
Measuring the effects of the social rural university campus

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†Tribute to Paul: This article comes from a proposal we were working on with Paul when he died. David and Paul had worked together closely since 1996 when David employed Paul as a research associate and began to supervise his PhD. They worked together closely on many projects at Newcastle University until 2009 when they both moved to other universities, but still collaborated together. Kate first met Paul as a postdoc at the University of Agder in 2014. It was very much an interdisciplinary meeting: their interests overlapped and Paul took on the role of an unofficial mentor. During their collaboration from that time, which shadowed a number of interdisciplinary research projects, he patiently helped her through her first experiences of fieldwork and interviews. (In his calm response to a particularly nasty second review, he parsed what was useful and then stated ‘the rest is patronising tosh, and I don’t respond to patronising tosh’). We both very much miss his creative spirit, his energy, and his friendship.

Abstract

There has been demand in many countries for the establishment of small campuses in more rural locations to spread the benefits of higher education both through the provision of university courses and through the positive economic spill-overs for these communities. Evaluations of the impacts of these universities according to current models show limited effects due to their small scale and specialization. Yet whilst there are clearly spill-over benefits from rural campuses into local communities, these are not only of the traditional (knowledge and economic) variety. Rather, regional campuses create social infrastructure that supports these places’ quality of life. This article seeks to develop a proposal for how such social impacts of regional campuses could be evaluated by creating a conceptual framework that articulates how university-region learning communities contribute to socio-economic development trajectories of rural regions. Our overarching hypothesis is that social rural campuses are places where local learning communities work with globally sourced knowledge to make it useful and usable in particular local contexts. Over time, these activities form the basis of regular contact networks, and the benefits they bring become woven into the provision of place-specific welfare services. As a result, the university’s contributions play a more structural role, and the students are involved in creating more lasting benefits by providing the interaction underpinning these structural collaborations. Our model is exemplified through an exploration of the context of the status of rural university campuses in Norway, and a case study of the Academy of Music, an outpost of the multi-campus University of Tromsø (UiT The Arctic University of Norway).

Key words: rural university; social impact; communities of practice; rural development
