market discourse, and the implementation of policies which are predicated on the assumption of a market model, have influenced the practices of the HE sector, leading to concern regarding the role of HE more generally:

> With the degree of marketisation seen in many HEIs, students and the institutions they attend look only to satisfy a consumer culture which negates even the possibility that higher education changes the individual's outlook. Instead many HEIs prepare the student for a life of consumption by obtaining a well-paid job: a mission of confirmation rather than transformation (Molesworth et al. 2009, p. 278).

Indeed, Michael Tomlinson points out that students are encouraged to view the value of their HE experience as a form of individual human capital creation, and that equity policies, such as widening participation, "largely co-exist alongside a neoliberal ethic of heightened student market rationality and self-interest" (Tomlinson 2018, p. 3). Such concepts do little to indicate the concept of mutual exchange, which is often seen as being at the heart of the HE student experience, or to help students and their communities negotiate an uncertain future.

In a market model, it is claimed that adopting a customer-led focus is instrumental in improving performance. In an HE context, this perspective has been expressed in the UK through the requirement to respond to the student as consumer with an emphasis on the provision of information, student choice, and the opening up of the HE "market" to private providers. The development of the latter has been the subject of strong criticism. Pointing out that new private HE providers have no requirement to produce new knowledge or support public debate, John Holmwood et al. state that, by consequence,

> low cost, low-quality provision will emerge as a major sector alongside a high-cost, high quality sector made up of a minority of established dominant universities derived from the existing elite institutions (Holmwood et al. 2016, p. 6).

This may have an adverse effect on social mobility as more privately-educated pupils enter academically-selective institutions*,* whereas local and regional HEIs are most successful in providing wider access to HE (Holmwood et al. 2016). In addition, the case is made that

> there is a risk that if the definition of good teaching is focused solely on service delivery and economic returns, students from less well-off backgrounds, with less experience of higher education cultures and who may have experienced social marginalisation – and who are thereby potentially less powerful and informed as consumers – may be offered a less rich experience and emerge with lower levels of social capital (Rammell 2016, p. 35).

Pooja Kumari, in a report for the UK Higher Education Commission (Kumari 2017), refers to the existence of "stripped back" provision with "no frills", in which lower-cost HE can mean no student access to university facilities such as libraries or information technology, even where an HEI validates the courses concerned. Moreover, as Gerbrand Tholen points out, the adoption of market rules has meant that the state no longer seeks to provide a "level playing field", with the result that, as more graduates enter the labour market,

> those who can mobilise material, cultural and social capital alongside educational credentials, in order to obtain advantage, will ultimately win desirable positions (Tholen 2017, p. 1072).

The case has therefore been made that "the [UK] Government is systematically applying the market to HE in the name of a 'knowledge economy' that no longer provides inclusive economic growth" and without much intention to reduce inequalities overall (Holmwood et al. 2016, p. 13).

It appears that little consideration has been given to the longer-term effect of emphasising HE as being of value solely in terms of the labour market, and of taking a purely individualistic approach to any benefits HE offers. Tomlinson (2018) points out that the current discourse neglects the value of HE as a transformative experience. More generally, the negative effects on wider society, which may result from a total disregard of the collective, have not been addressed. Bill Rammell (2016) makes the case that the current over-emphasis on competition and marketisation in UK higher education adversely affects the extent to which institutions can act to address issues of more general public interest and to deliver public benefit. An example he puts forward is that of the persistent gap in attainment between different social groupings, where inter-institutional competition based on measurement of such elements as entry qualifications and retention rates leads to some institutions' disinclination to engage with the active widening of access to disadvantaged groups.

It has been argued that, in an increasingly complex society with greater social inequalities, the role of public universities in providing employment to their local community and in contributing to a vibrant local culture becomes of growing importance (Holmwood et al. 2016). Particularly when located in relatively deprived areas, in contexts where communities are often drained of resources, HEIs can put their social and institutional power to use in helping to address societal power disparity by committing themselves to active civic engagement (Connolly 2014). With the reduction of state involvement in many areas due to the impact of the 2008/2009 recession, the UK Government has emphasised the importance of

volunteering, highlighting the need for a "vibrant civil society" which will support the creation of "pro-social norms" (Conservative Party 2008, p .6). It is widely recognised that, in a highly individualised society, the mobilisation of citizens for common purposes is a necessary function of maintaining any concept of the collective and common good (Birchall 2008). Requiring HEIs to become producers of individuals who are eager to maximise the financial returns on their degrees in the labour market overlooks the fact that HEIs are developing not just employees but also citizens, and that the public has a legitimate interest in the type of graduate emerging from HEIs (Rammell 2016). Complex social issues and widening inequality cannot be effectively addressed using a market model for HE – in such a context it is the public role of HE which would appear to be particularly important.

These changes necessitate that HEIs consider their *impact* on their environments more widely. Yet, the existing focus on the impact of research only is not effective for many HEIs, or for their students and other stakeholders. A broader, more socially relevant concept of impact is required, which encompasses the full range of HEI activities and adopts a more outward-looking approach.

Impact

Impact is about making a difference. HEI activities tend to be grouped into research, teaching and *third mission* engagement activities,[2] with varying emphases on these activities according to type of institution. Yet, as Alvesson et al. point out, "research, especially quantifiable outputs and publications in the right journals, has emerged as the key to enhanced individual and institutional status and reputations" (Alvesson et al. 2017, p. 13). The explosion in publishable research outputs may have been a factor in the decision to introduce a requirement in the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF),[3] which assesses the quality of research undertaken by HEIs and influences the amount of government funding received, that HEIs demonstrate impact. Such impact might be the measurable effect of either a direct intervention or via the researcher to a recipient organisation. This definition of impact relates to research undertaken by the HEI impacting outside academia.

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[2] The term "third mission" refers to activities undertaken by HEIs to support the application of knowledge to the social and economic benefit of society.
[3] The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the UK's system for assessing the excellence of research in higher education institutions. According to its own website. "three distinct elements are assessed: the *quality* of outputs (e.g. publications, performances, and exhibitions), their *impact* beyond academia, and the *environment* that supports research (http://www.ref.ac.uk/about/whatref/ [accessed 23 July 2018].).

The models of impact assessment that tend to be used are often based on those that work well for subjects such as natural or *hard* sciences, but these models pose challenges for researchers in the social sciences. Udo Steffens and Michael Grote (2016) of the Frankfurt School[4] refer to the over-ambitious *expectations of academic research*. In addition, the overall emphasis on the market model in HE has led to a considerable increase in the emphasis on business engagement, rather than on the more diverse engagement with communities (Benneworth and Osborne 2014).

Recognising the wider social production of knowledge, Michael Gibbons et al. (1994) distinguished between knowledge produced inside academia and that within other contexts, defining the former as Mode 1 knowledge and the latter as Mode 2 knowledge (knowledge produced in the context of its application). As Jawad Syed at al. explain, "Mode 1 knowledge is the traditional, discipline-based largely theoretical work aimed at understanding how the world works, while Mode 2 knowledge is trans-disciplinary and is concerned with getting things to work in practice" (Syed et al. 2009, p. 72). The university preference for Mode 1 knowledge means that,

> much … academic research remains founded on issues of experimental design derived from the hard sciences, which becomes the driving force in selecting research questions rather than the needs of the practitioners (ibid., p. 77).

The research debate is often couched in terms of achieving either rigour or relevance. However, as Alvesson et al. (2017) point out, "The demand for … a particular version of rigour is one that accounts for the continuing preponderance of papers based on quantitative methodologies", in which rigour is demonstrated through the use of "sophisticated, but routine, statistics" (Alvesson et al. 2017, p. 30). The audience for such publications is fellow academics rather than members of the wider community.

Recently, especially in Europe, efforts and funding have been put into supporting public engagement in research. For example, the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) for the Public Engagement with Research and Research Engagement with Society (PERARES)[5] funded a project co-ordinated by the University of Groningen Science Shop with the aim of "strengthen[ing] public engagement in research through involving researchers and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the formulation of research agendas and the

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[4] The Frankfurt School of Finance and Management is a leading Business School in Germany.
[5] The European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) for the Public Engagement with Research and Research Engagement with Society (PERARES) ran from 2010 to 2014 and involved 28 partners from 17 different countries.

research process" (Benneworth and Osborne 2014, p. 225). In 2011, the UK Research Councils put out a call to fund eight "Public Engagement with Research" catalysts for three years aimed at "embedding a culture within universities where public engagement with research is strategically planned, systematically assessed, valued and recognised" (Grand et al. 2015, p. 4). However, David Weerts and Lorilee Sandmann (2010) argue that adoption of community engagement with research is *"uneven"* and research universities are slower to implement engagement – success in advancing traditional forms of scholarship tends to generate a devaluation of community work. In addition, Ann Grand et al. (2015) find indications that "the language and rhetoric of engagement is being operationalized in specific and quite conservative ways", often as the transmission of knowledge and expertise from the university to the public (Grand et al. 2015, p. 10). They state that, "[t]he most common definitions of 'public engagement with research' focused on the dissemination, communication or presentation of research", in which communication tends to be one-way (ibid., p. 10). This is supported by David Mathews, who claims that few university-community initiatives

> focused on building relationships with community, much less on projects that increased the civic capacity of these organizations and the individuals they served (Mathews 2012, p. 99).

There is a sense that the community is frequently used as a source of data, and that, although

> more applied (or relevant) research may bring in much needed funding for institutions that are not capable of securing large-scale [research] grants, [this] also forces them to sacrifice the traditional notions of what kinds of science are performed within universities (Jongbloed et al. 2008, p. 316).

Widening the parameters of impact beyond the area of research, Cristina Escrigas et al. (2013) argue that a significant recent trend in HE is the growth of the theory and practice of engagement and the consideration of knowledge in terms of its social impact. However, although the term "engagement" is widely used in the literature, international or even national approaches to engagement activity are not uniform. Paul Benneworth and Michael Osborne (2014) point out that across Europe even formal requirements are not consistent. For example, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden have a clear legal duty for societal engagement but are not well financed, whereas the UK has no legal duty but engagement activities are well-funded. In addition, in the UK, one measure of successful "engagement" is the effective recruitment of students from socially disadvantaged groups (defined as "widening

participation"), which is an indirect way of engaging with communities. When surveying engagement activities in Europe, Benneworth and Osborne (2014) highlight a number of valuable, high-impact developments. For example, a new campus created in one of the poorest areas in England includes a cultural centre and arts incubation units and has helped regenerate the area. However, they also refer to HEIs' "detached benevolence", emphasising that societal engagement is voluntary or marginalised as an activity in universities, and that business engagement, which can generate income, has become the more important engagement activity (Benneworth and Osborne 2014).

Other engagement activities which involve students going into the community are typically on a smaller scale. *Service learning*[6] is much less widespread in much of the rest of the world compared to North America. There are individual "best practice" approaches – for example, at the National University of Ireland (Maynooth), where students can gain credit for service learning (Connolly 2014), and the University of Bedford's Refugee Legal Assistance Project (Rammell 2016) – but these are exceptions. As Brid Connolly (2014) points out, service learning can promote charity-oriented volunteering, a form of "noblesse oblige" help which potentially has the effect of reinforcing power differentials in the community. In addition, John Batchelor has argued that conventional volunteering "concentrates too much on people's problems, rather than on their abilities" (Batchelor 2003, p. 255). This is consistent with the claim made by Weerts and Sandmann (2010), that service learning and outreach work are typically uni-directional approaches to delivering knowledge and service to the public. This view is reinforced by the fact that the literature on community–HEI engagement is drawn largely from the HEIs' perspective (Escrigas et al. 2013).

When discussing engagement, Frank Fear and Laurilee Saunders (2016) claim that the important elements of effective engagement are: respectfulness, collaboration and mutuality with an emphasis on the values of community. Drawing on the concept of "*engagement*", we propose that a different, more accommodating model of impact is required. It needs to be one which recognises the importance of a wider range of HEI activities and which considers impact as encompassing all aspects of teaching, locality impact and public engagement, together with the mutual impact of stakeholders upon all others. An approach to engagement is required which echoes the co-operative model and challenges the current consumer model of HE with a model based on social solidarity (Neary 2016).

Mutuality

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[6] The term "service learning" refers to the opportunity for students to volunteer in the community and to use that experience as the basis for learning.

In contrast to the dominant market ideology which underpins current HE practice, this article argues that, for public HEIs, the most effective response to current challenges should be neither privatisation nor further marketisation, but a form of *mutualisation*, or at least the recognition of some characteristics of mutuality. A move towards mutuality might help address some of the issues identified and is reinforced by potential lessons from business models in sectors affected by disruptive technologies and in the models used by professional service firms. The core of many such models is a move from short-term commitment to a long-term engagement; in this scenario, students and others become part of the community, as co-creators of knowledge and networks.

In *Mutualising the State*, Ed Mayo and Henrietta Moore argue that citizens can play a key role in the design and delivery of services, and this concept of mutuality views people as partners rather than as users. They claim that organisations with close co-operation with or control by key stakeholders are more efficient and responsive, setting mutuality "in the context not only of the reform of public services, but of the wider questions of the renewal of the democratic state" (Mayo and Moore 2001, p. 9). Mutuality is about more than participation – the latter is not unusual in the HEI context. However, Liberversity (2011) claims that many HEIs strive for self-sufficiency, typically through employing students or using volunteers to maintain the institution. They see a danger here, in that such a focus on co-operation, volunteerism, and even peer-teaching may result in a closed system. In addition, in an individualised context, it is easy for academia to regard the community as a resource. *A Stronger Society* (Conservative Party 2008) refers to the emergence of "episodic" volunteering, which is less committed and more casual, and which may reflect the use of volunteering to enhance career prospects. Connolly (2014) points out that,

> reaching out to the community … has to be underpinned with real mutuality, and [the recognition] that civil society does not exist simply to enhance the careers of academics or HEI students (Connolly 2014, p. 11).

Further, Escrigas et al. argue that genuine community engagement takes the form of a

> collaboration between [the] university and a targeted community … for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity (Escrigas et al. 2013, p. xxv).

Offering a contrast to the established model of engagement and participation which favours the HEI, this approach provides an opportunity for mutuality. "New mutualism", a term first used by Peter Kellner in a pamphlet for the British Co-operative Party (Kellner 1998), argues that, "mutualist public policy would favour the dispersal of power, and would take a pragmatic view of the question of ownership, espousing neither the free market nor state ownership, but cooperation and high trust relationships" (Birchall 2008, p. 8). Johnston Birchall (2008) claims that the new mutualism "tends to adopt a multi-stakeholding principle, accepting that more than one category of person benefits from the mutual" (ibid., p. 6). The definition of what constitutes impact in such a context needs to be considerably broader than that typically currently adopted in HE. If impact is a many-to-many stakeholder game across all HEI activities, then a way of thinking about impact is required that encompasses the needs of many, diverse actors. HEIs need to develop ways in which mutuality can be harnessed within the institution at the heart of stakeholder interactions. One model for this is the *ecosystem*. Ecosystems direct HEIs to focus on the problems faced by their stakeholders and to become better embedded within their stakeholder contexts. Embedding enhances the ability to deliver impact.

Ecosystems

As W. James Jacob et al. explain, HEIs are "employers and customers as well as suppliers of goods and services. Their staff and student expenditure have a direct effect on income and employment in the cities and regions" (Jacob et al. 2015, p. 4). HEIs are, therefore, important organisations in their particular context, and could, thus, gain insight from organisational forms applied elsewhere. Organisations, somewhat belatedly, have discovered that they cannot exist in isolation. Most innovations are complementary, and these complementary advances often co-evolve across organisational and professional boundaries. Frequently, innovations are trans-disciplinary, and no individual organisation has all the specialised knowledge and managerial resources necessary for the whole system. The result is the development of ecosystems. Business ecosystems are intentional communities of economic actors whose individual activities share, to some extent, the fate of the whole community. A business ecosystem is a collaboration that seeks to create a system of complementary capabilities and organisations. It provides a "space" for business opportunity and the ecosystem is a co-operative approach to developing businesses within that space.

The development of an ecosystem fits with Eric Cornuel's (2007) view that the future of HEIs will involve partnerships and alliances that will facilitate economies of scale and better opportunities for staff and students; with learning becoming more "real world". The current customer-led perspective on HE, which claims to be instrumental in improving performance and competitiveness, may inhibit change. Being customer-led involves meeting customers' expressed needs, which could be seen as short-term and reactive. By contrast, according to Jeffrey Bailey and Byron Dangerfield (2000), a more effective market orientation is concerned with anticipating customers' current, future, expressed and latent needs, involving a longer term focus and more innovation. HEIs' external stakeholders – their "customers" such as businesses and community organisations – need to more actively explain their requirements to the sector, and to engage in discussions relating to areas ranging from course development to shaping policy. In the UK, the development of degree apprenticeships may force employers to engage more with HE and to have a greater input into the curriculum (Powell and Walsh 2018). Yet, there is no such curriculum requirement for engagement with the wider community. In the next section of this article, we present the experience of one UK HEI, outlining how using mutuality as a lens through which to explore impact and ecosystems as a potential delivery mechanism for impact activities can lead to a more encompassing approach.

The experience of Birkbeck College, University of London

Birkbeck is a broad-based, small, research-intensive institution that is a member of the federated University of London. It researches and teaches in science, arts, social sciences, law, and business, with around 40 per cent of its activity based in its School of Business, Economics and Informatics. Birkbeck is ranked in the top 1 per cent of global HEIs for research and in the top 30 in the UK. The College was established by George Birkbeck in 1823, with a commitment to educate working Londoners. For most of its 195-year history Birkbeck has specialised in part-time, evening courses for mature students, 85 per cent of whom are employed while they study. As a lifelong learning institution in the metropolitan context of London, the College has delivered a rich and distinctive classroom experience to students, exposing them to peers from a wide range of backgrounds. As Leni Oglesby points out, "Lifelong learning cannot be easily categorised: a programme which is a first HE step for one student is a vocational refresher course for another, and an interesting leisure pursuit for a third" (Oglesby 2007, p. 12). The experience offered in such a context provides a strong

contrast to that provided in more conventional HEIs with predominantly full-time students. However, the impact of many of the environmental forces identified earlier, especially changes to funding which led to substantial increases in undergraduate fees, has resulted in a decline in Birkbeck's traditional intake of part-time students. More generally, there is a current crisis in widening participation in the UK with around 143,000 fewer part-time HE students studying than five years earlier (Holmwood et al. 2016). It is clear that many older UK students do not find higher fees supported by access to loans to be an attractive proposition.

Birkbeck has, therefore, extended the opportunity for evening study to full-time students, with the result that in many disciplines full-time recruitment now includes younger undergraduates whose characteristics may be substantially different from the College's traditional student body. To counter the threat that this would soon alter the nature of the institution, Birkbeck needed to develop a strategy which was based on its existing strengths. Such an offering held the potential of attracting atypical full-time undergraduates – those more similar to Birkbeck's traditional student cohort. The institution needed to ensure that it built on its unique history to enhance the student experience, to develop employment and employability skills, and to engage better with practice – in short, to deliver impact across a variety of contexts. The aim was to enable a Birkbeck qualification to be more than a "ticket" for an immediate purpose, instead creating a kind of "lifetime membership".

As an institution with a dual commitment – to excellence in research and to widening access to HE for working Londoners – Birkbeck has a long tradition of making HE available to those who need to work through the delivery of the HE curriculum via evening classes. This model has been maintained in a context which is in flux. Recently, the push towards a market model for UK higher education, as expressed through government policy, has meant that the College has needed to develop sustainable competitive advantage. The three most important elements of differentiation in HE are (1) by *context* (location and regional links); (2) by *content* (expertise of academic staff); and (3) by *process* (educational philosophy and delivery). We argue here that it is through building on the elements of context and process that some sustainability can be achieved for Birkbeck.

The institution's distinctive educational philosophy and its long tradition of providing flexible learning have meant that the institution has developed a particular perspective on its students. With its mission to provide access to HE for working Londoners, Birkbeck recognises that "no more than a small fraction of students in institutions would be where they are if there were no significance for their future careers in what they hear and read, and it is a

mistake to suppose that there is anything discreditable in this" (Lionel Robbins, cited in Willetts 2013, p. 15). The College is therefore committed to providing valuable and effective personal and professional development. However, it does not view social and economic goals as contradictory, and sees itself as offering much more than that. Birkbeck's tradition as a lifelong learning institution involves a commitment to educating individuals as persons in the world, not just as students. It is appreciated that "contemporary life is not about a linear progression through societally ordered stages" (Billett 2010, p. 410), and that lifelong learners actively construct their own knowledge, finding resources "as and when they need them in response to the changing circumstances of life and work" (Knights 2007, p. 3). The College recognises that, in addition to helping students develop work-related skills, HE is "about providing access to and updating of all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and understanding through life" (Osborne 2007, p. 36). Birkbeck therefore has strength in embracing the skills and interests of *the whole person over time*, not just the "person as student". The development of an ecosystem reinforces and embeds many of the activities and attitudes already existing in the College.

An ecosystem relies on mutuality and shared goals. Birkbeck, as is the case with other institutions, has a variety of stakeholders (although such a scale of part-time lecturing staff is rare), but for the College the key differentiator is (paradoxically) the similarity of those stakeholders. This similarity, combined with a strong element of *co-location*,[7] builds scale and commonality of interests. In many UK HEIs it is easy to differentiate stakeholders: undergraduates are young, postgraduates are older and predominantly from overseas, staff are full-time and alumni are geographically distant. This is different at Birkbeck – here, students are diverse, age does not categorise them, many staff are full-time but there are a substantial number of visiting staff, and alumni are close by. Further, they may be members of multiple stakeholder groups – postgraduates may teach, visiting staff may be alumni etc. An ecosystem exploits and adds value to this similarity. Not all relationships are internal-to-external (the College to alumni, for example), some may be internal-to-internal (as in internal internships for human resource management students), while in a good, self-sustaining ecosystem some connections will be external-to-external (alumni seeking career coaching from visiting staff, for instance).

A consequence of location is that Birkbeck has a large alumni population – many local, London-based, most already working, who are older than average upon graduation. For example, the School of Business, Economics and Informatics has active contact with 11,068

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[7] The term "co-location", in this context, refers to an enduring relationship based on proximity.

alumni, of whom 5,148 have London postal addresses and a further 2,608 are resident in the south east of England. Similarly, the College has active interactions with over 50,000 alumni.[8] This is unusual. Graduates of non-metropolis institutions tend to move to large cities, and high-quality institutions not catering to mature, working students have more mobile alumni, with many returning overseas. Birkbeck's alumni demographics, allied with its location, means that the College can be in physical contact with a higher proportion of its alumni than many competitors. It can, therefore, engage with them or provide services in ways that most other *almae matres* cannot. Similarly, other stakeholders, for example, students who are working Londoners, and particularly visiting staff (often working professionals and who number close to 1,000 across the College) are local to Birkbeck.

Birkbeck alumni are unusual in their willingness to give back to the College. They may not always be the cash-richest, but they are willing to invest time (and emotion) in helping the College – a non-cash endowment fund – *anyone can give money, but the truly supportive give time*. Clearly, non-monetary giving is easier when alumni and institution are located in the same city. However, the mutuality between stakeholders outlined here is based on the belief that "there is actually almost nobody who doesn't have something to offer – and enabling them to offer it can be transformative" (Batchelor 2003, p. 255). This form of mutuality is a "form of community relationship in which people help each other rather than merely helping those in need" (Birchall 2008, p. 11). It captures the *zeitgeist* of the, now perhaps forgotten, "big society" initiative in the UK,[9] and actually gives some substance to the concept that "we are all in this together".

The Birkbeck Engagement, Employability and Employment Ecosystem (B4E)

The Birkbeck experience offers an opportunity for creating rich connections among like-minded peers, and has been enacted through the development of the Birkbeck Engagement, Employability and Employment Ecosystem (B4E). B4E enables deeper, integrated relationships with stakeholders, providing more value for them and for the College, and tying together many of the activities that are currently taking place. Ecosystems engender network effects. Network effects are positive externalities that are generated by membership reaching critical mass and by the possibility of interaction with many other members. The ecosystem aligns Birkbeck with what is happening in the workplace, encompassing entrepreneurship,

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[8] These figures were obtained from the College's unpublished alumni data.
[9] The "big society" initiative was launched by the UK government in 2010. It was designed to encourage greater delegation in running local services to local communities and volunteers.

intrapreneurship[10] and employability. In addition, it enables the institution to engage more deeply with the community, to understand the range of its impacts upon more stakeholders and to enhance impact, delivering it across more dimensions.

There are many Birkbeck stakeholder groups, principally students, academic staff, alumni, visiting staff, employers, partner organisations and professional bodies. Other stakeholder groups such as senior management, governors, unions etc. could also be included – even partners, parents and children of stakeholders. Indeed, recent internal retention research suggests that the influence of "significant others" is key to whether a student succeeds in their studies. Members of each stakeholder category also have a large set of potential roles. One of the keys to the ecosystem is that people may belong to more than one group and that the mapping of groups to roles is one-to-many not one-to-one. It is the co-location – and therefore the clustering of stakeholders, especially alumni and visiting staff, and the large number of "local" students – that enables the ecosystem.

To support and help maintain an ecosystem, Birkbeck needed to become more of a "destination", providing members of the community with reasons to attend and/or engage with the College, such as events, resources or opportunities offered through partnerships. A public intellectual programme, "Be Birkbeck", has been developed, which offers membership to the general public so they can engage with current debates, but which also offers, for instance, business students and alumni access to the criticality of the social sciences and the different perspectives of the arts. It can introduce them to "the notion of democratic accountability of business education and research to public and organizational well-being", which is a concept which remains peripheral in the "prevailing conception of an increasingly commercialised business school" (Syed et al. 2009, p. 79).

In a system of overlapping stakeholder groups it is difficult to clearly differentiate benefits by recipient, but the following overview provides an illustration of the potential for alumni activity within the ecosystem. Alumni may do many things for the institution beyond being a source of donations for endowments. In the area of research, they may host research and enable both research impact and its evidencing. However, in terms of programme design and delivery, and of community engagement, alumni have a wider scope for working with the institution. They can join advisory boards, help with programme development, be visiting lecturers on conventional awards and executive education programmes. Alumni can also enhance the profile of the institution, either through supporting institutional marketing or

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[10] The term *intrapreneurship* refers to a contractual arrangement for those individuals whose innovation is undertaken in the context of an organisation, and who are therefore behaving like entrepreneurs while working within a business.

through acting as an institutional ambassador. Another kind of support are the benefits to students which are offered via alumni engagement with the institution – these can be financial and/or experiential. The provision of prizes and bursaries is an important financial contribution to the College – particularly the latter, as Birkbeck has a high proportion of low-income students, many of whom benefit from the generous bursary programme (40% of part-time undergraduate students are in receipt of a bursary). The experiential benefits offered by alumni to current students include the softer skills development achieved through the hosting of internships or the provision of mentorship, and the access to networks, and sometimes to employment. However, the ecosystem is not uni-directional. Birkbeck can offer its alumni a range of benefits. As a world-leading research institution it can undertake projects, enable access to expertise, and deliver kudos through hosting businesses and partnering with them. As a metropolitan institution, the College can be a customer to local business, deliver training and development to them when required, and provide employees.

Given that the majority of current Birkbeck students are mature and are in work in all sectors of the economy, many of the exchanges outlined above potentially apply to them. Existing activities draw on the synergies outlined, but it is recognised that the breadth and variety of expertise offered by students, visiting staff and alumni is still an under-valued and under-utilised resource. For example, visiting staff usually have membership of formal and informal professional networks in addition to their teaching at Birkbeck. To give an illustration, one set of alumni of the Career Management and Coaching Master's programme, some of whom are visiting staff, provide career counselling/mentoring opportunities to students. Visiting staff who are engaged in professional practice are a valuable teaching resource, but they could be more closely integrated in the delivery of professional services to students and as users of services provided by the College. Engagement with the ecosystem offers an additional reason for visiting staff to teach at Birkbeck and better supports a portfolio career. B4E acts as a community host, an honest broker, and an agora,[11] which is both physical and virtual.

Most institutions deliver a range of options to students to support a rounded experience, but, recognising the necessity of increasing impact of both formal and informal learning, Birkbeck has designed a range of complementary activities to develop their skills, networks and confidence. As Shoshana Dobrow et al. (2012) point out, "trends such as globalization, technological innovations, and changes in organizational structure … make securing developmental assistance from a number of people who span various social spheres more

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[11] An *honest broker* is an impartial mediator; an *agora* is a public open space for debate.

necessary than ever for individuals" (Dobrow et al. 2012, p. 211). Through B4E, the College provides students and alumni with a range of diverse networks, offering them access to the information or resources which can enhance their personal and professional development. This is likely to have particular value for the large proportion of Birkbeck students who come from a widening participation background, and whose access to professional networks would otherwise be limited. More generally, a wide range of interactions with students, staff and alumni – most of whom are local – enables Birkbeck to have a range of ways of engaging with the community.

Through a range of interactions, the Birkbeck experience supports Rammell's claim that "it makes more sense to think about concrete 'publics': multiple constituencies with potentially competing demands, but who each have an interest in higher education" (Rammell 2016, p. 20). He contrasts this approach with the fact that "traditional ideas of 'the public' have in practice meant established interests represented by those with the capacity and resources to represent those interests and to influence decision-makers" (ibid., p. 21). An ecosystem can help equip the neglected "publics" with networking and influencing skills to the benefit of their communities.

Discussion and conclusions

This article argues that pressures on HEIs are creating a need to demonstrate institutional impact. However, what constitutes impact has generally been considered narrowly, focusing largely on research output – with much of that research being delivered to large private sector businesses. Impact, however, goes beyond the impact of research; it includes the impact of research mediated through teaching and through executive education, the impact of teaching on students and their employers, and the impact of other forms of public engagement and enterprise activity. Recognising the broad nature of impact and the extent to which many impact elements are under-valued, this article suggests that two mechanisms are helpful in assisting HEIs in widening the delivering of their impact. The first, mutuality, recognises that the relationship between stakeholders goes beyond the transactional. The second, the development of an HEI-centred ecosystem, is a vehicle for enhancing impact on a set of stakeholders across a variety of dimensions.

The adoption of these approaches includes the recognition that "both formal and informal experiences of HE can significantly enhance student agency and build a variety of capitals, including personal and identity capital" (Tomlinson 2018, p. 10). Mutual exchange

calls for the attribution of value to different kinds of knowledge, and the networking involved in an ecosystem reinforces a move away from a focus on the self-contained individual. In addition, a challenge is provided to market ideology via the criticality which is developed as part of higher learning and which is fundamental in a highly individualised society, where information is freely available yet often of questionable validity, and where people are "confronted with choices more profound than those of consumer 'lifestyle' [*sic*]" (Knights 2007, p. 4). In order to be active citizens, students need to be educated to do more than passively consume information "or sound bites from temporarily fashionable experts" (ibid.). Moreover, the opportunity to be part of local networks can alert members to the value of a collective approach to activity – as Batchelor (2003) points out, "Voting and other kinds of participation emerge out of other kinds of activity for local and personal good" (Batchelor 2003, p. 256). Engagement of this sort is particularly important in a context such as that of Britain, where "volunteering levels are lowest in the most deprived areas where volunteers are needed most" (Conservative Party 2008, p. 20).

The wider public benefits from HE include

> local and regional economic benefit, the professional and civic capabilities of graduates, the knowledge and insight produced by research and the valuable civic functions of universities (Rammell 2016, p. 20).

However, in an HE context where the focus is increasingly on private benefits – either to individual students through increased earnings or to private organisations via research impact – it is easy to overlook the elements of impact which benefit groups as well as individuals and which are not easily measurable. As Oglesby points out,

> The key performance indicators by which we are currently measured and evaluated are not sophisticated enough to measure outputs that stretch into the future and cannot be as neatly categorised as those affecting production at the end of a delineated period of study (Oglesby 2007, p. 10).

Neary (2016) has highlighted the strong synergy between the values of the cooperative movement and those of academia, including a commitment to collaboration, education, independence and concern for community. The development of the B4E ecosystem outlined here recognises the importance of individual personal and professional development, but contextualises this in a way which offers wider benefits to individuals and their community. Moving away from the perspective on university–community engagement, which is based almost exclusively on an HEI perspective, B4E develops an ecology of knowledge framework

which recognises the value of knowledge outside the formal curriculum and the formal processes of the institution. Escrigas et al. (2013) argue for the importance of a *"knowledge democracy"*, claiming that knowledge should be measured through "its capacity to intervene in reality and not just to represent it" (Escrigas et al. 2013, p. xxxiv). Both mutuality and B4E support the notion that "Both 'lifelong education' and 'learning throughout life' … depict a worldview of a democratic society" (Elfert 2015, p. 93).

Yet, however desirable such a model is seen to be, there is a recognition that the current policy context is one that is dominated by a neoliberal agenda, which negatively impacts adult and community education, and which means that "effective and sustained community engagement is difficult to achieve" (Jacob et al. 2015, p. 17). In addition, it is still the case that HEIs' commitment to a strong disciplinary structure, and to the importance of scholarly values and attainment, means that academia tends to be inward-looking, addressing an internal audience through its activities (Jongbloed et al. 2008). Moreover, as Benneworth and Osborne (2014) point out, elite institutions are more concerned to demonstrate their excellence at world class research, addressing issues which are multi-national in nature, rather than designing their research to have relevance for their own local community.

For institutions which do commit to engaging with their communities, there is no "one size fits all" approach or "best practice" model which can be applied in a range of contexts. It is important that any community engagement model adopted builds on an institution's strengths and is consistent with the institution's ethos. Benneworth and Osborne (2014), when exploring the extent of community engagement in the European HE sector, argue that community engagement is still at an "early, peripheral phase", existing on the margins of mainstream HE practice and lacking the policy drivers which would support its easy integration into mainstream practice. It has been pointed out that HEIs need a close relationship with other organisations to achieve a sustainable impact on society (Jacob et al., 2015). This takes time to build, and, if it depends on individual academic staff or students, can lapse when they move on. Moreover, as Escrigas et al. (2013) explain, processes of knowledge production are different inside and outside academia, which makes effective communication difficult due to different discourses. In addition, it has been argued that the tendency of academics to assume that their expert knowledge means that their views should have authority if they are involved in community decision-making can be a serious impediment to collaborative working (Laninga et al. 2011). In order to create effective synergies between HE institutions and their community partners it is necessary to strengthen the view that diversity is an intellectual strength, rather than an administrative nuisance

(Oglesby 2007). Weerts and Sandmann (2010) report that a key indicator of engagement adopted by the US Campus Compact Indicators of Engagement project[12] was the extent to which universities crossed into the community, sharing resources and including community voices in programme design, thereby fostering dialogue related to public problem-solving. Yet, currently in the UK, there is no commonly agreed measure for evaluating such activity, which means that its formal recognition is difficult (Grand et al. 2015).

However, it may be that Birkbeck's ecosystem is more likely to be sustainable than a less coordinated approach to engagement. The model itself positions community engagement as being closely linked to the university's mainstream activities, and builds on existing institutional activities. It is explicitly consistent with the College's mission. Jacob et al. (2015) argue that participation is the single most important factor in sustaining effective community engagement, and that it is often neglected. The emphasis on mutual interaction and dependence which is integral to an ecosystem is likely to support the development of effective communication. Weerts and Sandmann (2010) found that advocates of community engagement were more prominent at urban institutions, and the nature and location of Birkbeck's students, staff and alumni means that relationships may be easier to maintain. The range of relationships which exist in an ecosystem mean that the responsibility of maintaining meaningful external relationships does not lie with single individuals.

Further, Weerts and Sandmann (2010) emphasise the importance of *boundary spanners* [13] in maintaining community–university relationships, arguing that there is a requirement for high expertise and socio-emotional capabilities in such exchanges. In terms of the interface between different organisational discourses, the College's wide range of interactions has alerted it to the fact that colleagues with the highest level of technical expertise may not be most effective at maintaining links with those external to the institution. In addition, the commonalities which exist in different internal communities at Birkbeck may help the exchange of different knowledges and skills, extending this to external communities more effectively. Birkbeck's tradition has enabled a recognition of individuals beyond the "person as student", supporting the recognition of what Mathews (2012) terms "Citizens' resources ... such as commitment and political will", which can be complemented in a community setting by the material and technical resources of the institution (Mathews 2012, p. 98).

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[12] The Indicators of Engagement project (IOEP) was launched in 2002 by a coalition of American colleges and universities called Campus Compact. For more information, see https://compact.org/indicators-of-engagement-project-categories-page/ [accessed 25 July 2018].
[13] A "boundary spanner" crosses organisational boundaries, and can interpret one organisational culture to another.

There is a range of literature (e.g. Fitzgerald et al. 2012; Hall 2009; and Mason O'Connor et al. 2011) which emphasises the increasing importance of community engagement in what is a rapidly changing context for HEIs. As Escrigas et al. (2013) point out,

> A recognition of the capacities and processes of knowledge creation by social actors outside HEIs is key to understanding a transformative role for HEIs (Escrigas et al. 2013, p. xxxv).

There is also a growing need for HEIs to demonstrate their public value, and the current model of research impact cannot easily deliver impact through intervention and engagement. In addition, "It is increasingly recognized that public engagement cannot be simply a one-way street in which universities graciously allow access to their stock of knowledge and expertise" (Rammell 2016, p. 26). Rammell (2016) points out that HEIs have a long tradition of being spaces for public debate and, through engaging with their publics, can set a higher standard for public debate. He argues that, through engagement, HEIs can encourage in individuals "a more developed sense of the value of civil society, and a willingness to make a personal contribution to its functions" (Rammell 2016, p. 33). The commitment to lifelong learning and community engagement "links to the related ideas of social capital and trust and the role played by cooperative and collective learning" in community building (Osborne 2007, p. 36). In contrast to the dominant market perspective, the adoption of a mutuality approach can extend engagement and impact in a way which is relevant to the self-defined needs of individuals and their communities.

Currently it is difficult to effectively demonstrate evidence of such impact, and the general area of HEIs' impact outside of formal research is under-researched. The ecosystem model presented here is drawn from a commercial context and, while it may fit an institution like Birkbeck, it is not certain that it has wider viability across a range of institutional contexts. This could be usefully explored. In addition, for the wider establishment of community engagement as a valued and recognised activity in UK higher education, it is necessary to have commonly agreed impact criteria. The development of such criteria should include measures which are identified as important by the community.

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