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Queen's Communities and Place: towards the alignment of higher education place-based strategy with local need

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Practice case study

Queen's Communities and Place: towards the alignment of higher education place-based strategy with local need

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Abstract

Serving as a key delivery mechanism for Queen's University Belfast's (UK) strategic commitment to social and civic responsibility and economic prosperity, Queen's Communities and Place is a research initiative based on engagement and partnership between communities, policy makers and academics. Combining academic expertise and experiential knowledge from the community, Queen's Communities and Place uses a 'place-based' approach to co-create new solutions to address persistent

physical, economic and social challenges, as well as to strengthen the engagement between Queen's University and its surrounding communities. Queen's Communities and Place launched in November 2021 with our anchor partner in the Market community in inner south Belfast. We are also working collaboratively with projects and communities in the north, west and east of Belfast across a range of sectors and academic disciplines. We have sought to challenge existing frameworks, with evidence-led, data-driven approaches to build interventions and practices together to identify what might work better here for communities to thrive. Capturing three perspectives – academic, community and local government – this co-written reflective article details the experience of establishing a working partnership with our pilot community, and provides some examples of how our approach is working to address the challenges on the ground to date.

Keywords community–academic partnership; community engagement; place-based; social and civic responsibility

Key messages

- Building trust in historically disenfranchised communities requires a time investment, authenticity and reciprocity.
- Backbone funding is vital to ensure continuity of commitments.
- Transdisciplinary knowledge exchanges require a clear set of shared goals, and a theory of change to provide direction and focus.

Introduction

Aligning a higher education 'place-based' strategy with local need (McCann, 2019) is a major challenge for academic institutions, demonstrating a different type of community–university engagement, one with transformative goals (Aranguren et al., 2021). Queen's Communities and Place (QCAP) delivers on the commitment to social and civic responsibility and economic prosperity made by Queen's University Belfast's (QUB) Strategy 2030 through authentic partnership to find lasting solutions that tackle disadvantage and improve outcomes for places and communities across Belfast and Northern Ireland. This follows the wider context of engagement with place-based strategies within both academic institutions and government initiatives, which, while enjoying variable levels of success, have provided much learning for future initiatives (Lankelly Chase, 2017). Our approach, which is place-based, informed by local partners, collaborative with other institutions, and committed to using clear measurement to demonstrate impact, aligns with the key principles of civic engagement as laid out in the Civic University Commission report (UPP Foundation, 2019).

When wider society participates in research, the resultant outcomes become more relevant, indicating the need to forge deeper connections with communities so that societal change and innovation become shared endeavours. Despite the potential dividends of collaborative working, there are challenges; for example, historically, citizen co-production has had limited impact on policy, suggesting a lack of influence on local and national government (Carr, 2018). In addition, there are obvious power imbalances between academic and community partners. Implemented correctly, community-based participatory research can minimise power imbalances between institutions and communities while seeking to generate strategies and outcomes that can be sustained beyond the duration of the research itself (Wilson, 2019). Our aim was to approach this work with a genuinely humble attitude, recognising the existing strengths and capacity of the community to set their own priorities and improve outcomes. We sought, therefore, to grow these existing strengths with an emphasis on robust research and evaluation, and building strong policy connections. This co-written article shares the perspectives from the community, local government and academic partners to lay out the experience of building a transdisciplinary knowledge exchange

within a community–university research partnership, the crucial role of having a strong relationship with policy makers, and how co-produced solutions must come from genuine partnership, listening to local people, and delivering on commitments.

Using data and evidence to drive change together: the academic perspective

Since its inception in November 2021, QCAP has worked intensively with our pilot community, and it has already demonstrated the capacity to explore how place-based engagement with communities can be achieved by developing a model of academic research that aims to: (1) build new, or strengthen existing, partnerships with the wider policy community, to co-design solutions and/or advocate for regulatory reform across several sectors or policy areas that to date include community-led housing, community wealth building and education; (2) provide tailored research and practical support for the development of local programmatic work or asset-based regeneration projects located in some of Northern Ireland's deprived and segregated communities; and (3) strengthen how communities access and utilise data from open-source government platforms such as the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (NINIS) and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), as well as output and financial data collected from their own monitoring systems using social impact investment methodologies and community data dashboards (Higgins et al., 2022). An important feature of our staff configuration is the inclusion of two posts: a local coordinator, funded and supported by our government partner, the Department for Communities; and a clerical support officer. These posts are co-located within the university and a local organisation, the Market Development Association (MDA), within our pilot community, the Market in inner south Belfast. They seek to ensure that capacity is being built at grassroots community level, embedding the voice of the community in the academic team, and reinforcing that community partners are colleagues, furthering our aim to reduce power imbalances.

Theory matters to QCAP, and it underlines our understanding of engaged research as developing 'bottom-up' from the lived experience of the community (Green, 2008), with complex boundary negotiations for all involved in the partnership, and an understanding of the diversity, conflict and divisions within and between communities (Munck, 2022). This uncovering of underlying experience can provide the opportunity for communities to understand, challenge and pose alternatives to social problems they may be facing, and to develop shared goals. The iterative process of developing a theory of change is well underway, in what will ultimately become an articulation of 'how' and 'why' QCAP will achieve both positive change for disadvantaged communities and its anticipated impacts with partners. The process involves all of those with a stake in the community, bringing together multiple perspectives in a single working document, ensuring that the theory of change is inclusive and locally relevant.

Northern Ireland context

In comparison with other UK regions, Northern Ireland has a unique political past, and it is still working through ways to best address the place-based legacies created by the conflict. This demands an informed local understanding, and any type of approach taken to develop a community place-based approach needs to be tailored to reflect the persistent local challenges faced by communities, and how these relate to other, overlaying geographies created by poverty and deprivation (Murtagh et al., 2019). QCAP seeks to advance a critical body of research that helps to further understand the challenges created by these dynamic geographies. Critically, it also works to support local action, and to address some of the place-based challenges experienced by the most deprived communities in a sensitive, informed and productive way, while simultaneously creating a useful platform for learning and knowledge exchange opportunities across the other regional partners involved.

Our pilot site

The creation of a community engagement charter set the tone for our extensive collaboration with the community partner. One year on, we have a programme of co-produced work which we have driven through four community embedded action working groups (AWGs) focused on topics which have emerged through research findings and community voice: (1) health and well-being; (2) education; (3) work and the social economy; and (4) communities and the knowledge economy. This is a key mechanism by which we engage with local residents, and through which additional forums or consultations with residents' groups are coordinated. The groups meet each month, and they are comprised of community development association staff, the QCAP team and local community residents. While the engagement of the community residents through the AWGs and other consultations is now working well, there were initial concerns and uncertainties from some, which were assuaged by the role of the local coordinator, academic partners working closely with the community organisations, and schools, and by the productive activities (detailed below) that have commenced in the area. Our joint programme through the AWGs is supported by four linked empirical and action research initiatives.

The Growing Up in the Market study

A central reference strand of the initiative is the three-year qualitative longitudinal study Growing Up in the Market. The study has a significant focus on children and young people's journey through education at key transition points, through to the world of work, and it is further contextualised with the family perspective, providing detailed data on life within the community. Our methodology seeks to build long-term depth evidence; however, we have also built capacity to take immediate action to address urgent emerging concerns, utilising data collected in year one. Two recent examples of this are detailed in the perspective provided by the community, below.

Social economy and community wealth building

In this programme of research, QCAP helps to regenerate communities and support social enterprises to create alternative approaches to economic inclusion, local development and community wealth building. This involves providing practical or technical support to help communities develop asset-based social enterprises. It also works to develop the local policy environment by collaborating with sectoral intermediaries such as Development Trusts Northern Ireland to engage more effectively with statutory departments and government agencies. This research is targeted across several place-based community partner projects. Specific to the Market, this activity has seen the use of financial data to forecast the potential social impacts created by a suite of community regeneration projects. The MDA has used this analysis to help leverage capital investment from several funding bodies and local development agencies ([QCAP SECW, 2022](#)).

Communities and the knowledge economy

The knowledge economy seeks to address the barriers that preclude working-class communities from participating in a knowledge-based society, and it provides a platform for QUB as an anchor institution to directly support the needs of our local communities to ensure that they can adapt and thrive in future economic realities. Our partnership works to leverage the resources and scholarship available within the university to co-create educational, research and innovation opportunities that are necessary for the most marginalised people and places to gain access to our knowledge-based society. Key examples of this work include a summer 2023 science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programme for the community, a participatory action research project involving the refurbishment of the pond and wildlife garden at St Malachy's Primary School, and acting as an entity for engaging working-class

communities within the Belfast City Regional Deal and the QUB Institute of Electronics Communications and Information Technology.

Community health and well-being

This programme of work is still developing, having commenced after the first three. The health and well-being AWG has identified three priority areas based on Growing Up in the Market analysis, as well as on previous community surveys and testimony from lived experience advocates within the neighbourhood. These areas are: mental health, suicide and substance use prevention; special educational needs; and physical well-being. In recognition of the need for added research capacity to support this work, QCAP has worked with colleagues from the School of Medicine in QUB to put in place two further research posts to assist in the development work necessary for this AWG. The further work stemming from the initiatives detailed by the community below also signal how this programme will advance in the immediate and medium term.

Local government perspective: supporting place-based policy

People and Place – A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (Department for Social Development, 2003) is one of the Northern Ireland Executive's flagship anti-poverty programmes, and was launched in 2003 by the then Department for Social Development (now the responsibility of the Department for Communities). This place-based programme was aimed at supporting communities across Northern Ireland impacted most by deprivation by bringing together the budgetary resources and work plans of government departments and statutory agencies, and relevant voluntary and community sector groups, in partnership with local people. Two reviews of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme concluded that, despite evidence of replicable practice, for the most part, the programme had delivered mixed economic and social outcomes for the recipient areas. In recognition of these delivery challenges and mixed policy outcomes, the Minister for Communities commissioned a strategic review of the existing People and Place Strategy, which aims to improve how this department and others across government can better tackle deprivation in both urban and rural Northern Ireland through a place-based approach based on objective need.

Place-based approaches have been taken by other departments and statutory agencies, including Urban Villages, Together Building United Communities, Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, and Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Strategy. This explicit focus on 'place' illustrates how it has returned to the centre of the Northern Ireland policy arena, and evidence from McCann (2019) and BEIS (2020) demonstrates its growing significance across wider local and national research agendas.

The academic rigour provided by QCAP generates a welcome additional lens for our review, and it has the potential to provide an innovative and transformational influence on supporting future place-based practice across the region. We are pleased to have this ongoing support as we work our way through the review, and the value we place on the approach is demonstrated by our funding for two community-focused posts, which offer potential for capacity building and backbone support at community level. We also strongly welcome the long-term approach taken by QCAP.

Local community perspective: building capacity through authentic partnership

As noted, top-down approaches to neighbourhood renewal have had mixed results, with evaluations often citing a lack of contextual relevance, which has led to growing cynicism within the community sector in Northern Ireland (Robinson et al., 2023). For that reason, there is a pressing sense of urgency to think

critically about place-based inequalities, and to challenge dominant assumptions, systems and structures which reinforce them. The QCAP partnership presented the Market community with a new and unique opportunity to do this using bespoke place-based research, and the community sees the partnership as a way of disrupting hierarchies of knowledge by elevating local voices in the process of enquiry. As anchor institutions, universities have the capacity to support the transition of disadvantaged communities, so that they can develop resilience and respond to more intractable challenges. Attempts to do this should be underpinned by those academic institutions investing the time and resources to build authentic and equitable partnerships with the community. The partnership Social Charter document codifies this within the QCAP model, and emphasises the university's commitment to the Market community and the co-produced work strands which QCAP and other university colleagues have engaged in alongside its residents. In particular, the recruitment of the local coordinator and the local clerical support worker have been integral to the success of the partnership, and in signalling the commitment of our academic and government partners. These dedicated posts are co-located within the community, and they have resolved the problem of the additional workload created by partnerships of this kind falling on existing community workers.

Part of the appeal of the QCAP partnership for the community was the opportunity to test the effectiveness of our current programmatic work, and to adapt where necessary to produce better outcomes. To this end, linking with the university has made the community's data collection more efficient and professional, thus allowing us to better understand the impact and outcomes of our work, and helping us to tailor and refine our offer to residents. The academic rigour brought by the university partnership also protects the independence of data, even where it is not favourable to the community, the university or government partners. Training provided by QCAP to community staff has also seen the MDA change how we record and track data. A data dashboard developed by QCAP staff for the MDA in particular has been a welcome addition to our work, a highlight being its accessibility in allowing community staff from non-academic backgrounds to understand and analyse data pertaining to our community. To date, the work of the partnership has delivered several co-produced pieces of work in the community, all built around listening to residents and taking actions. Early analysis of year one of the Growing Up in the Market study indicated that the emerging drugs landscape, substance use, and the cost-of-living crisis were all having a negative impact on family and community life in the Market. Through the QCAP partnership, the community was able to rapidly respond with several interventions, which included: (1) family food hampers, which were distributed to over two hundred families leading up to Christmas; and (2) a naloxone training, which was completed by 24 residents and was the first peer-to-peer training of its type in Northern Ireland. Evidence from Growing Up in the Market is also being used by residents in the health and education AWGs to design local strategies for each, including immediate plans for a community education programme on drugs and addiction, medium-term plans to fund and recruit a community health worker, and long-term plans for the creation of a health hub within the community. Genuine partnership, listening to local people, co-producing solutions based on what they say, and taking action to implement these have been central to the success of the QCAP model in the Market thus far.

Conclusion

As QCAP develops further, we will closely evaluate its impact and potential for informing 'what works here' in place-based engagement, policy making and intervention. In so doing, we will keep working to align our institution's 'place-based' strategy with local need across communities. We recognise that the best partnerships grow from the bottom up, based on strong personal relationships. Our collective experience is that top-down relationships are too often established for presentational reasons, rather than because of the real value that might be delivered by the collaboration, and they have tended to wither

quickly as a result. We are dedicated to working hard to maintain the partnership approach that QCAP has developed, which is not without its challenges. The production of this article was an example of the additional time and cooperation needed when we work collectively rather than individually. However, we remain committed to the goal of allowing all partners to achieve some real form of capacity building as a result. Finally, we are convinced that our strongest partnerships are those that embrace academic independence, even where this leads to research findings that could be regarded as 'inconvenient' to the local or policy communities. In our view, a partnership which tries to compromise academic independence for the short-term advantage of either party is in no one's long-term interest.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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