



Observatory PASCAL

Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions

PASCAL UNIVERSITIES REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT PROJECT (PURE)

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Some Immediate Reflections on Conducting a PURE Review: some Do's and Don'ts

Having just returned from leading the first of the PURE review team visits, this short note highlights a number of points which other teams might consider in conducting their own review programmes.

The Region and the challenges it presented

We conducted the review in the Thames Gateway Region, a diverse area which stretches from the east end of London along both sides of the Thames Estuary for up to 40 miles on each side. It is a region 'created' by Government, in recognition of its strategic importance for development in the south-east of England: it contains significant areas of brownfield land for development and is well placed to benefit from major transport links such as the high-speed rail link to Europe via the Channel tunnel, major motorway development and proximity to airports. It also includes the site of the London Olympics in 2012.

It has a population of approaching 1.5m, spread through diverse city and more local coastal communities. The economic base of the area is changing with the decline of traditional military based industries and some manufacturing. The region has identified education-led regeneration as a major theme, and within that HEIs are playing a significant role in provision for up-skilling in the local population and supporting business development. There was a strong desire too to support local communities across the region.

The governance of the region is complex, involving central government, (parts of) 17 local authorities and planning bodies, 8 HEIs within the region and other FE colleges, and employer organisations, all bound together in a complex array of partnerships.

This presented a number of challenges for the review team, in the time we had. These included:

- Gaining the confidence of a diverse set of stakeholders;
- Understanding the character of this diverse territory;
- Getting to grips with the workings of the governance arrangements and trying to understand the extent of co-operation and integration between them;
- Accessing end-users to get behind the 'official' presentations

Some reflections on what worked for us

- 1) Our team had a good mix of backgrounds and interests. It was useful to have a short session before any meetings with stakeholders to clarify the process and particular interests, emphases, or areas for questioning which team members would like to pursue.
- 2) We were put up in a city-centre hotel outside the region. We felt there would have been advantages in being accommodated in or close to places or communities on which the visit was likely to focus in order to give a better feel for the context of the programmes to be discussed, maybe cut down travelling, and send a message to the local stakeholders that we wished to immerse ourselves in their environment to aid our understanding. The hotel should also have free internet access to aid note-taking and accessing other relevant background materials as the visit proceeded. We have requested this for the return visit in 2010.



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- 3) It would be useful to hold a pre-visit meeting between the CDG leader and the local group leader to clarify 'housekeeping' issues.
- 4) For 'non-native' reviewers, it will be helpful to have a readily available glossary of terms, agencies, and basic service organisation details. A checklist of acronyms should be available.
- 5) We were expertly guided on our travels around the region – very efficient and also an important opportunity to talk informally about issues outside the more formal meetings.
- 6) The initial meeting with stakeholders is important. It provides an early opportunity to provide an overview of the PURE process for stakeholders to clarify expectations. It is important to stress that the PURE process is flexible, is designed to address their priority interests, and provides opportunities for benchmarking and mutual learning through clusters. A local chair, sympathetic to the PURE project, is valuable to steer the initial meeting.
- 7) Whilst stressing the local focus, it is also clear that there will be a set of recurrent themes within the PURE project such as links between HE and FE, future proofing skills, hearing the voice of the business sector, data collection, analysis and evaluation etc. It will be helpful too in the initial meeting if review team members are up-front about their particular interests, and the themes they will likely pick up.
- 8) Sufficient structure to the process initially is important, and for the purpose of developing benchmarking as the process develops.
- 9) When negotiating the programme with the local team, ensure the local team has a good idea of what the review team want to get from the visit. The programme for the visit should give adequate weight to both 'regional' and HEI perspectives, and a balance between touring 'show piece' facilities and opportunities for discussion. The local organisation for our visit was thorough, but we were able to take advantage of some additional time available to members of the team to add additional visits which improved the balance.
- 10) Try to find opportunities to meet with end users of projects (community members or students on courses, employers etc), as a balance to the 'official' presentations of outputs and outcomes.
- 11) It was important to probe presenters about the reality of development processes and the information they had available on which to make judgements, in our case, about such issues as assessing local demand for and supply of skills, the reality of determining responses to demand between HEIs, the relationship between local developments and wider institutional policies and provision, and the role of government agencies in guiding or otherwise influencing developments, and the extent to which there was an 'employer' voice within the governance arrangements.
- 12) Decide how to record content of discussions, and make arrangements for comparing notes and key findings and conclusions within the team. A final wrap-up session was valuable, including the local liaison person, to provide early feedback, highlight any mistaken impressions, provide guidance to the report writer, and plan next steps.
- 13) Recognise that as team members and visiting experts, there is the opportunity both to both 'pick up tips' for application in our own local situations, whilst at the same time being pressed for advice by people in the study area. We were all a little wary of offering advice too soon, before our understanding of the local context was sufficiently advanced. At the initial stage at least it seems important to provide observations and constructive feedback which will allow local stakeholders to reflect on what is best in their setting.



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In conclusion

Hopefully, there are points here which other teams will take into account in conducting their own reviews. Each of the team members in London identifies points to take back with them for their own 'local' reviews. It will be helpful if other teams share experience as the process rolls forward.

John Tibbitt, with
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