

## Universities in partnership for local development. A case study

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*Abstract:* In literature, the contribution of teaching and research to society usually assumes economic-oriented tones in its application, by developing the concept of university as a stakeholder in economy and industry. Yet, a broader awareness of the idea of regional and local development, in relation to universities, is growing, escaping the boundaries of economic growth to target social, cultural and environmental objectives. This essay contends that this engagement in local development aiming at the formation of human and social capital, as key factors of development, could be mutually beneficial to the academic function of knowledge production, and to the community involved.

This local engagement is considered here as a type of service provided by the university; in this sense, it is a function of the higher education institutions in society, in the same ways as teaching and research are. These functions constitute the immediate applications of the social role of the university, which I identify as a dynamic dimension determined by the economic, cultural and social developments affecting the expectations of society towards the university.

I contend that the university should develop an awareness of the social context in which it is embedded on several grounds: because social knowledge is local, as the intensity and the pervasiveness of social and scientific change have made both highly sensitive, and therefore susceptible, to local environments. I am proposing one specific way in which the university can re-interpret its engagement into the local context. What matters to this essay is to analyze the implementation of human and social factors useful to local development. Some cases, taken from the US context, are taken as an application laboratory for my considerations.

*Keywords:* university, local government, public-private partnerships, human capital, social capital.

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## **Introduction**

Over the past decades, the conventional, elitarian and Humboldtian idea of university has been challenged by an interlocking of multiple social, economic and political developments: democratization, industrialization, urbanization, the increase in educational rates and in the welfare of nations; all these contemporary phenomena have forced the universities to tackle a massification of accesses, and a fine variety of expectations on behalf of the society. These developments have brought to a revolution (Kerr, 1982) in the higher education sector, which is challenged in its core activities, in its organization, and deeply in its self-definition. Both the Anglo-American and the Continental European models of higher education have faced the same challenges towards higher accountability to the collectivity (Capano, 2000; Gellert, 1999). This is true for all typologies of higher education institutions, but it weights more on the traditional universities in virtue of their philosophies of education, rooted in their mediaeval and modern origins and developments.

From an élite to a mass, from liberal to vocational, from detached to industry-related, fiscal and social accountable, higher education is undergoing a complex system of changes to which it has to prove adaptable.

The modern university was born a social institution. Its service to society, for the advancement of the human intellect, is echoed in all mission statements throughout the world. Historians have constantly tried to characterize the relationship between the university and society in terms of links and causality: their efforts are an affirmation of this nexus. Contemporary universities have been challenged by a growth in the complexity of this relation, whilst the identification of universities as the sole providers of higher education started to come apart. This rip in the university's self-identification is common to all Western systems of higher education, be they the Continental or the Anglo-Saxon ones. The whirlwind of organizational adjustments the university is undergoing is a symptom of

deeper transformations affecting its core activities. For centuries, academics and intellectuals have debated over the philosophy of higher education, over its ideas and functions. The conundrum has been represented by the tension between liberal and vocational education, between the theoretical thrust to knowledge for the sake of knowledge, and the utilitarian training for a specific profession and material achievements. Both ambitions have shaped the debates over higher education in the past, as they still do now.

However, the development of a society based on knowledge has complicated this conflict, by determining an evolution in the very notion of knowledge production. This complex phenomenon is the linchpin in my argument that a social role turning the mission statements of universities into factual service actions to the local communities is viable and, in fact, desirable.

Dealing with multiple sources and producers of knowledge, with advanced (in terms of knowledge-based) expectations and with a high differentiation of these expectations, means that the university must enact functions that belong to the tool box of networking: assimilating, mediating and communicating. In practice, this means that the university becomes a producer of *Erkenntnis* as well as of *Wissen*, of which it is not the sole producer as it was in the past (Delanty, 2000), and this grants it innovative opportunities to open up to a latitude of partners in the production of knowledge.

Society is becoming increasingly knowledge-based and knowledge is replacing physical resource as the main driver of economic growth. Universities therefore need to communicate the relevance of their activities, particularly those related to research, *by sharing knowledge with society and by reinforcing the dialogue with all stakeholders*. Communication between scientific specialists and non-specialists is much needed but often absent (European Commission, 2006).<sup>2</sup>

What said has been masterly summarized by Gibbons when he stated that the most significant changes affecting higher education in the knowledge society are not related to size, but to function (1994).

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: *Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities: education, research and innovation*, Brussels, 10 May 2006, COM (2006) 208, p. 8.

The social functions of universities all stem from the thrusts delineated above, and can be of four major kinds: the provision of expertise, character education and democratic citizenship development, higher accessibility and equity of opportunity and social development.

In literature, the contribution of teaching and research to society – that is, the social role of university – usually assumes economic-oriented tones in its application, by developing the concept of university as a stakeholder in economy and industry. Over the past two decades, the university has progressively been recognized a place in the provision of expertise and in horizontal cooperation for target-specific programmes, as well as a fundamental role in the implementation of ‘learning regions’ (Florida, 1995; Lundvall and Maskell, 2000). Yet, a broader awareness of the idea of regional and local development, in relation to universities, is growing, escaping the boundaries of economic growth to target social, cultural and environmental objectives.

The notion of the university’s service is not the by-product of economic growth and human capital’s productivity any more; rather, it entails the engagement of the university in its local milieu through direct action. In the context of the rupture with the past that the higher education sector is undergoing, I will contend that this engagement in local development aiming at the formation of human and social capital, as key factors of development, could be mutually beneficial to the academic function of knowledge production, and to the community involved.

This local engagement is considered here as a type of service provided by the university; in this sense, it is a function of the higher education institutions in society, in the same ways as teaching and research are. These functions constitute the immediate applications of the social role of the university, which I identify as a dynamic dimension determined by the economic, cultural and social developments affecting the expectations of society towards the university. The response of the university, therefore, is equally dynamic, and multi-dimensional.

I am not putting forward the idea that local development should be privileged over teaching and research, nor that, when it comes to teaching, theoretical analysis should give way to practice-based learning. I contend that the university should develop an awareness of the social context in which it is embedded on several grounds: because social knowledge is

local, as “the intensity and the pervasiveness of social and scientific change have made both highly sensitive, and therefore susceptible, to local environments” (Nowotny, Scotts and Gibbons, 2006); because this regional, or local, orientation does not harm the ambition to internationalisation which is a powerful global trend; and also because a process of knowledge production that is connected to knowledge-based social inputs provides reliability to the process. All these points are endorsed by the fact, observed on an international scale by OECD, the European Commission and a consistent share of economic literature, that collaboration patterns between regional actors and universities are common strategies for economic growth. Diversity in patterns comes from local peculiarities. The autonomy of the academic institution is not harnessed by this process: in fact, I contend that a university’s networking latitude is a predictor of its autonomy as an institution of knowledge production *and* higher education.

This aspect of higher education politics is a niche one in specialized literature, and a quite recent one. Therefore, there are considerable methodological limitations affecting the nature and the quality of the research to be pursued; and yet, these limitations are themselves opportunities for further engagement with the topic.

However, the argumentation of an active social role of universities must face obstacles beyond those of methodological nature. In a European framework, where the relationship between university and society has strong historical, cultural and philosophical foundation, and, particularly on the Continent, has not nurtured the notion of “service to community”, as its US counterpart has. This transformed the structural specificities of the system in cultural biases.

### **Regional engagement and networking for development**

The focus of this article, however, is not the analysis of the questions raised on the role and identity of the higher education institutions. Rather, I am proposing one specific way in which the university can re-interpret its engagement into the local context: that is, through public-private partnerships. I will not focus on spin-offs – the conventional example of

outreach by the university to local and regional actors: my focus is on that segment of factors of local development relating to people – that is, human and social capital. In addition, I will not consider the public or private nature of the partnership as relevant in this study: what matters to my research is the implementation of human and social factors useful to local development. Some cases, taken from the US context, are taken as an application laboratory for my considerations.

As OECD points out, publicly funded universities in Western countries face a shift in governments' agenda with regard to their mission: from the traditional set of education and research objectives – aimed to increase the so-called manpower needs and the outcomes of scientific research – to the expectation of a specific economic and social role (OECD, 1999; Rutten, Boekema and Kujipers, 2003):

[t]he autonomous teaching and research activities of publicly funded universities are coming under increasing pressure from governments and their electorates. The agenda has moved on from a desire to simply increase the general education level of the population and the output of scientific research; there is now a greater concern to harness university education and research to specific economic and social objectives. Nowhere is this demand for specificity more clear than in the field of regional development. While universities are located in regions, questions are being asked about what contribution they make to the development of those regions (...). Such questions are being posed because development has a strong territorial dimension (...) So the challenge universities face is how should they respond to demands which are emanating from a set of actors and agencies which have hitherto not sought to engage in a dialogue with universities, namely those concerned with regional development.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, universities are called upon the task to re-interpret the dynamics of globalisation at a local level. The double aspiration of higher education to both internationalisation and localisation is usually neglected in literature in favour of the thrust to internationalisation only, which dominates the fore. This tension is nonetheless present, and the exploration of it could contribute to the debate on the dialectic of glocalisation.

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<sup>3</sup> OECD, *The response of higher education institutions to regional needs*, IMHE, Paris, 1999, p. 9.

Regional engagement is a widespread reality, but international comparative analysis is made difficult by the fact that it is a policy deployed at the institutional level, and it is deeply embedded in the local socioeconomic context; the same holds true for community development, which is not necessarily included in regional development (even though they are both classified in higher education literature as services to community). In this sense, they both present similar difficulties for international analysis, therefore the need to address them through case studies. OECD, for instance, in the attempt to assess their contributions to the socioeconomic development of the region, has recently peer-reviewed selected universities in Denmark, Finland, England, Spain, Sweden and in the Netherlands (as well as in other extra-european countries).<sup>4</sup> The project aims at raising awareness amongst HEIs and their regional actors of the potentialities and mutual benefits for partnerships, aiming at the economic, social and cultural development of their region. Partnerships are encouraged as instruments for development side by side with the provision of expertise, and good practices for evaluation purposes on behalf of the university.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> OECD, *Project on supporting the contribution of higher education institutions to regional development*, 2007. Other participating countries are Australia, Brazil, Canada, Korea and Mexico. For further reference, see

[http://www.oecd.org/document/16/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_201185\\_34406608\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.htm](http://www.oecd.org/document/16/0,2340,en_2649_201185_34406608_1_1_1_1,00.htm)

<sup>5</sup> The developments triggering regional engagement are classified by Chatterton and Goddard (2003) as 4. The first is the emergence of the knowledge and non-material assets economy, the learning economy, as the economic-oriented version of the knowledge society. Secondly, the needs identified by the learning economy are interlocked with the transformations in the mode of knowledge production towards application, heterogeneity, inter- and trans- disciplinarity (Gibbons et al., 1994). To the context of the knowledge economy and its cognitive and educational derivation it corresponds a third broad trend, the resurgence of the region, as an important arena for political and economic activity, as it has been discussed above. This political framework of horizontal dynamics of networks is the nurturing ground for the fourth determinant of the regional role of universities: the importance of networking, which assumes great relevance in the case studies presented further on in this paper (Paul Chatterton, John Goddard, "The response of HEIs to regional needs", in Roel Rutten, Frans Boekema, Elsa Kuijpers (editors), *Economic geography of higher education. Knowledge infrastructure and learning regions*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003).

Regional engagement can assume two aspects, depending on the goal to pursue, which, in turn, is a predictor of the conception of development investing the policies. One form of development is mostly economic-related, and organizes territoriality and its actors with the aim of economic and industrial growth for clusters. Under this perspective, universities play a central role in R&D, technical innovation and interaction with the labour market. A second idea of development has a wider breath:

higher education institutions can contribute strongly to social, cultural and environmental development in a region. However, this requires a comprehension of the complex interplay between the institutions and the surrounding society. It also requires horizontal delivery structures to be put in place which facilitate inter- and intra-institutional co-operation (...) It is our view that concentration solely on excellence and technological advancement based on cluster development involves a risk of reduced sense of belonging of people in the remote areas and in the fringes of the society, as well as under-optimal use of human resources.<sup>6</sup>

Both lines of development are equally relevant, if not complementary, and their significance, let alone their specific weight, within a region is set at the local level. In this it lies the importance of the politics of regionalisation; and to complete the overview of the trend, a useful concept to review is that of learning regions (Florida, 1995; Lundvall and Maskell, 2000).

Chatterton and Goddard (2003) remark that the level of local territorial embeddedness of universities has always been low, due to national regulations, international standards, academic paradigms, and research communities; the authors elaborate a model for interaction between university and region on the basis of the recommendations by the Committee of Rectors of European Universities (1998)<sup>7</sup> and the Unesco's *Framework*

<sup>6</sup> OECD, "Jutland-Funen in Denmark", Peer Review Report for the *Project on supporting the contribution of higher education institutions to regional development*, June 2006, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> "[I]n order to respond better to the needs of different groups within society, universities must engage in a meaningful dialogue with stakeholders (...) universities which do not commit themselves to open and mutually beneficial collaboration with other economic, social and cultural partners will find themselves academically as well as economically marginalised" (John Davies, *The public role of the university. The dialogue of universities with their stakeholders: comparison between different regions of Europe*, CRE,

for priority action for change and development for higher education (1998) in the urgency for universities to engage with local partners; their considerations also make the bulk of the 1999 OECD Report on *The response of higher education institutions to regional needs*.

The issue of territoriality is problematic for a number of reasons, which can be summed up by the cultural aversion to the very idea of regionalism: in fact “some academics equate the term ‘region’ with parochialism and see it as the antithesis of metropolitanism and cosmopolitanism – adjectives which are heavily associated with the historical development of many old universities”.<sup>8</sup> These questions are related to the privileged reputation of national and international level research and training, also as a means to contribute to regional growth; the consequential approach to regional-based activities as secondary, and a detachment to the territorial complexity; and a concern for institutional autonomy (Chatterton and Goddard, 2003).

And yet, there are gains – the oft quoted “university/region value-added management process” (Chatterton and Goddard, 2003). The university could take advantage of a regional focus in the implementation of trans-disciplinary and interactive forms of learning theorized by Gibbons et al. (1994), and by connecting degree courses and regional clustered labour market. In this sense, it could foster service learning, as it does in the US campus model. Service learning is defined in the *Encyclopedia of community* as “an active, creative [pedagogy] that integrates community service with academic study in order to enhance a student’s capacity to think critically, solve problems practically, and function as lifelong moral, democratic, citizen in a democratic society. In most cases, service-learning takes places within an academic course (...) service-learning also involves student reflection on the service experience, and emphasis on providing genuine service to the community, and the development of democratic, mutually beneficial, mutually respectful, relationships between the students and the community members with whom they work”.<sup>9</sup> Service is not only useful as a tool of immediate effect, as in the form of voluntary work; it can

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Geneva, 1998, quoted in Paul Chatterton, John Goddard, op. cit., p. 21).

<sup>8</sup> Paul Chatterton, John Goddard, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Benson and Ira Harkavy, *Encyclopedia of community*, 2003a, pp. 1223-1224.

also entail research activities pursued by the students and orientated on key areas of social concern.

However – and proceeding further down the tricky path of intangible assets – the gains to weight are not only teaching and research-related: universities are central, “through their staff and students, in the development of these networks of trust and civic engagement, and hence in the wider political and cultural leadership of their localities”.<sup>10</sup> It is in line with this argument that OECD in the 2007 report *Project on supporting the contribution of higher education institutions to regional development*, mentions the importance of developing a “sense of belonging” to the territory in order to fight social exclusion. Very little is usually said about this function of the university. In general, and as pointed above, the literature on learning regions tends to focus on regional development as economic growth; therefore, the role of universities is analyzed in its interactions with firms, as well as with the labour market.

Yet, as Maskell and Törnqvist point out, in spite of the amount of research provided on the topic (which is still minor as opposed to others, such as the topic of the internationalisation of the universities, big on the fore), the evaluation of the actual relevance and function of universities in the process of regional development is a daunting task (Maskell and Törnqvist, 2003).

Even if it is not mentioned in the 2007 OECD report, community development is included in some of the universities’ policies of engagement within the region under the heading of ‘social development’. According to the literature (OECD, 1999, 2007; Chatterton and Goddard, 2003), this can take multiple forms:

- Healthcare programmes (nursing, dental, medical, general hospital, geriatric care);
- Provision and sharing of facilities: sport facilities for physical fitness, libraries, premises, bars, restaurants, theatres, cinemas;
- Participation in public affairs: employers’ organizations, politics, media, schools, art sector, transportation;

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

- What OECD names “general social well-being”: legal, counselling, welfare and education services.

Two examples of these policies can be drawn by the 2007 OECD project. The first one is the case of the Värmland region in Sweden, where social development has been identified as one of the policies actively pursued by the Karlstad University, in line with its declared goal to become “one of the most active universities in Europe as regards cooperation with society in its region”.<sup>11</sup> To carry out this task, the university aims at integrating learning programmes and societal needs, such as in social work, nursing, sociology, religion, theology and education. The recommendation is for an extension of this effort to ensure “more integration of students within the regional community in the form of volunteer programmes, internships in social and community based organizations, and better career links to local social organizations”.<sup>12</sup> A second example is taken from the University of Twente in the Netherlands, and it is interesting because it involves missing gaps in education-related societal goals: “[t]he Peer review Team recommends that the region and its HEIs – as a matter of urgency – address the widening participation issue through raising aspirations of young people. This can be done through engaging educational institutions with the community and reaching out to schools through pathways programmes that are innovative and captivating. This will be most effective if engagement is channelled through visible projects which demonstrate their relevance to regional communities”.<sup>13</sup>

My position that social development ought to be implemented by higher education institutions as a policy hand in glove with the traditional economic and technical engagement seems to be supported by both previous research and recent case studies. As seen, it can assume multiple forms depending on the sector of incidence. The scope of social development, however, goes beyond services to community, to include

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<sup>11</sup> OECD, “Värmland Region in Sweden”, Peer Review Report for the *Project on supporting the contribution of higher education institutions to regional development*, May 2006, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> OECD, “Twente in the Netherlands”, Peer Review Report for the *Project on supporting the contribution of higher education institutions to regional development*, March 2006, p. 35.

policies for social inclusion, poverty relief, equity in education and cultural development. On the latter, an interesting case is again the University of Twente in the Netherlands, whose best practices include music therapy in prisons and rehabilitation centres, and the work done by the ITC department to produce downloadable maps of the Pakistan region to support the logistic operations following the earthquake in 2005. “Although not directly regional, the effort demonstrates to regional communities, particularly those with their roots in Pakistan, the relevance of HEIs to their everyday lives”.<sup>14</sup>

This last concept is indicative of values that are recurrent behind the cases briefly listed above, and belongs to regional development both in the economic and technical sense, and in the social one: those are the values of closeness, legitimation, understanding of shared goals that give a meaning to the engagement both by the university and by the local actors. As mentioned, these values constitute the social capital of the group. The relevance of these elements for successful networking is not only reprised by the literature on public/private partnerships, but also strongly highlighted through the case studies.

As said, I focus on a conception of development which is based on social and on human capital. This is naturally an extremely broad conception, which needs to be pinpointed. The connection to the literature on innovation lies in the relevance recognized to interaction with customers and cooperation through informal networks as key elements of success (Maskell and Törnqvist, 2003; Freeman, 1995; Lundvall, 1992; Mowery and Oxley, 1995; Nelson, 1993; Håkansson, 1989; Hagedoorn and Schakenraad, 1992); the added value of local interaction as both dialogue and exchange of information, which “may be conducted long-distance, but is often less expensive, more reliable and easier to conduct locally”<sup>15</sup> is endorsed by empirical analysis (Maskell and Törnqvist, 2003; Jaffe et al., 1993; Malmberg, 1996); and comparative analysis on different

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<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Maskell and Gunnar Törnqvist, “The role of universities in the learning region”, in Roel Rutten, Frans Boekema, Elsa Kuijpers (editors), *Economic geography of higher education. Knowledge infrastructure and learning regions*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, p. 134.

environments on a global map<sup>16</sup> highlighted a series of factors which could determine a driving contribution of higher education to the economic performance of a region, among which the concept of critical mass has emerged as crucial: in a context (university-firm interaction) where “there is a need for a ‘precision-tooled’ interaction between researchers and entrepreneurs” and this interaction is based on mutual understanding and trust, “critical mass refers to *communication density* rather than the number of persons involved”.<sup>17</sup> This is echoed in what Amin and Thrift define “insitutional thickness”; that is, the clustering, at a local level, of firms, chambers of commerce, R&D laboratories, government agencies, and training and higher education institutions. Networking is also defined as “associative governance” (Hirst, 1994), with an eye to the politological implications of it rather than its organizational ones. Chatterton and Goddard enrich the concept of networking, naming it “soft infrastructure” by making dialogue-generating social capital (Putnam, 1993) or “untraded interdependencies” (Storper, 1995) one of its winning feats.

Narrowing down the scope of analysis, the conceptual thread connecting network and multiple spheres of authority and social capital is comprised in the structure of the partnership. In 1993, OECD surveyed the partnership strategy as a response to unemployment issues and to rural development, dating the first experiments to the beginnings of the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> In both reports, the notion of partnering was seen as “a promising way of helping local communities to cope with problems specific to their areas”.<sup>19</sup> Coherently, in the 2001 report OECD identifies governance implementation as the ultimate benefit of public-private partnership (PPP) synergies:

[i]mproving governance (...) is at the core of government strategies to reconcile economic prosperity, social cohesion and environmental progress (...) To improve governance, governments (...) have recently created and supported networks of area-based partnerships. Through partnerships,

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<sup>16</sup> Reading references in Peter Maskell and Gunnar Törnqvist, op. cit., p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>18</sup> OECD, *Partnerships for rural development*, Paris, 1990, and *Partnerships – the key to job creation*, Paris, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> OECD, *Local partnership for better governance*, Paris, 2001, p. 15.

agreements on long-term priorities involving a wide range of stakeholders may be used as a guide to deliver programmes and services consistent with local conditions and allocate resources in a way conducive to sustainable development. These partnerships facilitate consultation, co-operation and co-ordination. They are, in short, a tool to improve governance.<sup>20</sup>

According to OECD, PPPs are structured on four axes; the rationale behind their implementation for public service does not aim only at filling efficiency gaps in the governance framework, but also at working out mismatches between policies and programmes set at the central level and specific local conditions.

Having said this, it must be conceded that the mechanisms of an effective partnership constitute an unfocused node to untie. Assumption can be relatively accurate on the factors of success of an autonomous and non-hierarchical collaboration targeted at a specific problem, but each context evolves dynamically together with its constitutive networks, and in any case partnership experiments are difficult to compare and assess, particularly when their objectives are different, due to their strongly local governance agendas.

It is perhaps easier to study partnerships and networks sharing a common policy context and featuring the same categories of leaders or actors. This is the effort made in this paper, an effort necessary in light of the fact that universities are amenable to a great variety of networks and an equally great latitude of partners, not only through the diversity of expertise that they produce and with which they can provide their territories, but also through the extension and the nature of their presence on the territory.

The Anglo-Saxon model of higher education provides a good explanation of this latter point, as it creates a context where, as historian Rothblatt highlights, the accent shifts “from *teaching* to *place*”. A university is a place for the dissemination of universal learning (...) an English university is above all « un milieu d'éducation; milieu plutôt qu'institution, d'éducation plutôt que de recherche; ce milieu est de préférence résidentiel, l'éducation de préférence 'libérale et générale' » (1968). So this milieu has its importance in shaping the role of the university as a knowledge producer: wherever liberal education goes hand

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<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 13.

in hand with higher education, as Newman's heritage linked them, the university is undoubtedly and primarily a collection of teaching subjects, as both anglosaxon and continental models think of it; "but if a university was to become a place for teaching, it needed to have another kind of focus as well, and that would be a 'college'. A college, Newman said, completed the work of universities by providing them with a wholeness. The college was the architectural or spatial counterpart of the liberal education theory of breadth [of the curriculum]. We can now see why the idea of a university must be complemented with place if the goal of rounded and integrated personalities was to be obtained".<sup>21</sup>

What does it mean, exactly, for a university to be complemented with a place? First and foremost, this complementarity must be thought of as dialogical: it works both for the university and for the territory. In addition, this relationship has both tangible and intangible aspects.

It is tangible the influence that the university has, or should have, on local services: on public transport policies (schedules and students' fares), on the real estate market, and, in general, on retail stores, bars, restaurants, entertainment services and activities. All these sectors should be positively affected by the university, which provides a consistent share of young population with specific demands. Not only students, but also researchers and university professors have particular requirements with regards to accessibility to areas of study. If the university's campus can not provide adequate sitting areas (adequate in terms of number, comfort and ICT access) the local environment should adapt to this need. Indeed, this could be easier for an urban than for a rural environment, but universities and higher education institutions established in rural areas (such as Land Grant Universities in the US) might have different requirements than those regarding solely study areas. The same could be said for the departments and Schools of science and technology; it is difficult to generalize the needs of a varied entity like the university, but this variety is matched by the flexibility provided by the networking and partnering toolbox.

Intangible outputs of the presence of a university in the territory are the sense of belonging it generates in the citizens. The idea that the university

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<sup>21</sup> Sheldon Rothblatt, *The modern university and its discontents. The fate of Newman's legacy in Britain and America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

belongs to its city or its region can have powerful repercussions on the idea of higher education. This sense of belonging is boosted by the openness of the university to the local population, which should complement the services it receives from the local area. In the case studies to follow, this openness takes the form of service community and commitment to a problematic area. However, as discussed above, openness can be interpreted literally as applied to libraries, expositions, theatres, premises, sports facilities, extra curricula activities addressed to the general population (as concerts, drama plays, projects of various nature). Some might argue that a university open to the public – in this latter sense – would take attention and resources away from its students – indeed the principal target for whom it should implement its services: there is a risk this might happen, but only when the students themselves, both individually and through students' organisations, are not actively involved in both policies and activities. As for the local population, to have access – albeit occasionally – to the premises or to the staff and students (in the case of community service) of the university they host, might enhance a sense of closeness to the idea of higher education. This aspect should not be neglected. The case studies to follow show that the reputation of the university institution is a powerful driver of unintended expectations and prejudices. The more elitarian it is, the more distant from the everyday social life of the local area the university looks – or sounds, depending on the geographical distance. Both the universities taken into consideration in these cases are structured around one or more campuses – i.e. dedicated places for teaching, following the classification given by Rothblatt. However, I would argue that the Humboldtian idea of the university as of a privileged place of access to education higher than the compulsory education level, holds in the cases of city universities, too – those institutions whose infrastructure is scattered around the urban milieu: which, ideally, should favour its integration into the city. Some might argue, at this point, that the need for an open and approachable university should be weighted by the increasing number of higher education students and graduates; and yet, both empirical evidence and the literature on policies to combat social exclusion show that the withdrawal from formal education is partly alimented by lack of self-confidence, motivation, and expectations on behalf of the school age population (European

Commission, 2008). An encouraging presence of the university on the territory might go in the right direction to address this issue, as mentioned above with regard to the recommendations of the OECD Peer Review group to the University of Twente to engage with the community for *raising aspirations of young people*.

The following section presents two case studies of the engagement of a university in partnership with local actors for social development. Both the universities considered are private institutions, but, as said above, this is irrelevant for the creation of factors of local development. Both case studies are taken from the US higher education context: the first (the Boston University-Chelsea Partnership in Chelsea, Massachusetts, referred to hereafter as BUCP) has been the object of extensive evaluation and on field empirical work composed of individual interviews with key local figures and collection of primary and secondary data carried out over 8 months spent at Boston University in 2006. The second case (the school-university partnership between the University of Pennsylvania and West Philadelphia) has been analyzed second-handedly mostly through desk work and occasional email contacts. The reason for this unbalanced attention to two equally interesting experiments was to provide the first, as the case study of my doctoral dissertation, with a context for analysis and comparison.

This, however, proved rather hard, as the case of BUCP is indeed unique. Chelsea is a small town of approximately 35.080 inhabitants, 1.8 square miles long just north of Boston. The Partnership established a 20 years long day-by-day management of the local public district (the Chelsea public schools) by the Boston University (1989-2008). The Partnership was the response of the district to the severe and stagnating underperformance of its schools. As such, it conflates two practices that, albeit common, have not been implemented together anywhere else, let alone through a higher education institution provided with centrality in the long-term systematic operational management of an underperforming school district. One is the model of community service in the local context of US campuses; the other relates to the reforms of underperforming school districts. The US school districts system is open to localized reforms processes. These can take different forms, depending on the context. University-school partnerships are common practice. In the wide spectrum of school university agreements, partnerships can be considered anything from sending

university faculty to an elementary school for teacher training to a university actually running a school, as in a charter school agreement.<sup>22</sup> The variety of these examples makes it very difficult to make generalizations. However, partnerships have never developed into administrative arrangements, and this makes the BUCP a truly unique case study. Its peculiarity curbs its comparative potential, which could constitute a setback for the analysis of the social function of the universities in implementing factors of local development. Moreover, the nature of schooling in the US, which dictates enormous differences in regulation, curriculum, and all aspects of school management from state to state makes it all the more difficult to generalize educational reforms.

Despite this great variety of typologies and the unicity of the BUCP, the University of Pennsylvania (Upenn) has been involved in community service in West Philadelphia for 22 years now, and it provides many diverse examples of engagement. Additionally, the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnership, as the body constituted by the University for community engagement purposes, is partner of the Council of Europe in the *International Consortium on Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy*. Prof. Ira Harkavy, the Director of the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnership at Upenn, is also one of the most active exponents, in the US, of the theory of social engagement on behalf of higher education institutions.

### **The Boston University-Chelsea Partnership**

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<sup>22</sup> Charter schools are publicly funded elementary or secondary schools in the United States which have been freed from some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools, in exchange for some type of accountability for producing certain results (set forth in each school's charter). State-run charter schools (schools not affiliated with local school districts) are often established by non-profit groups, universities, and some government agencies.

*Structure, strategy, achievements*

After years of mismanagement, in 1988 the School Committee of Chelsea invited Boston University (BU) to take over the public school district, comprising 9 schools covering K-12 education (1 early childhood education centre, 4 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 1 secondary school), which was severely underperforming. The partnership agreement was initiated in 1989, re-confirmed twice, in 1994 and 1999, and is bound to come to a term in June 2008.

In determining the revolution brought in the district by its insulation from the city government, some understanding of the importance of the local control upon education in United States is needed, as this responsibility constitutes one of the most driving powers for citizens (Thornton, 1956; Spring, 1989). The state board of education sets educational policies and oversees to their implementation, but it is the district, under the administration of the Superintendent and the trustee of the School Committee, elected by the citizens, that delivers education to youth.

In light of this, the district of Chelsea would consider a partnership with a private entity more positively than the aid of the state, and therefore accepted the proposal of Boston University President John Silber to run the underperforming district. Not that the state itself was to dislike this option, for the extraneity of the task it would have had to carry through, and the impossibility to devote its human resources to the day-to-day management of a school system. On the other hand, there have been those who favoured a public intervention to a private one. The concern of this party was basically that of preserving the democracy guaranteed by the public nature of the school system: however, neither the state nor the district was keen on starting a cooperation of some kind, which would have been forced upon both considering the urgency of the situation, in the absence of other options. Some may arrive at saying that concerns for the preservation of democratic processes can only sound reasonable when the bottom line of the policy maker is to preserve the health of the public school, not the future of the children. Chelsea, in a way, expressed a concern for its youth which was stronger than the preoccupation for its school system, and acted accordingly.

In this context, the BUCP is an example of PPP because of the varied nature of the actors involved: the Chelsea public school district; the Boston University, a private institution; and the state government of Massachusetts. The relevance of the community in the process was highlighted in the agreement text, but in the first years of the Partnership it was not enforced in deeds.

Structurally, the Partnership agreement gave Boston University the general authority over the district from the Chelsea School Committee,<sup>23</sup> and endowed it to a Management Team appointed by the Presidency and composed of BU personnel (6 members):<sup>24</sup> “the School Committee delegates to the University its powers, functions and/or duties relating to city finances, including, without limitations, the authority to determine expenditures within the total appropriation for educational costs (...) of the General Laws for the preparation of the proposed budget (...) to conduct all business, management and administrative tasks and operations of the Chelsea school system”<sup>25</sup> (see figure 2). In Massachusetts, public school districts are managed by a Superintendent appointed by the School Committee, or School Board, which in turn is elected by the population with a two years mandate. The Superintendency is in charge with the management of financial and human resources,<sup>26</sup> whereas the board sets the general educational policies.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 2. The structure of the BUCP

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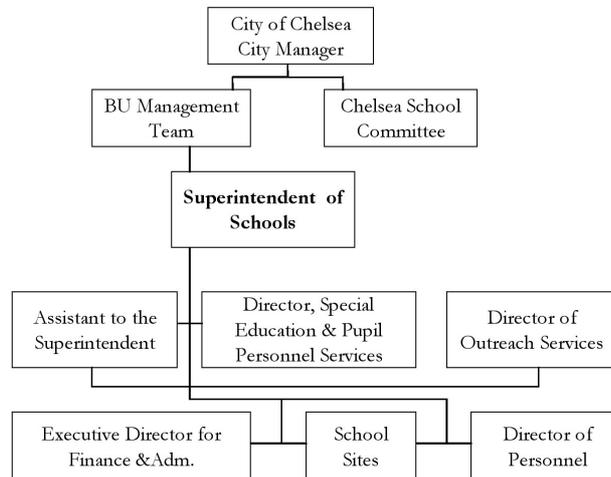
<sup>23</sup> <http://www.chelseaschools.com/school%5Fcommittee>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.chelseaschools.com/management%5Fteam>.

<sup>25</sup> Section 3 of the *Agreement between the Chelsea School Committee and the Trustees of the Boston University*, May 1989.

<sup>26</sup> General laws of Massachusetts, Chapter 71: Section 58.

<sup>27</sup> General laws of Massachusetts, Chapter 71: Section 37. “The school committee in each city and town and each regional school district shall have the power to select and to terminate the superintendent, shall review and approve budgets for public education in the district, and shall establish educational goals and policies for the schools in the district consistent with the requirements of law and statewide goals and standards established by the board of education”.



Source: Baraldi, Labarile, 2007

The Partnership identified seventeen goals that it would strive to achieve during its existence. These goals respond directly to the major problems that the Boston University 1988 Report identified in Chelsea. They are the standards by which progress of the Partnership is judged over the course of time in the yearly *School District Legislative Report* elaborated by the Superintendentcy.

1. Revitalize the curriculum of the city's school system;
2. Establish programs for the professional development of school personnel and for the expansion of learning opportunities for parents;
3. Improve the test scores of students in the school system;
4. Decrease the dropout rate for students in the school system;
5. Increase the average daily student attendance rate for the school system;
6. Increase the number of high school graduates from the school system;
7. Increase the number of high school graduates from the school system that go on to attend four-year colleges;

8. Increase the number of job placements for graduates of the school system;
9. Develop a community school program through which before-school, after-school, and summer programs are offered to students in the school system and through which adult education classes for inhabitants of the city are offered;
10. Identify and encourage the utilization of community resources;
11. Establish programs that link the home to the school system;
12. Decrease teacher absenteeism in the school system;
13. Improve the financial management of the school system and expand the range of operating funds available to the school system;
14. Increase salaries and benefits for all staff, and raise the average teacher salary to make it competitive with the statewide average;
15. Construct effective recruiting, hiring, and retention procedures for all staff members;
16. Establish student assessment designs and procedures that are of assistance in monitoring programs and that act as incentives for staff members in each school;
17. Seek to expand and modernize physical facilities in the school system.

The BUCP addressed managerial and educational issues with the purpose of generating sustainable results. In this perspective, all commentators agree on the fact that the real test of the value of the BUCP is the sustainability of the school system performance after the expiration of the agreement in June 2008.

To pursue the aforementioned set of goals, the Partnership immediately insulated the school district from the patronized system it once made with a corrupt city government: “we will be developing and exposing to the nation the result of a new administrative structure in which there is an institutional buffer between the members of the School Committee, who are subjected to constant political pressure of an improper sort and the management of the schools which if they are to be effective must be operated free of that

improper kind of interference”.<sup>28</sup> The term ‘insulation’ indicates a model of political autonomy. It is necessary to specify that this autonomy had a political nature, since when it comes to schools it is easy to read autonomy as the outcome of a process of decentralization. The Chelsea district has not been decentralized because it was already; and it has not been made autonomous because there was no body it ought to have set autonomous from. All commentators and all the actors interviewed agreed that the move was a successful one. Specifically, the political umbrella provided by the Boston University guarded the autonomy of the School Committee members, who, deprived of factual powers, simply were in no condition to accept patronizing offers.<sup>29</sup>

The BUCP provided a successful experiment for the Chelsea schools, under different perspectives.

1. It implemented managerial skills and professionalisation in the district, ensuring that the administration mechanism would be sustainable in the future. From a school department where computers were unknown and balance sheets handwritten, Chelsea shifted to a sophisticated system where standards are set clearly, and the mechanism is reliable thanks to a steady ongoing presence from the top level of decision-making.

2. It helped build 6 new schools, restructuring old schools in severe disrepair and organizing the transportation service for the students.

3. It shaped the curriculum in the schools through grades K to 12 by providing it with a structure and a focus, and by endorsing its implementation with strong linguistic pre-school preparation. The upshots of this effort have been vertical alignment through grades and harmonization between middle and high school framework.

BU has brought to the district two successful programmes: the *Intergenerational Literacy Project (ILP)* and the *Early Childhood Education*. The former provide immigrant parents with morning and afternoon classes (depending on the parents' availability) to improve their read, written and spoken English; while in class, parents receive childcare

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<sup>28</sup> John Silber, “A brief and discursive essay concerning the common schools of the City of Chelsea (lately call'd Winnisimmet) together with certain proposals for their better ordering and new-furbishing by a gentleman of Brook-line: an address to the Massachusetts Historical Society”, transcript, November 17, 1989, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Glenn, Boston University School of Education, interview, April 2006.

services for infants and toddlers and supplemental education for pre-schoolers. Each adult class is staffed by two teachers and three tutors for individual instruction, whereas the pre-school classroom is staffed by a teacher and five tutors.

The *Early Childhood Education* (ECE) programme draws upon the idea developed by the Head Start Project, launched in United States under the presidency of Lyndon Johnson in the mid-60s as the pilot programme of the so-called War on Poverty, of addressing two of the principal problems of kids in inner-city districts (nutrition and health care and English as a second language) together.<sup>30</sup> The ECE is open to children between the ages of three and four, and combines academic work with linguistic training. Children receive breakfast and lunch, and at the end of the programme are ready to approach primary education with the proficiency expected by school-age native English speakers.

In both programmes, BU employs its own graduate students, as well as its undergraduate students for training purposes.

4. By centralizing the curriculum, BU provided the district with clarity and focus of the mission, thus winning the psychological biases inside the school system. Chelsea schools do not constitute a demoralized system anymore. Reformers, whether from BU, from the state or from the city, worked upon a deep-felt community pride which helped raise hopes. To hope, Assistant Superintendent Mary Borque would add clarity, direction and focus of a mission, as the major contribution of Boston University. She feels comfortable with the word “centralization” in describing a system where the mission and goals stated in the contract acted as the vision, the stakeholders compacted around the Management Team as a centre for articulating this vision, and around the administration and school department as the centre for implementing it: the more the trust increased, the more the two nodes complemented each other.<sup>31</sup>

5. It provided free high quality specialized education to the Chelsea teachers, boosting their professional development.

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<sup>30</sup> On this, an excellent volume among the jungle of specialized literature is Edward Zigler and Susan Muenchow, *Head Start. The inside story of America's most successful educational experiment*, Basicbooks, New York, 1992. Zigler was involved into the engineering of Head Start right from the beginning.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Borque, Assistant Superintendent, interview, July 2006.

6. As a result, students' performance, particularly in the elementary school, has improved dramatically, as it is evident in detail by comparing the *Reports to Legislature* in different years. Yearly progresses evaluations are elaborated by the Massachusetts Department of Education, [www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu), and the longitudinal comparison of students test scores between 1998 and 2005 shows a cumulative improvement over time, to which it corresponds an increase in the graduation rate: drop out rates have decreased from 16.30% in a.y. 1997/8 to 10.88% in a.y. 2005/6.

### *Context*

The Chelsea District started to decline rapidly during the 1950s, as a result of the political, economic and social deterioration of the entire urban area. Following the construction of the Tobin Memorial Bridge, the city found itself in a state of emergency, fuelled by the corruption of politicians, the rapid deterioration of the quality of public services and by the increase of social problems related to the diffusion of poverty (Delattre, 1994). These alarming signs of a social malady worsened in the mid '70s, because of ethnic dissension resulting from the waves of immigrants that dramatically shifted the ethnic balance in place until then. The city of Chelsea is a traditional gateway into the USA and a blue-collar suburb of Polish, Irish and Italian immigrants: following the migratory influx of the 1970s, the Hispanic population increased rapidly, reaching 40% of the total population in 1998. Add to that the Asian and African ethnic groups, who account for 10% of the total population, and the result is that the students of the Chelsea Schooling District speak 39 languages and 85% of them belong to ethnic minority groups. The Chelsea Police Department was slow to respond to this demographic shift, and as a result, the relations between police and minority groups deteriorated to the point that, in 1983, a riot against the police broke out. There were no Spanish-speaking police officers on the force until 1992 and the tension has only recently dissipated.

As for the conditions of the schooling system at the time, towards the end of the 1980s, student costs, financed by the municipality, were considerably less than the average costs in the State of Massachusetts. In 1988-89, only a quarter of all High School students took the Scholastic Achievement Test (now known as the SAT Reasoning Test). Only a fifth of

all High School graduates planned to attend a four-year college course; 25% of all teenage girls were pregnant or already mothers; and 52% of those who attended high school did not graduate.<sup>32</sup>

At the root of the problem in Chelsea are poverty and the conditions that accompany it. Poverty in Chelsea is accompanied by bad housing, not being able to pay the medical bill when your child gets sick, sometimes leaving the kids unsupervised, owning an unreliable used car, getting to work too late when the car breaks down, losing your job because of it, tensions in the family, divorce, moving to another place, starting all over in another low paid job, in another school, etc. Parents living in Chelsea often are working two or three jobs. Some of them lack the time to oversee if children do their homework. Some do not speak English, making it impossible for them to adequately help their children through school (Spellings, 2005).<sup>33</sup>

Parents involvement and students attendance are some of the challenges faced by the district. Schools, however, have to combat against two complementary issues: students' mobility, and language diversity.

Due primarily to its position as a passage gateway from Logan International Airport and the Commonwealth, which attract low-income immigration without retaining higher income households, Chelsea sends to its schools a population whose average transience rate is 32 % (Chelsea public schools, internal data).

Among both mobile and non-mobile students, English as a second language is a further obstacle to proficient instruction. 79.3% of the students come from homes where the primary language is not English. The current demographic situation in the city is characterized by a dense incidence of Hispanics. In 2000, year of the most recent data, the dominant ethnicities in the city were the white and Hispanic ones.

The Hispanic presence in Chelsea is 4 times the national average, and 7 times that of Massachusetts.

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<sup>32</sup> Data available on the report *Boston University report on the Chelsea public schools. A model for excellence in urban education*, Boston University, Boston, 1988.

<sup>33</sup> Frans Spierings, op. cit., p. 16. The authors quoted are M. A. Crenson, *Neighborhood politics*, Harvard University Press, Boston, 1983, and M. Spellings, *Helping your child with homework. For parents of children in elementary through middle school*, Washington, US Department of Education, 2005.

Table 2. The Hispanic population rate in Chelsea and in Massachusetts

	<b>Chelsea</b>	<b>Massachusetts</b>
Total population	35,080	6,349,097
Hispanic or Latino Population	16,984	428,729
% Hispanic or Latino	48%	7%
% Under 18	27%	23%
% Born Overseas	36.1%	12.2%
Per Capita Income	\$14,628	\$25,952
% $\geq$ 25 without High School Diploma or GED (General Education Development)	40%	15%
% Poor	2.,3%	9.3%
Employed Rate	6.4%	4.5%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, 1999

As for the School Committee, the electoral system is generally expected to foster diversity and democratic representation when structured per district (per ward) rather than a large: in the first case, candidates run for their own district, and they represent the average category residing in their specific neighborhoods (Asians, Hispanics, Anglos and so on). This is a more effective system than the election at large, where candidates run for the city, because districts are generally strongly characterized in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and their representation in the board might be hampered by racially polarized voting patterns. In Chelsea, the School Committee has been elected per ward since 2000 only;<sup>34</sup> the Hispanic community presented to the Federal Government the district voting system as a case of under-representation of minorities, and successfully had it changed into the creation of nine districts.

In Chelsea, the Committee, according to Elizabeth McBride, one of his historical members (the only one elected at large), is not given enough consideration by the community – there are never enough candidates running for it, which makes elections poorly competitive and diversified.<sup>35</sup> The opening to a higher representation of minorities in the School

<sup>34</sup> Although candidates are still free to choose whether to run per district or at large.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth McBride, School Committee, Burke Elementary School Site School Council, interview, July 2006.

Committee in 2000 did not act as a pull factor for participation. After involving the federal government into ensuring ward elections, the Hispanic leaders did not provide a candidate. “The local community organizers have tried hard to involve community members in education. They are slowly making progress as indicated by the following example. Only since two years (2005), has a Spanish speaking person become a member on the School Committee, the Vice Chairman. Local activists had hoped for more”.<sup>36</sup> To what extent the percentage of non legal immigrants affect this phenomenon, is hard to measure.

To this, it must be added that under the political umbrella of Boston University the School Committee has assumed a descriptive, or passive, sort of representation power, in the sense that its members feel responsible for *representing* the population’s interests, instead of feeling responsible for *determining* policies *on behalf* of the population – which is a form of substantive representation (Berkman and Plutzer, 2006; Mansbridge, 1999; Pitkin, 1967). This might be a further reason for the low rate of participation of the community to its School Committee (and, as Elizabeth McBride points out, to other participatory bodies like the Site School Councils).<sup>37</sup>

In addition, the socioeconomic status of parents is a strong retainer of participation. Due to the poverty rates, the overlapping time schedules and the language barriers, “[m]any families in Chelsea do not have many options for doing this”.<sup>38</sup> Despite the opportunities offered by the *Intergenerational Literacy Programme* (par. 3.1) and other community initiatives,<sup>39</sup> many low-income, non-English speaking parents tend not to be aware of the existence, the function and the advantages of the Site School Councils, the School Committee, or even of the Superintendent. As many

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<sup>36</sup> Frans Spierings, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth McBride, interview, July 2006. Composed of school staff, teachers, students and parents, the Site School Councils (SSC) are both decision-making and advisory bodies; their purpose is to develop school improvement plans and to participate in school walk-throughs; the SSC is expected to maintain communications with the school board, students and community.

<sup>38</sup> Frans Spierings, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> See City of Chelsea, *Youth and family resource guide. Healthy bodies, healthy minds*, May 2005.

of them point out, after being informed on the role of these bodies, interesting as it would be to participate, many of the meetings take place at working hours, and no translation into Spanish or other minorities languages is provided. To this, it should be added that immigrant parents, particularly if not fully integrated, feel a sense of inadequacy in interacting with the school staff.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, this does not hold true for all parents. More integrated parents and long-time Anglo residents constitute a well educated and informed cohort and should be considered apart. The group in transition, which is not detached from the institutional set as the first, but not yet part of it as the second, is also a different case. Further distinctions should be drawn among the parents of toddlers and primary school children, and parents of higher grades students in terms of engagement with the schools.<sup>41</sup>

However, there is no disaggregate data on these groups, and although it could be assumed that low-income and non-English speakers are the majority among the parents, the last extensive survey addressing parents' status, needs and feedbacks dates back to 1988, making it difficult both to generalize and to make recommendations.

All this considered, commentators agree that parents are more responsive to the current system, which works effectively and improved systematically over the years.<sup>42</sup> However, Principal Tim Howard, from Kelly Elementary School, points out that outreaching to parents – a policy taking place primarily at Chelsea High School thanks to the efforts of Nancy Melendez, Parental Liaison Officer of the Chelsea High School –<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hispanic parents, Chelsea High School, interview, June 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Puccetti, Boston University School of Education, interview, July 2006.

<sup>42</sup> See the *Reports to Legislature* elaborated by the Chelsea School Department, 1992-2006.

<sup>43</sup> On the parenting classes organized by Melendez, Frans Spierings notes: "The participation of Latinos in these classes is high. Also parents from other new immigrant groups participate in these classes. The program is now also starting at the middle school. The classes are set up in a way that fits the culture and the life world of the parents involved. When students go to high school, parents often back off, to give their kids some space. Different parenting styles are being taught to parents to cope with this transition. The classes are organized at 08:00 in the morning and they are taught in Spanish. 35 parents attend every week, mostly fathers, who work all night at the workplace, and then start classes with

was not an initiative of Boston University; it may be said that the University did not favour such an opening for fear of interferences in the decision-making process. Moreover, this involvement acts mainly at the school level; parents tend to interact with teachers and principals, but do not participate in the institutionalized decision-making process.

Once again, the school grade of the student-parent target plays a significant difference in this respect. Commentators from the district administration point out that BU's strategy, concentrating almost entirely on preschool and primary education, neglected to stream a curriculum plan to connect them with issues pertinent to secondary education. Of the same advice is Molly Baldwin, Director of *ROCA*, an NGO targeting problematic youth age 14-24, even if she does not focus on curriculum only: "until the past several years, they were not willing to talk about middle and high school issues".<sup>44</sup>

Another aspect explaining why representation in Chelsea does not trigger participation can be brought forth on the basis of Berkman and Plutzer's analysis of school districts' funding policies. Focusing on the funding levels of the district as political choices, Berkman and Plutzer point out that these are conditioned by local resources (income and tax rate) and housing value – as well as by political institutions (budget referenda, town meetings), the public opinion, and interest groups like teachers unions and senior citizens (Berkman and Plutzer, 2006). The conceptual implication of this is extended by Berkman and Plutzer to a positive correlation between local funding and responsiveness; that is to say, communities are usually sensitive to expenditures in education.

At the local level, districts are funded through local tax revenues, mainly taxes on home and business. At the state level, low income districts like Chelsea have been targeted by the 1993 Massachusetts Educational Reform Act (MERA). This reform was the response to the Supreme Judicial Court's decision regarding the *McDuffy vs. Robertson* case (1993), ruling that poorer districts in the Commonwealth were in fact neglected by the state through their funding system as more affluent communities were allowed to provide better schooling (in terms of schools and staff) than

a cup of coffee, to go home for sleep afterwards" (Frans Spierings, op. cit., p. 17).

<sup>44</sup> Mary Borque, interview, April 2006; Molly Baldwin, *ROCA*, interviewed by Frans Spierings.

poorer communities. This distribution positively affects communities like Chelsea in virtue of their low level of gentrification.<sup>45</sup> In 2000, the rate of owner-occupied housing units in Chelsea was as low as 28.9%, compared to the state's average rate of 61.7%. Moreover, in a small reality like Chelsea, the proportion of Subsidized Housing Units (SHU) is heavy on the balance: as of September 2007, the percentage of SH Inventory Units was estimated by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development of 17.2%, as opposed to the state average of 9.5%.

How tax inequalities would affect Chelsea, where most of the households are tenants, is easy to understand. Until 1993, the districts would be financed locally by property tax, and in a city where gentrification has for a long time been a remote dream, this could not have made up for the needs of the schools. The downward trend started to be reversed by the action undertaken by Boston University, with the *Different September Foundation*. Not that state aid was absent in the previous years: at the inception of the Partnership, 90% of children qualified for and received free or reduced lunch. However, after 1992, state funds started to increase, and in the current distribution they make for 80% of the education expenses, whereas the local property taxes amount to 20%. In other words, the work of Boston University in Chelsea is heavily dependent on state aid.<sup>46</sup>

#### *The state and the Partnership*

The Partnership can be considered a case of public-private collaboration in the sense that the school system involved is public, not because the Commonwealth is a major stakeholder in the collaboration mechanism. Yet, the state of Massachusetts has impacted the BU-Chelsea Partnership in 3 ways:

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<sup>45</sup> Gentrification is "the restoration and upgrading of deteriorated urban property by middle-class or affluent people, often resulting in displacement of lower-income people" (*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Fourth edition, 2000, updated in 2003).

<sup>46</sup> State aid is identified under the label of Chapter 70 on the districts' budgets. For details on the Chapter 70 formula, the updated state foundation budget, and the expenditure categories, visit the School Finance section on <http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/>.

1. Directly, by providing support both to the negotiation process and the collaboration mechanisms;
2. Through MERA 1993, forcing a polity turn for BU, which held accountable to the State on the basis of performance measured through MCAS;
3. By promoting social cohesion, through the work of the 1991-1995 Receivership on the city of Chelsea.

1. There have been two cases of direct intervention of the government in the partnership, when legitimacy to the networking process was called for by the Hispanic minorities who felt under-represented in the process. The state government approved the BU-Chelsea deal once the contract had been signed by the parts. Not much later, the authority's intervention was prompted by the leaders of the Hispanic community who felt underconsidered by the university leadership. The deal was strongly supported at the state level for the sponsoring of two Chelsea-born political figures: senators Richard Voke and Tom Birmingham. In consideration of the project, former Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis reassured the Latino community that the government would have monitored the constitutionality of the process.<sup>47</sup> The action undertaken by the Hispanic community in 2000 for representation in the School Committee has been mentioned above.

2. The Massachusetts Educational Reform Act (MERA). Implemented in 1992-3, MERA had two significant consequences on low income districts as Chelsea. The first was the reformed funding system mentioned above, which entailed a rigorous degree of accountability on behalf of the districts; that is, Chapter 70 state aid had the effect of tying the BU Management Team up to a strict set of state regulations concerning curriculum and standards.<sup>48</sup> Students poor performance, as mentioned in the opening, constituted the very thrust for the state to intervene actively in education. The outcome of higher accountability to the governmental

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<sup>47</sup> Michael Dukakis, former Governor of Massachusetts, interview, June 2006.

<sup>48</sup> MERA had also launched the innovative model of charter schools, "public schools exempt from local control and existing union-contract restrictions" (Massachusetts Politics and Policy online, <[www.issuesource.org](http://www.issuesource.org)>). Charter schools are not taken into consideration here as they do not relate to the district of Chelsea.

authorities in which schools are now held has produced, as a result, a certain alignment of curriculum framework. MERA 93 mandated a statewide test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), which is based upon a state curriculum framework. In practical terms, since 2003 MCAS is compulsory in order to earn a high school diploma. Without detailing the innovations brought by the MCAS to the curricula statewide, it is important to locate this reform into the Partnership. Up to 1993, BU had enjoyed great discretion in the administration of the district, and for reasons related to efficiency it had chosen to focus structural reforms on the managerial aspects of the system. After 1993, it found that, as the replacement of the School Committee, it was held accountable to the state for its work in Chelsea, and therefore had to shift its focus away from management to curriculum and achievement. It could be remarked that a strong basis of operational skills was needed anyway, and BU had just time to start filling that gap before being streamed on to different priorities.

3. The Receivership. Finally, any analysis of the achievements of the Partnership would be remiss if it did not give due attention to the most radical of the state's intervention over Chelsea. Detached from the Partnership agreement, the period in time known as the Receivership (1990-1995) deeply rearranged the political structure of the city, providing a constructive context for the schools to flourish.

The report by Susan L. Podziba, *Social capital formation, public building and public mediation. The Chelsea Charter consensus process* (occasional paper for the Kettering Foundation, Dayton, 1998), is the account of the process of democracy building in Chelsea, in the years 1990-1995. The small dimensions of Chelsea made the governance experiment reported by Susan Podziba in 1998 and the partnership between the school district and Boston University inevitably overlapping.<sup>49</sup>

In 1990, given the serious state of mismanagement and corruption the municipality had endured since the beginning of the 1970s, the state of Massachusetts put the city under Receivership. Chelsea's legal demise was an obliged step, and the only alternative to the end of the town status,

<sup>49</sup> This report is also available in the Italian reviewed edition under the title: *Chelsea Story. Come una cittadina corrotta ha rigenerato la sua democrazia*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 2006. The two volumes are hereby referred to as 1998 and 2006.

which would have been a shocking solution, and the bankruptcy, which according to the Massachusetts legislation is unconstitutional for cities. Four of Chelsea's past mayors had been convicted on federal corruption charges, and some of them incarcerated; the city was the outpost of both Italian and Irish mobs, controlling drug traffics; the municipality worked on an allegedly patron-client system, and could not deliver basic public services like snow removal and trash disposal; the majority of firemen and policemen alike have been convicted of corruption and misbehaviour.

The State therefore appointed Receiver James Carlin, who showed great authority and little diplomacy in cleaning up the community from its corrupted elements and practices. After the formidable revolution he brought in a matter of one year, in 1991 Lewis Harry Spence, who had served as Deputy Receiver in the previous eight months, took over the lead and his work is allegedly considered a turning point in the story of the city of Chelsea. His task was to replace "a political machine, notorious for corruption and mismanagement, with a municipal government that would truly serve the needs of an ethnically diverse, factionalized, and disillusioned population".<sup>50</sup> "The Chelsea Charter Consensus Process (...) was designed to engage a politically disillusioned community in the formation of its new local government, the creation of which would enable the city to be released from state Receivership. The Chelsea Process sought to create a public and increase social capital throughout the Chelsea community, as necessary prerequisites to engaging community negotiators in integrative bargaining to reach a common public goal. In addition, social capital and a stronger public could help revitalize and protect Chelsea's new democracy".<sup>51</sup>

It would be incorrect to consider the Hispanic clustering and their political claims as a mere expression of troublesome whim, as some seem to do. First of all, because the Latino community was highly diversified, as it is today. Immigrants from El Salvador were numerous, but not politically active; nor were the Dominicans, who on the other hand formed a small aggregation. The Portorican community was a very nurtured, active and organized group, and took the leading role for the Hispanic whole.

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<sup>50</sup> Susan Podziba, 1998, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, p. 7.

Therefore, the long term goal of involving the Latino community into political organizations did not respond to a common political interest. Commissioner Spence's view on the situation at that time is that "the goal of activating Latino community was largely based around politics that defined itself as adversarial to the dominant Anglo politics of the community; therefore, it was opposed to any form of cooperation".<sup>52</sup> Not that a sense of frustration could not be justified vis-à-vis the actual oppression suffered by the Hispanics, but the reaction seemed to build a factual polity of frustration which ruled out both confrontation and collaboration.

The priority of the Receivership was therefore to battle over the control of the cocaine trade by the local organized crime,<sup>53</sup> while at the same time diving out any replacement of it (mainly of Dominican and Columbian control) at birth. The first step to take the government of the city away from the mob was therefore to replace the chief officers of the police department – namely the older ones. Spence recalls that younger officers were actually motivated in their mission; in the years, Hispanics began to join the team also. The second crucial social goal was the integration of the two big ethnic groups, in the effort to redefine the cultural boundaries from Anglo vs. Latino to law-biding vs. law-breaking.

It was Spence's decision to start a process of consultation for a new statute implementing a brand new political structure in the city. His predecessor had hired an external expert to draft a new statute for Chelsea; Spence opted for a participatory process which could involve the community, through the work of an appointed commission, and with the aid of a professional mediation team, into the drafting process and the creation of new norms of self-government. "To win the challenge of Chelsea, the drafting process had to enforce the network of democratic practices already in place and help it spread in the whole community; it had to educate and motivate to participation both the new immigrants who had no history of democratic experience behind and the elderly locals who would not react to corruption anymore".<sup>54</sup>

In 1998, two years after voting in favour of the new statute and system,

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<sup>52</sup> Lewis H. Spence, interview, August 2006.

<sup>53</sup> For more information on the figure of Whitey Bulger, see Dick Lehr, Gerard O'Neill, *Black mass: the Irish mob, the FBI and a devil's deal*, PublicAffairs, New York, 2000. I am grateful to Lewis H. Spence for this reference.

Chelsea won the All-America City Award, an honour to civic excellence for those communities successful in working together to address critical local issues.<sup>55</sup> The path which took Chelsea to this important achievement has implied the construction of both trust and cooperative practices. Podziba proposes that one of the indicators of the lack of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) in Chelsea was the lack of belief in the possibility to be listened to by the government in the need for change. Another socio-cultural gap that had to be filled in Chelsea was the opportunity to transform the residents into public actors; in other words, a public dimension as the channel of participation was missing (Podziba, 2006). “The process we were creating aimed at opening channels for Chelsea’s reserves of social capital to flow in; an ocean of public protagonism was needed for a stable structure of self-government to set up”.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, essential to the success of the project has been the constant support and involvement of the residents. “If the public dimension had somehow disappeared, the new government would have been a flop because it wouldn’t represent those it had to govern. And it is right among those who remain outside the process – either out of delusion or of indifference – that opponents would go find the major obstacle to the process”.<sup>57</sup>

As a result of this process, there is evidence that Chelsea’s residents are showing new-found political will and cooperation: this test case, as Podziba points out, is the vivid example of what David Mathews calls “experimenting with cure” (Mathews, 1994). In drafting their new charter, the Chelseans prohibited anyone previously convicted of violating the public trust from running for or taking the city office, so as to inoculate the community for previous political illnesses. Also, they chose to entrust the municipality not to a mayor, but to a city manager, external to the city, hired by an elected council. This renewed conscience of themselves as a community allowed the Chelseans to constructively deal with the deep reforming process taking place in their schools.

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<sup>54</sup> Susan L. Podziba, *Chelsea story*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2006, p. 24 (my translation).

<sup>55</sup> I am grateful to Lewis H. Spence for this reference.

<sup>56</sup> Susan L. Podziba, *ivi*, p. 37 (my translation).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

*The university and the community*

The Partnership was an idea of John Silber, who has been President of Boston University from 1970 to 1996. Silber is perceived as a highly controversial figure. He is a brilliant expert in education, a conservative educator committed to public schools, and a powerful leader, strongly opinionated but not keen on negotiation. His own vision, among other things, piloted the creation of the Early Childhood Learning Centre, where immigrant pre-school children learn intensive English for three years before grade 1. On the other hand, Silber was against bilingual education in schools (which, at that time, was legally required to schools),<sup>58</sup> and often expressed publicly remissive opinions on the Hispanic community. As former Receiver Lewis Harry Spence put it:

at the beginning it was clear to me that the efforts on educational issues were constantly derailed by Silber's statements, which would come out every now and then and were so provocative that the Receivership, after working hard in building pieces of trust, would lose all focus. So what I did as Receiver was to keep John Silber out of Chelsea (...) I worked with his staff to discourage him from coming. He probably understood my strategy: the matter of fact was that he actually stopped coming. In three years, he never showed up (...) The Partnership was identified by the community with him because he was so outrageous. It didn't matter what good the University, under him, was doing to the schools. So my effort was to have the Latino community agree on supporting the Partnership and all the positive features it was bringing to Chelsea, if the insults to them would stop.<sup>59</sup>

"The reality – former Superintendent of Chelsea, and former Dean of BU School of Education Douglas Sears explains – was that the project was meant to reflect John Silber's vision of education".<sup>60</sup> This vision meant to apply a middle class education system (past memory of the Jewish, Polish, Italian and Irish middle class) to a low income population, affected almost entirely by Latino and Asian welfare rates.<sup>61</sup> This can be understood when

<sup>58</sup> John Silber, former President of Boston University, interview, June 2006.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis H. Spence, interview, August 2006.

<sup>60</sup> Douglas Sears, former Superintendent of the Chelsea District, interview, February 2006.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem.

considering that the School Committee who invited the university to sign an agreement was composed by Anglo Chelsea residents.<sup>62</sup> Boston University implemented action on the mismanagement of the system, obtaining excellent results, but it overlooked the demographic changes which the city had undergone in the years. In other words, the university offered an integrated strategy to reform the schools in Chelsea, but not an integrated approach to the problem. Silber's vision was also centralizing: all decisions were taken by the Presidency of the University. On one hand this unbalance had the benefit of providing neat directionality to the decision-making; on the other, directionality was identified with the controversial figure of Silber.

An additional aspect of the university's approach which had to the effect to hamper the relations with the community lied in the exclusion, from the quasi entirety of the BUCP process, of the Boston University School of Social Work, which for years had been present on field in Chelsea with training, research and consulting programmes. At different stages (coherently with the policy priorities) the School of Management and the School of Education were involved in the programme: interestingly, the latter was only introduced in the policy setting after both the teachers' union and the School Committee lamented its absence. The School of Social Work, on the contrary, joined the effort at the beginning, but was progressively neglected, and, with it, a community-based approach went disregarded. In other words, as Melving Delgado, Co-director of the Centre for Addiction Research and Service of BU School of Social Work would put it, "BU did not approach the Latinos extensively as a community of students and families as partners. They would have been receptive. That was golden opportunity to help them franchise (...) BU brought a hierarchical approach into a community that did not deal fine with hierarchy".

The situation was bound to change, at least informally, towards the mid-90s, for multiple reasons. Silber left the chair in 1996, when the Management Team was beginning to enjoy more autonomy once the Partnership was on safe tracks. In addition, the appointment of Douglas

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<sup>62</sup> And the vote to accept the university's proposal was not accepted immediately, nor unanimously.

Sears to the Superintendency of Chelsea in 1995 constituted a significant change towards community outreach and stability.

Sears is remembered as the Superintendent who would ride his bike across town; who would ride on the school bus to make sure it was on time – and took the chance to review math with the kids; who would ensure the snow would be cleaned away at night for streets to be viable in the morning; who would show up in the schools to talk to teachers, principals and students, and make sure the work of all was focused.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Sears supervised the district for five years for the first time in the history of the Partnership, following a high turnover of Superintendents in the previous years, thus providing the internal administration of the district with a stability that it had lacked. This positive stability eased the way to a higher degree of communication from both parts – university and community. In fact, leaving aside the small group of negotiators from both parties,<sup>64</sup> it is safe to say that as BU was perceived by the Hispanic community as a elitist, alien authoritative body, so the community was perceived by BU as a blind laymen opposition cohort.

Frans Spierings found that the various nongovernmental agencies working with the people in the city addressing different social, political and educational issues all took shape in the years corresponding or immediately following the launch of the Partnership (Spierings, 2006). “These organizations concurred on one thing: the public school system belongs to the community and not to the university”.<sup>65</sup> This phenomenon can be seen as the response to the lack of common political purpose Spence recalls. If it is safe to say that the contrary attitude of some of the Hispanic leaders towards Boston University acted as a political glue in the broader Latino community, it is also important to remark that different reactions came from different needs. Some of the opponents nurtured a fundamental lack of trust in the Partnership; others realized that the university would not address issues they thought it should, and got organized to fill the gap. Some others – like the teachers’ union, who were not involved if not later

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<sup>63</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth McBride, who at that time was Chairman of the School Committee, remembers interacting with Hispanic immigrants who did not identify with some of the most outspoken leaders amongst the opponents.

<sup>65</sup> Frans Spierings, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

in the process, and suffered severe cuts in the schools staff – felt inexcusably overlooked.

In the case of the teachers, their opposition and fear that the adjustments to the curriculum brought by BU would not be consistent with the factual needs of the students lately disappeared.<sup>66</sup> In general, all fears relating to schools performance and the discrimination of Hispanic children in school followed suit; as said, there is evidence that overall parents are satisfied with the school system, and those who have stayed long enough notice the difference in enthusiastic tones. There have been longer-standing issues, as the neglect on behalf of BU of the middle and high schools to focus on early childhood education, following Silber's intuition that basic language education had to be safeguarded as the path to successful performance in the following grades. Cuts in budget and lack of attention to all grades but the primary are still a matter of disapproval by some commentators.

Chelsea is now home to some 20 NGOs, without counting the activities organized by the local Catholic and Episcopal churches, targeting youth, community relations, minorities and disadvantaged groups.<sup>67</sup>

### Conclusions

The Partnership considered in this case study proved successful in the objectives that it had set for itself, thus proving a positive case of an active role played by a university in local development.

As mentioned, the achievements of the partnership can be summarized in: significant increase in the quality of both teaching and learning, as the by-product of new school buildings, relevant teacher training, health and nutritional programmes in the schools, and the centralization and harmonization of the curriculum. Improvements in students' performance are supported by test score evidence. The vast majority of the goals set have been reached: the challenges presented to the schools by poverty, students' mobility and linguistic diversity are constitutive of the Chelsea community, and the approach to them goes beyond the scope of the Partnership. Overwhelmingly, commentators are proud to show the

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<sup>66</sup> See Rita Kirshstein, Diane Pelavin, *On the front line: Chelsea teachers and Chelsea-BU agreement*, US Department of education, Office of policy and planning, 1992.

<sup>67</sup> City of Chelsea, *Youth and family resource guide. Healthy bodies, healthy minds*, May 2005.

outstanding results of the agreement, and refer to it as a breakthrough for the whole city.

On its behalf, the university provides the School of Education's students, both graduate and undergraduate, with training opportunities in a demanding environment as the one in Chelsea, by ensuring that, in quality of teachers and tutors, they can count upon advanced facilities, textbooks, and premises, as well as professional mentoring, all of which is provided by the university itself.

BU's professional staff has also taken advantage of the Partnership, particularly in the School of Education, by addressing the research issues enveloped in the project: this has happened mostly at the inception of the partnership, and lately, given the amount of data gathered over the 17 years of collaboration.

The success of the Partnership also had repercussions over the reputation of the university, by endorsing the image of a research university (the 4th biggest in the US) with a commitment to community service.<sup>68</sup> The Partnership plays a significant role in the marketing of BU School of Education; Silber's vision of the Partnership echoed a long tradition of community service initiated in 1918, at the foundation of the School.

Yet, some lessons can be drawn from the Partnership for the university. The action of university can not be identified with the achievements of the partnership altogether, even though its contribution is highly predominant. Indeed, it is this element of leadership that makes this case study absolutely unique. However, it is safe to say that the action of the university has proven necessary but not sufficient.

It would be remiss to provide an account of the BUCP without considering the process of co-causality among all interest groups, which has developed over the years, at times not under the initiative of the university, and, in certain cases, even a *san* unintended effect of its action.

"Reaching agreements that are compatible with all interests does not mean groupthink (...) collaboration does not mean that everyone has to agree on the best possible solution; it only means that they have to be willing to support the decision once it is made".<sup>69</sup> This difficulty is

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<sup>68</sup> <http://www.bu.edu/president/ccw>.

<sup>69</sup> Ann Marie Thomson, James L. Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

overcome in literature by defining specific leadership skills (broad-picture thinking, framing, team building, negotiation and mediation, coaching, strategic thinking, communication, conflict resolution and problem solving), allowing for the network to function without bridling its non-hierarchical potential (McGuire, 2006).

It was inevitable and necessary that at the inception of the Partnership, the university should take a firm stand and lead a powerful strategy. Yet, it has been due to individual efforts, undergone later on, that the rips with the community have slowly been sewed up. It has been said that both consensus building and collaboration are cyclical processes; they constitute gains, not merely prerequisites, for networking. In these processes, the role played by trust is indisputable, and the leadership must set it as a priority goal. In the case of the Partnership, the problem was complex because the network constituted by the agreement, comprising the university and the school district, was itself part of a larger network composed by the school district and the community. Under this point of view, therefore, two forms of social capital had to be implemented anew: one bonding the stakeholders involved in the Partnership (School Committee, BU staff, School staff, professional administrative staff) and one bridging out to the community (BU staff, BU leaders, community leaders and population). Parents straddle both.

This effort was not needed only to locate the university's lead of the school system inside the city as an actor sharing common problems: indeed, under this perspective much was done by individual efforts as those of Receiver Lewis H. Spence and the City Manager following him, cooperating with the university staff, particularly some of the Superintendents (themselves belonging to the BU staff). A second reason for which outreach to community was indispensable has been stated very effectively by Spierings:

[g]ood education needs all the partners it can get. If problems are interlocking, then so the solutions must be. A thing that organizations and parents can do together is: try to keep the kids in school for one or two years more. This will increase their lifetime earning capacities by more than a million dollars. Education in Chelsea needs a multi-partner, multi-action, integrated approach.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Frans Spierings, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

This is a lesson that Boston University had to learn in the years. As said, the initial mistake was philosophical, as the vision applied to the school district was not cut upon the community of Chelsea. A relevant obstacle was constituted by the cultural distance perceived by the community to a private university which held a high academic reputation as an élite university (the truthfulness of this perception is debatable, since Boston University is both an excellent research university and one of the most diversified campuses in the country in terms of student population). The effect of its reputation on the community was unexpected by the university, and even more so considering that its reputation was a key factor for the implementation of the project.

These are all reasons why it is possible to say that the university offered an integrated strategy for reforming the schools in Chelsea, but not an integrated approach to the problem.

On the community side, lessons have been learnt to. As Spierings found, the conflict over the Partnership strengthened the local polity, bolstering local human and social capital for self-intervention. The ground was prepared by the work of the Receivership, and boosted by the Partnership. In this sense, this was another unintended effect of the agreement, but a useful development too, as the Partnership could have not been expected to provide community development, since it had been targeted for school reforms.

### **The partnership between the University of Pennsylvania and West Philadelphia**

Among the cases of school-university partnerships reported in the report *The power of partnerships*, issued by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of policy Development and Research, and Office for University Partnerships (2005), the most interesting to mention is carried out by the University of Pennsylvania (Upenn), where a urban health initiative on behalf of an anthropology professor changed nutrition-related habits in city schools while at the same time providing his students with community-based learning opportunities. This programme, called the

Urban Nutrition Initiative (UNI), started as a curricular extension to the module of Anthropology 210 in 1991, and it has now become an NGO with a \$300.000 annual budget and a full-time staff of three. Its mission is to bring a multidisciplinary health curriculum to several West Philadelphia schools, involving approximately 100 undergraduates and graduates from the University, and 1000 pupils from local schools.

In the words of Harkavy, the University of Pennsylvania motivates its engagement in the education system of West Philadelphia on the grounds of two major thrusts: the first and foremost is the mission to foster democracy: “Penn’s most basic, most enduring responsibility is to help America realize the democratic promise of the Declaration of Independence in practice: to become an optimally democratic society (...) We believe [Upenn] can best do that by effectively integrating and radically improving the entire West Philadelphia schooling system, beginning with Penn but including all schools within its local geographic community and within the urban ecological system in which it functions as the strategic component”.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, “we have come to see our work as a concrete example of a general theory of action-oriented, real-world, problem-based learning”;<sup>72</sup> in other words, Upenn promotes a learning by reflective doing approach in matters of education and social work. This is a clear representation of the utilitarian approach to the concept of service developed by American universities (Neave, 2000); a clearer one, perhaps, than the BUCP, which addressed a very specific problematic area, although the vision behind it was similar: “our School of Education – BU former President John Silber argued – trains future teachers and school administrators. How can we claim it is effective, if it doesn’t prove it can administer a school district, and teach in its schools? It would be like saying that faculty and students in a School of Medicine wouldn’t be able to work in a hospital”.<sup>73</sup>

Very broadly conceived, the Center is based on the assumption that one highly efficient way for Penn to carry out its traditional academic missions

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<sup>71</sup> Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, John Puckett, “An implementation revolution as a strategy for fulfilling the democratic promise of university-community partnerships: Penn-West Philadelphia as an experiment in progress”, *Nonprofit and voluntary sector quarterly*, 2000, 29:24, SAGE, p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>73</sup> John Silber, interview, July 2006.

of advancing universal knowledge and effectively educating students is to function as what we now call an ‘engaged democratic cosmopolitan civic university’. Stated somewhat more specifically, Penn’s research and teaching would actively focus on solving universal problems, for example schooling, health care, economic development, as those universal problems *manifest themselves locally in West Philadelphia/Philadelphia*. By effectively and efficiently integrating general theory and concrete practice, as Ben Franklin had advocated in the 18th century, Penn would symbiotically improve both the quality of life in its local ecological community *and* the quality of its academic research and teaching. Put another way, the Center is based on the proposition that when Penn is creatively conceived as a community-engaged university, it constitutes in the best sense both a *universal* and a *local* institution of higher education.<sup>74</sup>

The strategy envisioned for these purposes does not differ from the streamlines pointed out by Unesco, OECD and the European Commission and mentioned in the preceding chapters: it requires “creatively and intelligently adapting the work of local institutions (universities, hospitals, faith-based organizations) to the particular needs and resources of local communities. It assumes that colleges and universities, which simultaneously constitute preeminent international, national, and local institutions, potentially constitute powerful partners, ‘anchors’, and creative catalysts for change and improvement in the quality of life in American cities and communities”.<sup>75</sup>

Interestingly, the self-evaluation provided by the Penn University on its engagement to community efforts highlights a key area shared by the BUCP, that is, the role of the leadership. Harkavy points out the role played by former President Judith Rodin (appointed in 1994 on to 2004)<sup>76</sup> in the implementation of campus-community relationships. “A native West Philadelphian and Penn graduate, Rodin was appointed in part because of her deeply felt commitment to improving Penn’s local environment and to transforming Penn into the leading American urban university”.<sup>77</sup> In order

<sup>74</sup> Ira Harkavy, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>75</sup> Ivi, p. 29.

<sup>76</sup> And replaced, in 2004, by President Amy Guttman, who shared the same vision on the role of universities in advancing democratic education and societies.

<sup>77</sup> Ira Harkavy, op. cit., p. 34.

to do so, the University underwent a process of academic transformation towards the implementation of the Franklinian-inspired orientation of union of theory and practice; which concretely signified the dualism of academically based community work outside the campus, and the provision of active learning for students on campus.<sup>78</sup> Both these policies conflate in the over 150 Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) courses provided to students through the Center for Community Partnerships: as the center presents it, “ABCS is rooted in and intrinsically linked to teaching and research and promotes student and faculty reflection on the service experience. ABCS is committed to linking theory and practice through activities that make a significant difference in the community of West Philadelphia and at Penn. Through their work with West Philadelphia public schools, communities of faith and community organizations, ABCS faculty and students work to solve critical community issues in a variety of areas, such as the environment, health, arts and education”.<sup>79</sup> The new academic philosophy did not have a revolutionary impact on the academe; rather, it can be perceived through single modules across disciplines. According to internal estimates, during the 2006-2007 academic year 21 departments and 8 professional schools have offered ABCS modules. The increase in the offer has been steady over the years (source: the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships, 2007):

- 1991-92: 4 ABCS courses, 3 faculty and 100 students
- 1995-96: 20 ABCS courses, 19 faculty and 500 students
- 2000-01: 38 ABCS courses, 34 faculty and 925 students
- 2005-06: 53 ABCS courses, 44 faculty and 1446 students
- 2006-07: 57 ABCS courses, 49 faculty (students n.a.)

Some of the areas involved are School of Education, the Urban Studies programme, the departments of mathematics and of physics, the Asian American Studies programme, the City Planning programme, the School of

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<sup>78</sup> See the 1749 pamphlet by Benjamin Franklin, *Proposals relating to the education of youth in Pensilvania* (in bibliography as facsimile reprint, with an introduction by William Pepper, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931, from the archives of the Mugar Library, Boston University).

<sup>79</sup><http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/abcs-courses/academically-based-community-service.html>.

Nursing, and the Anthropology department.

This creates a connection not just to what said about transdisciplinarity in the application-driven mode of knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994), but also on the role played by individual human capital on the network processes: “[p]residents – Harkavy points out – can provide leadership, but it is faculty members who develop and sustain the courses and research projects that durably link a university to its local schools and community. More specifically, it is through faculty teaching and research that the connection to local schools and communities is ultimately and durably made”.<sup>80</sup> The case of the BUCP endorses this statement, and adds the commitment of the personnel from administration working with the Management Team to the engagement of the BU faculty.

The engagement of Upenn in West Philadelphia started off in 1985, driven by the considerations illustrated above. The reason why these thrusts focus on West Philadelphia was geographical proximity. West Philadelphia is a 14 square miles area adjacent to the University of Pennsylvania, and therefore it constitutes its local community of reference. The area comprises 25 neighborhoods, 209,090 inhabitants (Census, 2000), 19% of whom are under age 18, 31 public schools (run by the school district of Philadelphia), 15 recreation centres, 9 libraries, 97 licensed child care centres, and it is covered by two police districts (numbers 16 and 19).

Upenn is part of the West Philadelphia Partnership, a consortium of community organizations, educational/health care institutions, residents and companies dedicated to enhancing residential and economic life in West and Southwest Philadelphia. The difference between this Partnership and the BUCP is in their specific goals: the BUCP was established with a clear purpose (reforming an underperforming district) and it was designed upon a specific target (the Chelsea School District): the West Philadelphia Partnership has a broader mission which promotes educational enhancement as well as economic and community development. Similarly,

[s]ymbolically and practically, the creation of the [Barbara and Edward Netter] center constituted a major change in Penn’s relationship to West Philadelphia and Philadelphia in general. The university as a corporate entity now formally and organizationally committed itself to finding ways to use its truly enormous

<sup>80</sup> Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, John Puckett, op. cit., p. 35.

resources (broadly conceived) to help improve the quality of life in its local community, not only in respect to public schools but to economic and community development in general.<sup>81</sup>

Inside the West Philadelphia Partnership, the initiative related to education is the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC): “a nationally recognized university-assisted, school based, service learning program operates day-time programs at Turner Middle School, Shaw Middle School, Wilson Elementary and University City High. WEPIC also sponsors community schools (evenings and weekends), summer youth employment, school to work initiatives, and Construction-Tech, a program that employs carpentry students at West Philadelphia High after school and in the summer as carpentry apprentices to rehabilitate homes in West Philadelphia”.<sup>82</sup> The quote is the presentation of WEPIC given by the West Philadelphia Partnership website. WEPIC is not the only education-related programme promoted by Upenn in the local context, but it is the one coordinated by the West Philadelphia Partnership – a mediating, non-profit community-based organization composed of institutions (including Penn), neighborhood organizations, and community leaders – in conjunction with the School District of Philadelphia. Other WEPIC partners include community groups, communities of faith, unions, job training agencies, and city, state and federal agencies and departments. Also, a peculiarity of WEPIC is its focus on community schools: the ultimate goal of the reform initiated by WEPIC is to transform traditional inner-city schools into

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<sup>81</sup> Ivi, p. 34.

<sup>82</sup> <http://partners.upenn.edu/wp/community/wpp>.

community hubs.<sup>83</sup> The approach to the school promoted by Upenn was, if possible, quite the opposite of that of BU towards the schools in Chelsea.

However, the Netter centre promotes some 15 other school and community initiatives (beside the ABCS courses mentioned above), and all of them count on separate networks. The centre monitors and manages them, and makes sure adequate funding is provided through private donation and constant fund raising. Therefore, it could be said that the Netter centre, as a body, functions through partnerships, at the local as well as at the regional, national and international level.

The emphasis on partnerships in the center's name was deliberate; it acknowledged, in effect, that Penn could not try to go it alone as it had long been (arrogantly) accustomed to do. The creation of the center was also significant internally. It meant that at least in principle, the president of the university would now strongly encourage all components of the university to seriously consider the roles they could appropriately play in Penn's efforts to improve the quality of its off-campus environment.<sup>84</sup>

A few considerations can be drawn from these statements. First of all, it is interesting that the authors highlight the need for all components of the university to seek an adequate role in community service. Elsewhere, this requirement is explained in terms of successful synergies:

[p]revious experiments in [partnerships with] community schools and community education throughout the country had depended primarily on a single

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<sup>83</sup> "A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone – all day, every day, evenings and weekends. Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities" ([www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org)). For more information on community schools and their activities nation-wide, see the report "Community schools. Partnerships for excellence" published by the Coalition for Community Schools on <http://www.communityschools.org/partnerships.html>. Further reading on the more specific topic of community building in a school environment is Anthony Brick, Valerie E. Lee, Peter B. Holland, *Catholic schools and the common good*, Harvard University Press, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London, 1993.

<sup>84</sup> Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, John Puckett, op. cit., p. 34.

university unit, namely, the School of Education, which was one major reason for the failure, or at best, the limited success of those experiments. The WEPIC concept of university assistance was far more comprehensive. From the start of the (...) experiment, we understood the concept to mean both assistance from, and mutually beneficial collaboration with, the entire range of Penn's schools, departments, and administrative offices.<sup>85</sup>

Synergies, however, are not build only through multiple approaches, but through collaboration amongst the different academic actors. Collaboration and coordination among departments constitute a challenge for Upenn. "Since its creation in 1992, to help solve the complex problems adversely affecting the quality of life in West Philadelphia, the [Netter] Center has tried to function as an integrating agency to effectively align Penn's numerous schools and departments and bring about their mutually beneficial collaboration. Easier said than done, alas." Due to organizational culture and structure, higher education institutions usually tend to endorse fragmentation over collaboration and communication between departments and sections. This trends goes beyond the American research universities sector.<sup>86</sup>

Developing solutions to critical, complex, West Philadelphia problems would, of course, directly and indirectly significantly benefit Penn as an institution and would be in the enlightened self-interest of everyone at the

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<sup>85</sup> Ivi, p. 32.

<sup>86</sup> Although the problem in the US is most strongly perceived inside Upenn since it is "perhaps the only major American university" where all its schools and colleges are located on a contiguous urban campus. In the early 1970s, therefore the newly-appointed president of the university, Martin Meyerson, emphasized the extraordinary intellectual and social benefits that would result if the university took optimum advantage of the ease of interaction that a single campus location provides. To realize those benefits, he called for implementation of a "One University" organizational realignment – a realignment in which Penn would be characterized by an intellectual collaboration and synergy across departments, divisions, colleges, and schools that would result in powerful advances in knowledge and human welfare (...) That kind of radical realignment is much easier said than done. In practice, overcoming Penn's longstanding disciplinary fragmentation and conflict, narrow specialization, bureaucratic barriers, and what Benjamin Franklin (...) stigmatized in 1789 as "ancient Customs and Habitudes", proved enormously difficult to achieve; the One University idea essentially remained an idea, not an action program" (Ira Harkavy, op. cit., p. 28).

university. In principle, therefore, developing such solutions should logically constitute ‘goals which are compelling and highly appealing’ to almost all members of Penn’s multitudinous departments, centers, institutes and schools. In practice, however, the longstanding competitive fragmentation built into Penn’s organizational culture and structure has strongly trumped the logic of collaboration and enlightened self-interest.<sup>87</sup>

The structure of the BUCP allowed for a different situation. Centralization spared to BU the problem of coordinating the bodies and actors involved in the project, but it did not solve the issue of uni-dimensionality of approach. The various schools entered and exited the works at different times following a learning-by-doing process; in the end, even for a specific target as the reform of the Chelsea district, a comprehensive team of educators, administrators and social workers working together from the start would have had positive effects.

A second problem shared by both Upenn in the WEPIC and BU in the BUCP had to do with their reputation as elite universities. By reputation I mean both the distinguished prestige of two major research universities in the country, and also the halo of elitism associated to it. Implementing collaboration with the local community in problem identification and planning, and in the implementation of adequate strategies requires a actions that are both democratic and participatory: “[t]o put it mildly, this has not been an easy process. Decades of community distrust of Penn based on decades of community-destructive actions and inactions on the part of Penn take significant effort and time to reduce (...). As WEPIC and related projects have grown and developed, and as concrete, positive outcomes for schools and neighborhoods have occurred and continue to occur, community trust and participation have increased”.<sup>88</sup> The reputation of the University of Pennsylvania showing “long, deeply-rooted, institutional resistance”<sup>89</sup> to local involvement was one of the reasons why at its inception (1985) WEPIC focused on one school only (limited resources and the information gaps on an unknown reform process completed the panorama). The choice of the school (John P. Turner Middle School) was

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<sup>87</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>88</sup> Ivi, p. 37.

<sup>89</sup> Ivi, p. 32.

determined by its leadership, who proved keen to experiment innovative paths.

As seen, something very similar characterized the BUCP. Time, constancy, positive outcomes and participatory approaches have proven key elements of success in overcoming this issue. “Nonetheless, different kinds of projects involving different disciplines, skills, and material and led by different faculty members with different students, necessarily involve different levels of participation”.<sup>90</sup> this showed acutely in the BUCP, where the conditions at the inception of the agreement made it clear that a centralized leadership was needed. In this sense, the initial level of participation was bound to be minimal, although experience has shown that no matter how centralizing, leadership should strive to the creation of trust.

The tension that emerged early in the history of school-university partnerships (...) are more a question of developing trust than of solving tough problems of mutual interest. Lack of initial trust stems in part from the unfamiliar relationship between university-based and school-based people called for in the partnerships. This is exacerbated by the unknowns. What is to be gained? What is to be given up? What turf, is any, will be ours to control? Such questions do not always remain below the surface. And the way they sometimes manifest themselves does not immediately contribute to trust.<sup>91</sup>

Similar considerations can be generalized for all cases of school-university partnerships. At different levels, the clash of agendas between universities and schools (and/or community) generates the same challenges in terms of production of social capital. Given the wide variety of partnerships set up by the higher education sector in the US, it is hard to provide more detailed generalizations; however, the one highlighted certainly represents a key factor of success. Also, WEPIC, which has offered a second case of study (albeit not first-handed), beside the BUCP, has proven so successful that it expanded not only at a local, but also at the national level, in both cases with funding from the Corporation for National Service (CNS). Locally, the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for

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<sup>90</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>91</sup> Kenneth A. Sirotnik, John I. Goodlad (eds.), *School-university partnerships in action: concepts, cases, and concerns*, Teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York, 1988, p. 210.

Neighborhood Development (PHENND) was awarded a three-year grant by CNS of \$732,000 in 1997 to develop service-learning courses at area institutions of higher education as well as support community-initiated projects that are assisted by a university or college. The PHENND consortium includes 42 institutions of higher education in the Philadelphia region; in 1997 it included 25. On a national level, the project was replicated in the same years with both public (CNS) and private funds (DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund). The WEPIC Replication Project includes now 20 institutions of higher education across the country.

More cases of university partnerships for local development can be found in the report of the 2005 conference on research universities and civic engagement (interestingly focused on the most elitarian category of higher education institutions in US), *New times demands new scholarship*, published by Tufts University and Campus Compact.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusions

Although unevenly analysed, the cases of BUCP and of Upenn show marked similarities in the networking strategies, the need and risks of a strong leadership which must prove able to implement consensus building and cooperation tools, and the potentialities and needs for the formation of social capital. Key elements of success for a partnership between the university and the actors on the territory are, indeed, condensed around the capacity to bridge different, often clashing agendas. Success must be defined and gauged in both institutional and community terms, and it is usually distributed through stages at different levels. As such, it should be identified and celebrated in order to build trust. Shared ownership and constant monitoring, at all stages of the work, should accompany this efforts. In addition, and finally, "like social relationships, the best partnerships begin with partners listening to and learning about each other, and discovering how their differences and similarities can help them

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<sup>92</sup> [http://www.compact.org/resources/research\\_universities](http://www.compact.org/resources/research_universities).

appreciate each other. This hard work of listening and learning in relationships never ends. Without it, we cannot advance to a sustained reciprocal relationship that builds community capacity over time”.<sup>93</sup>

I reckon this analysis needs more confirmations and further empirical applications; yet, at this stage, it provides a good starting point for further research on a topic that is emerging on the international agendas, particularly through the reflections of the OECD, the Unesco, the Council of Europe and the European Commission. In a communication of 2003, *The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge*, the Commission recommends further research on the “emergence of new expectations” from the universities. On local and regional involvement, it asks for answers to questions related to how, and in what areas, the universities could contribute more; what ways there are of “strengthening the development of centres of knowledge bringing together at regional level the various players involved in the production and transfer of knowledge”; and, finally, on how to take greater account of “the regional dimensions in European research, education and training projects and programmes”.

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<sup>93</sup> Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research (PD&R) and Office for University Partnerships, *The power of partnership*, Washington DC, 2005, www.huduser.org, p. 8.

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