

The future of higher education today, series 2

Episode 3: How can universities work with partners to create change? – Transcript

Aaron Porter

Thank you for joining us for The Future of Higher Education Today, the podcast bringing together people to discuss the biggest issues facing universities and higher education. This is a series produced by Universities UK and Advance HE. I'm Aaron Porter, Associate Director (Governance) at Advance HE and I'm your host across this four-episode series focusing on governing and leading change and transformation in the higher education sector.

Our third episode looks at the importance of partnerships in helping institutions define and reach their strategic goals and create meaningful impact on their campuses and with their communities. Today's guests will be talking about how their institutions engage with different stakeholders to address local challenges and add value to students' learning experiences.

Joining us for today's episode, we have Sophie Cloutterbuck, Director of London Engagement at London Metropolitan University.

Sophie Cloutterbuck

Try to co-produce all your work with your partners as well. Rather than coming in as the people that know better, actually the people in the community know a lot. Let's co-produce with them. Let's hear their voices.

Aaron Porter

Gillian Docherty, Chief Commercial Officer at Strathclyde University.

Gillian Docherty

You must look at this as a whole systems approach. So having buoyant businesses or social enterprises or charities or public sector in the area that you're operating will

offer job opportunities for our graduates, will offer investment opportunities for our spin-outs.

Aaron Porter

And Doctor Nia Jones, Dean of Medicine at the North Wales Medical School at Bangor University.

Dr Nia Jones

When I graduated over 20 years ago, the NHS that I started working in, it's very different to the one that they're facing now.

So it's only right that we're training them differently, collaboratively. We want to be creative and we want a leadership and an organisation, I think, culture that values that

Aaron Porter

I'm going to kick-off with a very general question for the three of you in turn. I wonder if you could just say a little bit about the initiative that you're working on, what its priorities are and how you've gone about delivering on what you are looking to achieve. And perhaps I'll start with Sophie first.

Sophie Cloutterbuck

Thanks very much, Aaron. So today I'm talking about our civic and community strategy at the university and the London Met Lab, which is what we use to drive that strategy.

So we work on six challenges that London faces: health improvement, crime, discrimination, poverty and deprivation, the environment and social wealth. And we work with local partners in the community to address those challenges, whether it be through research, student placements, events, activities, the list goes on and on.

Aaron Porter

Gillian, what's the sort of focus of the partnership working that goes on at Strathclyde?

Gillian Docherty

Strathclyde, since its inception, has been a place of useful learning and for many, many decades we've worked extensively with industrial partners on innovation projects, research and development, and clearly taking some of the fantastic things we do here at the university, out to the world to create impact. And the innovation districts of which we are the lead anchor academic partner in, which there are two, the Glasgow City Innovation District and the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation District, are partnerships between the University, Scottish Enterprise, which is our enterprise agency here in central Scotland, and the city and regional councils. And together with other partners, industrial partners and others, really looking at how we drive economic and social opportunity within those innovation districts and beyond.

How we bring capability and expertise from the university out in a porous way into those innovation districts. And how we attract inward investment and company and other investments into those innovation districts to drive high value jobs and social inclusion and social impact projects.

Aaron Porter

Fantastic. Again, really, really interesting. And a third introduction from, from Nia, and the project that you've or initiative that you've been working on.

Dr Nia Jones

Thank you. Well, in 2021, Welsh Government pledged that there would be a third medical school in Wales. And the job to be done for us was to increase the number of local medical graduates, widen access into a career in medicine, and to improve care for Welsh speakers and more Welsh speaking doctors here in Wales.

And so we welcomed our first students in August of this year. And so we've got two points of entry. So in year one and year two, which has been a great opportunity. And as you all know, we're setting up a medical school, you know, with a huge collaboration. So with other university partners, with Cardiff University, we're working collaboratively with them.

There are contingency partners and we've historically had their students with us from 2019. And we've still got them with us here which is great because that sense of community for our students as well, that they're able to learn from students in other years—in years three, four and five. So that's very much collaborative there within the institutions.

But we're working with Welsh Government, we're working with our local health board partners, with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, and with all the

primary care teams, which has been hugely exciting and great to welcome them here. But one of the most sort of hugely diverse and rich feedback that we've had is our patient and public involvement, which we have engaged enormously with to be able to inform not just our curriculum, our education, but also our research.

And so very much that social accountability of our school, you know, that we're very much a school for the whole of North Wales, even though we're based in Bangor. Our students are across North Wales. It's a hugely diverse, geographical area and demographic as a result of that. And so the engagement with our community because the outcome is hopefully to be able to best serve them and their health need outcomes.

Aaron Porter

Well these are three fantastic approaches. And they're more than initiatives. But, I'll use that word simply to try and capture them with.

I wondered if you might each say a little about the impact that each of these approaches have had so far and how you go about trying to report on the impact and the difference that you each make.

Gillian Docherty

So the Glasgow City Innovation District was Scotland's first innovation district in 2019 and anchored, as I said, in that partnership between Strathclyde, Glasgow City Council and Scottish Enterprise. That jointly investing in some of the core assets and resources that we needed to bring that innovation district to life.

It's leveraged over £900 million now of investment and expanding Glasgow's innovation economy, including property investments, equity and debt funding into companies both start-ups, scale-ups and fantastic are our spinouts from the university. And it's attracted several tens of millions of foreign direct investment. There are now 1600 businesses in the district.

There are also many other things that we track in terms of job growth, value of those jobs and the inclusion available now in those jobs across a variety of sector. And really is at the heart of energising Scotland's manufacturing base, bringing new technologies and capabilities.

We're seeing financial impact. We're seeing growth and productivity and growth and new investments both from local or indigenous companies and also foreign direct investment.

And hopefully the creation of real centres of excellence and clusters of fantastic research and innovation that's going right through to impact into products and services.

Aaron Porter

And that's fantastic to hear. As you say, you know, there are some numerical, tangible, measurable outputs in terms of kind of growth and probably, you know, jobs and so on.

Sophie from London Mets' approach. How have you sought to capture the—sort of—the impact of the strategy that you've developed and how you're going about trying to measure and capture some of that impact?

Sophie Clutterbuck

Yeah, so I think to begin with we need to understand that the labs isn't one thing.

It's not just a lab, it's conglomerate of different things. So the lab is what we have Challenge Champions, which are academics for specialists that work in the community, specifically on those challenges.

All of our pro bono and low-cost clinics from the university are run directly through the lab. We also have a Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society. And we also have a module that is run through the lab as well. So there's lots—it's very hard to have one way of reporting because there's so many things to do. So we have KPIs for each of those areas. And then for an overall area, we report on policy change that we've actually made in the local community. Actual policy we can see that residents are changing the way they're being dealt with by councils or charities or NHS, whatever it might be.

We also look at internal measures as well, because it's great doing this work for the community and it's something really, really important to do this for the community.

But in the current climate, why are universities doing this? Well, it brings value to the universities. And I think it's really important to show the impact of the value as well as the amazing impact outside of the uni, what it's bringing back. So we've had hundreds and hundreds of students engaged in lots of projects related to this work. I say hundreds, actually it's over thousands.

It's a couple of thousand are involved. We have over 200 staff academically who are involved in learning new ways of co-production, new ways of working that they then bring into their research and bring into their classroom. And we get to extensive engagement with the local community. We saw over 8000 guests last year, and they're not one-offs.

So they're people that the university starts to get to know, that turns into more projects. As I say, we have different ways of looking at the impact. Is it student impacts? Is it financial impact to the university? Or is it impact to the community?

I'm working on a wider national project on how we actually measure all of this nationally as well at the moment.

Aaron Porter

Nia, obviously what you're establishing through the medical school—you've got your first cohorts of students coming in in this academic year. So in that sense, you're at the sort of an earlier stage of the journey. But I wondered if there were some nascent or emerging impacts that you felt were being had by the creation of this North Wales Medical School?

Dr Nia Jones

Yeah, just picking up on that conversation that, you know, we value what we can measure, don't we? Rather than measure what we value, you know. And it is, it is getting that right. So I suppose in terms of us, we have been here with C21 north. So we've had graduates. And sort of half of those have stayed in Wales.

Because they've been small groups, we've had this great relationship with them. And I, I do I value that enormously because part of what I want is that from undergraduate to postgraduate, we continue, we're not siloed anymore. And that's not just within medicine, but interprofessionally as well, that we create these collaborations. And if we learn together, we'll work together and provide better care. So, they've really been helpful in sending back, informing our curriculum, helping us to prepare the new doctors for the challenges that they will face tomorrow. So, that's been hugely rewarding.

You're absolutely right. It's a bit early to say what our impact will be. Although there is great excitement here. And I don't think that's an easy thing to say at the moment. You know, in terms of we're a new school, where we're asking our NHS colleagues to do more, without a lot more being given to them in terms of resource. And yet

they're enthusiastic to do that because they see this as an opportunity for growth and for change.

Aaron Porter

Much has been made of the kind of challenging financial circumstances facing a lot of higher education institutions. And there's a sort of a regular conundrum of trying to do, you know, more with the same. Or be more impactful with a similar resource envelope as we've had previously. And I wondered with your respective sort of approaches, whether there's been thoughts about what you might do to try and sort of deepen the impact or widen the net, or think in a more efficient way about how you're going to continue to develop your initiative.

Dr Nia Jones

You'll be aware we're not the only new medical programme. So there's lots of other medical schools sort of opening because of the need for more doctors and healthcare professionals across the sector.

You know, when I graduated over 20 years ago, the NHS that I started working in, it's very different to the one that they're facing now. So it's only right that we're training them differently, collaboratively. We want to be creative and we want a leadership and an organisation, I think, culture that values that and allows that growth.

We want them to be competent, they value teamwork. And these are the ethos and the culture that we should be training them with. So as much as it's challenging, we do have to look at our resourcing. We have to look at what we have and then we have to be able to make sure that we're using that to the best possible.

And then I think as educators, it goes back to first principles, you know, what are we trying to teach them? What's the most creative and best way to do it? How do we value their time? And let's bring our stakeholders along with us. The most important one are our students themselves and our patients. So, as much as it is challenging times, I think it's an opportunity for us to be creative now and to think differently.

Aaron Porter

And for you, Sophie, actually I didn't ask. Sort of, how long has the approach of the lab and the strategy been in place? And sort of where are you in that journey? And what's the sort of future plans for sort of widening the net or deepening the impact that you're looking to pursue?

Sophie Cloutterbuck

So we're in year five. When we first originally started, it was just the Challenge Champions. We've added the clinics, the research centre and the module in those years.

We've moved pretty quickly, actually. Especially in HE terms, to get that much done, I think it's been really good. But what we'd like to do—we don't actually want to make more partners. What we decided two years ago, we had over 650 partners and we couldn't work with them closely. We could only give everyone a little bit of our time. So we've now defined our areas.

We've actually decided to only work with six boroughs. That then can help us with so many different things, if we have that really close relationship, we're getting a lot more value out of our partnerships. And the partnerships are getting a lot more value out of being partners with us as well, which I think a lot of unis forget that part is why we have those partners and, you know, so we're getting the joint value.

We made the decision at the very start of this project, there isn't a team because it should be business as usual for the university. So rather than having a team that's dedicated to this work, this is put into academic workload allocations. It's put into professional staff job descriptions, etc. etc. So, it is actually just business as usual for the university.

We're just about to do the same with clinics. So the schools will take the clinic's hours, because it's so advantageous to their students. And I think that's the way with the current environment, we don't have, universities in general don't have the space or the money to be making big teams for this kind of work.

So if we can turn it into business as usual. We all heard Bridget Phillipson's speech and in it she said we have to be doing the civic work. Well, let's make a way it's advantageous to both us and the community.

Aaron Porter

Yeah, I think that's a really well-made point about, you know, how it's embedded across the rest of the university. Ultimately, that's how it will make both a bigger impact and also, sort of, more sustainable institutional approach as well. So I think that's worth bearing in mind as well.

And finally, same question to you, Gillian, in terms of, you know, thinking about what the sort of the future kind of breadth of what you do might be. Whether there's plans for expansion or consolidation or how the—what the future might look like.

Gillian Docherty

There's certainly no plans for consolidation. I think there's definitely an ambition to scale and grow our impact. And very much like Sophie, we embed it across the organisation. We're very small, light touch teams that spearhead the activity. But actually, it's colleagues from right across the institution who support the activity across the innovation districts.

I think one of the key things is the partnerships are critically important. They're actually, your partnerships with your local authorities, your enterprise actors, your industrial or social or public sector partners are critical because you are trying to make the best of a place. We are very fortunate. We're a city centre university and we believe we've got a big endowment in our place. And we have a responsibility to ensure that that place is as good as it can be. And our role in that is to help develop opportunities. So I think, yes, there's undoubtedly pressure and therefore the priority, the organisation and the strategic importance of activities like the innovation district are critical.

And you must look—I think we certainly look and I think—you must look at this as a whole systems approach. So having buoyant businesses or social enterprises or charities or public sector in the area that you're operating will offer job opportunities for our graduates, will offer investment opportunities for our spin-outs. And will offer research and collaboration projects and knowledge exchange projects with our academics.

Aaron Porter

And that actually neatly leads me to my, the final question, which is really if you have any advice or guidance that you would give to other universities or higher education institutions thinking about establishing new successful partnerships.

Sophie Clouterbuck

I think the first thing is to realise that this engagement is, should be a core strategic priority. It shouldn't just be an after-thought of something we have to do because someone said so. So I think until the first strategy is to get it in your strategy.

I think building the partnerships, they need to be beneficial. So it's to build the strong partnerships. You really need to see value for all partners in the room. But also value all partners in the room the same. And I think that's a big thing you need to do to get the strong partnership. Try to co-produce all your work with your partners as well. Rather than coming in as the people that know better, actually the people in the community know a lot.

Let's co-produce with them. Let's hear their voices. And focus on generating tangible, real-world impact. Making the community see how we can make a difference to the community as well. I think that's really important.

So I think long-term, over numerous years with the partners as well and not one-offs. And actually, I think the people working in these areas need to actively understand the areas they're working in. We're very much working in place. We need people who understand that place. It doesn't mean you have to be from that place, but you need to understand. Because as we all know, every local place is very different.

Nia was saying this earlier. I think the more innovative in a space we can be, the more we actually get out of it. And I think don't expect overnight successes. So if I talk about the—Gillian earlier was talking about local government—some of my local government, it's taken me four years to get to a good place with them.

And it's really difficult. Once you get there, but don't give up, when you get there, it will, the reward will be worth it.

Aaron Porter

Fantastic. There's some really great advice there, both from the sort of strategic level in terms of the initial thinking that's required, but also some more practical things.

How about for you, Gillian, any sort of principles or advice that you would want to share for the experience at Strathclyde?

Gillian Docherty

Of course. I think Sophie's done a great job there and I certainly would start with strategy as well. Our innovation districts are mentioned in Strathclyde 2030. They're a key part of what we do. I think the other thing is that long-term investment. So, we've been working in this area for more than a decade. Our principal has been co-chair of the Glasgow Economic Leadership Board with the leader of the council for more than 12 years.

They are not overnight success. And that persistence and resilience and that only comes when you go into those partnerships, opportunities with a view of how can we help? Not what can we get, how can we help? And I think if that mantra will help you persevere over the well, is that income for the university?

It's back to Nia's point. We do what we measure. Those are the things that will be lasting in terms of that persistence. And I think demonstrating value at every point of engagement with those partners and in a way that is authentically you as an institution is really important.

Aaron Porter

That's great. And again, some nice synergy there. But also, you know, that points around distinctiveness and it being authentic to your circumstance is very helpful as well. And finally, same question for you, Nia. Any advice you'd want to share?

Dr Nia Jones

Well, I think I think both Gillian and Sophie have done a great job there. And I would absolutely agree, and I think we're all in it for the long game aren't we?

And, and I think it is, it's having that shared value, that core team that you start with to be able to share that value with your stakeholders. And I absolutely agree that it's, it has to be intentional for all and meaningful for all so that we get that value. We're going to get the naysayers. And that's not a bad thing, because it makes us reflect on what we're doing again and think, okay, is there something in that? Is this something I need to change? But I do think you need your easy wins and your coalitions that keep you going. And I think building those relationships are really integral. And I think not to be scared that those relationships change.

And I think, because all of us are in this, because we want to make meaningful change, we've got to celebrate the wins that we get along the way. And share that with everybody.

Aaron Porter

Thanks very much for sharing those thoughts so openly and so interestingly. And I hope our listeners, too, will have found that both practically useful but also stimulating. This question of collaboration is going to remain a really important dimension of higher education as we continue to navigate the next few years.

So, my thanks to, Sophie, to Gillian and to Nia. Thanks to you for listening to today's episode of The Future of Higher Education Today. On the next episode, we'll be discussing the challenges and opportunities arising out of a coordinated tertiary system. But until then, thanks very much and goodbye.