

**Universities, knowledge transfer and regional development**, edited by Attila Varga, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2009, 388 pp., £89.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84542-931-7

References to universities' contributions to national and regional economic development are now such routine components of higher education policy discourse that it is easy to forget that, in Britain at least, it was not always so: the Robbins report of 1963, for example, touched on this only in terms of the function of universities in 'the advancement of learning' (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, para 27), but made no explicit link to the possible economic benefits that might follow from this activity. It could be argued that Robbins was at fault here – that he and his committee had overlooked the distinctive tradition that in the late nineteenth century produced the English civic universities, with their central missions of supporting the industrial and commercial (and, indeed, cultural) development of their respective cities. Elsewhere, the picture was perhaps even clearer, with the Land Grant universities of the United States, and the technical universities typical of continental European countries, being established precisely to direct academic knowledge towards practical ends.

Even so, the last few decades have seen the contribution of the university to economic growth, particularly that of the publicly-funded research university, become something of a preoccupation with policy-makers world-wide, anxious about their country's or region's ranking in the global knowledge economy. This concern has re-energised the case for public spending on higher education, and has, around the world, provided a basis for university leaders to lobby for increased funding in order to prevent their region or state being overtaken economically by their higher-spending neighbours. In Britain, what was until recently thought of as marginal 'third stream' university activity – defined negatively as not being teaching or research – now represents the key mission of some 'business-facing' universities.

This book offers a number of often quantitative disciplinary perspectives, broadly from economics and geography, on these issues; and for a British readership another point of interest is that most of the authors are from other European countries, a substantial minority being Hungarian scholars (the editor is a professor of economics at the University of Pécs). The book centrally addresses, using different methods, the key policy topic of how universities interact with economic entities, and in particular what the results are at regional level.

Goldstein contributes a valuable review chapter on 'what we know and what we don't know' about universities' effects on regional development. He argues that there are good data to support the claim that research universities typically make significant contributions to their regions' economic outputs, both by contributing to human capital and by generating research, but that the right regional context needs to exist first if these different contributions are to be absorbed effectively. The culture of the region is seen as a 'mediating factor' (25) here, in an attempt to explain why some universities find it easier to make knowledge transfers than others. Florida's influential 'creative class' thesis (2004) forms part of this explanation, suggesting that once a virtuous circle is formed, comprising go-ahead firms, a research university working on topics relevant to these firms, and an environment that attracts 'bright, creative' people (23), regional development is pretty-well assured. The problem seems to be that all these things need to be brought together at the same time – and as Goldstein concedes, we do not really understand why these factors seem to gel in one place, but not in another. He also notes that universities' internal organisations, and the regulatory frameworks within which they work, also help to explain variations in the extent of university/business interactions: this in fact was a key element in a recent European project to which I contributed, but which reported too late to be cited in this book (Shattock 2009).

Several chapters in this book attempt to quantify aspects of the transfer of university knowledge to firms. But as Ács notes in his chapter, the quantifications needed to allow inputs to the

necessary formulae, of matters such as ‘tacit knowledge’ and ‘the presence of business services’, are going to be ‘evasive’ (39) – to put it mildly. One finding that he reports is that the transfer of university research is more likely to help innovation in small firms rather than large ones. This chimes with anecdotal reports from people managing knowledge transfer in British universities, to the effect that SMEs are often amazed to find that the knowledge needed to solve their critical problems is readily available in a nearby university department.

A particularly interesting chapter by Varga and his colleague at Pécs, Parag, argues that ‘the quality of research network connections influences the scientific productivity of individual network members’ (141), a hypothesis that they test with data from their own university. While they find that better-connected researchers tend to be more productive, it is surely also the case that more productive researchers tend to be better connected. Nevertheless, the patterns of networking as between the different university departments that the authors present are striking: I wanted to learn more about how these departments differed in real-life, not just statistically.

The main UK contribution to the book is a chapter by Faggian, McCann and Sheppard on the relationship between graduate migration within Britain and regional economic performance. They conclude that ‘the knowledge base of a region plays a role in attracting university graduates into a region, while these graduate inflows simultaneously play a role in promoting regional dynamism ... there is evidence of a cumulative causation mechanism’ (268). They offer the telling statistic that there are 40% more graduates employed in London than are educated there, whereas in Yorkshire and Humberside the position is exactly reversed. As noted above, the trick must be somehow to bring together the different elements that make up a prosperous knowledge-region – organisational, human and cultural – at the same time, in the same place.

This is a valuable book for those interested in understanding the university’s interactions with national and regional economic life; and many of the ideas it presents are capable of further, and productive, development.

## References

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- Florida, R. 2004. *The rise of the creative class: And how it’s transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life*. New York: Basic Books.
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**Higher education and social justice**, by A. Furlong and F. Cartmel, Maidenhead, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 2009, 160 pp., £24.99 (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-033-522362-6, 978-0-33-522361-9

The chief virtue of this short but elegant book is that it gives a research-informed ‘all-through’ account and analysis of the issues that relate to social justice and participation in UK higher education. It is about who gets in, but also about where they get in (both aspects of ‘access’), what they receive and how they respond (‘experience’) and with what effects on life chances