

Civic Leadership, Innovation and Economic Growth

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Powering the Knowledge Economy: Universities, Cities, Innovation

Universities UK

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This conference brought together senior representatives from business, universities, local government and civic leaders to examine the latest policy developments and best practice in this area and to consider how to enhance the role of universities as anchors in local and regional economies. Delegates examined partnerships between cities, universities, businesses and place makers and explored their role in economic growth. Delegates also considered how to maximise the local and regional economic growth benefits from university activities and the role of universities in driving forward innovation in the knowledge economy.

Speech – Full Text

Thank you for inviting me to speak today at this very timely conference, particularly in the run up to the General Election in May and with the growing debate around devolution and cities.

I'm Steve West, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West of England Bristol. I also hold a number of external positions very relevant to today, including being President of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce, Chair of the South West Region CBI, Chair of the West of England Academic Health Science Network, and Chair of the new Bristol Learning City Partnership Board, run through the elected Mayor's Office. I am also Chair of the University Alliance mission group.

I see a major part of my role, and that of the University, as facilitating a joined up approach to problem-solving, so that we are really focusing on the key issues for the region and achieving the best outcomes, rather than simply viewing things through the lens or field in which we happen to work. The key issues of today and the future are highly complex - they cannot be addressed through one sector or sphere of society working alone.

This is certainly reflected in the title of my talk 'Civic Leadership, Innovation and Economic Growth'. We need to be thinking more broadly about 'Powering the Knowledge Economy'; this is not simply limited to local economic growth. It is about much more, including public learning, civic spirit, and community-based innovation. It is also about businesses playing their role in education, community and society, and being part of, rather than outside, the civic and place-based leadership agendas.

You'll probably know of the Bristol city region as being creative, a bit quirky and slightly unorthodox. It is perhaps for that reason we were the only city (out of ten in the referendums in 2012) to vote for a Democratically Elected Mayor. With his iconic red trousers, keenness to engage the Bristol community and his ambitions for the city as a test-bed for new-technologies, Mayor George Ferguson has brought about much more visible leadership in the city and a stronger presence on the global stage.

Indeed, it was the Mayor, UWE Bristol and other groups working together that recently won Bristol recognition as the European Green Capital for 2015. This has created a wide range of opportunities for the whole city-region and has been the catalyst for a number of initiatives, such as the Business West Go Green initiative which I was very pleased to launch; a whole host of local community initiatives; and the UWE Bristol and University of Bristol project to provide 100,000 student volunteering hours supporting green projects across the city, helping students to play their part in the city whilst developing green skills. We also already run a highly successful Education for Sustainable Development scheme at UWE with 96% of students exposed to ideas of sustainable development within their curriculum in 2013/14.

The European Green Capital agenda is designed to be a legacy project to build capacity and capability across the business communities, society and the universities. It is to create sustainable green economies and healthy life styles. Clearly the medium and long term economic and health impacts are game changing. Bringing together people, lifestyles, attitudes and the natural resources of the region (Severn tidal flow, solar, wind etc...) to provide growth opportunities that deliver long term gain.

Clearly universities play a very strong role in economic development, but I give you this example because I believe that powering the knowledge economy is more than economic - it is also based on the health and educational well-being of the city.

Universities think and operate long term, so they are well situated to coordinate and develop the high-level opportunities and catalysts, and to join-up across the various elements of a place - to be an anchor for the region; partly as universities are impartial and represent many sectors and sections of their locality and region. They are seen as politically neutral and draw on and contribute to the global knowledge economy to deliver success.

Other examples of this coordination and drive in our region include:

- Bristol being named as the location for one of the UK's first four University Enterprise Zones, which will support the next generation of hi-tech companies to set up and expand, in the areas of robotics, biosciences, biomedicine and other hi-tech areas. The Enterprise Zone is being located on UWE's Frenchay Campus and is a £16.5m project supported by £4m from the Government with match-funding from the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), business and UWE Bristol. It is expected to create more than 500 jobs and generate £50m for the local economy and I hope increase local and global growth through exports and knowledge sharing.
- Both universities in Bristol are also working very closely with business and the health sector on driving forward innovations on the assisted living agenda, diagnostics and telemedicine, particularly important for a society with an aging population and very relevant to all our lives. Joining up on this agenda will really make a difference to individuals and families throughout society. Again having an impact on local and global agendas - bringing education, business and society together to create new opportunities.
- This is all in addition, of course, to universities powering the knowledge economy through addressing skills shortages and providing opportunities that transform the futures of individuals, families, and communities. At UWE Bristol, for example, we have doubled our intake of engineering students over the past 4 years - with a high proportion of these staying in engineering and shaping the future of the sector in the region. We know that 80% of new jobs will be in high-skill areas so access to opportunities and different pathways to higher skills is absolutely critical - involving collaboration across universities, educational providers, businesses, public sector, community organisations and professional bodies.
- There can be no doubt that cities work best when all the realms of leadership are working together - Political Leadership, Community Leadership, Business Leadership, Trade Union Leadership and Public Managerial and Professional Leadership, as set out in Professor Robin Hambleton's new book 'Leading the Inclusive City'. It is the spaces where these areas overlap that really provide us with potential zones for innovation. There is certainly a need to generate and implement more radical solutions focusing on greater co-creation, co-production and co-management - with distributed agency - if we are to address the really pressing and complex challenges we face throughout our society.

As I've mentioned, universities are particularly well-placed to partner with local stakeholders to advance understanding, develop new ideas, and join up networks to focus on these big issues, in a way that is impartial and sits outside of sector or territorial boundaries.

In the heated public policy debate ahead of the General Election it may even be that university voices are more important than ever; with moves towards devolution and the ascendancy of city leadership there is no better time for universities to seize the opportunity of civic leadership to really shape the place they are in and accelerate a better future - for individuals, families, society and the economy as a whole.

Universities can and should shine a light on what is possible and lead the way by building the bridges, networks and capacity to deliver.