The importance of Place

Eastern Arc and levelling up
The Eastern Arc region is unique. Stretching across the East and South-East of England, from the Wash to the Channel, ours is a region of contrasts. It is a region of significant prosperity and stark deprivation, of urban centres and agricultural richness, of natural beauty and historic significance, of trade, transport, migration and movement.

The Eastern Arc consortium brings together three civic, anchor universities within the region: the University of East Anglia (UEA), the University of Essex and the University of Kent.

Together, we are a collective voice for the universities, but also an advocate for the region, addressing its needs and championing its opportunities, from the recognised challenges of social and economic deprivation in our coastal communities, to the opportunities we have as hubs for transport and trade, renewable energy and the creative economy.

We recognise the disproportionate impact we have on our surrounding area compared to larger, metropolitan universities; together, the gross value added (GVA) generated by UEA, Essex and Kent was over £2.4bn. We acknowledge and build on this through our strategies, alliances and networks at both consortium and institutional level.
'Place' is central to all of our work.

At consortium level we are defined by our region. As we make clear in the background to our collaboration, all of our members 'are on the North Sea rim, a region rooted in the land but shaped by travel, trade and migration.' As such, involvement, integration and relevance to our region and the wider beneficiaries of our work are embedded in our Strategy 2020-25.

As part of this, we are engaged with the national conversation around ‘place’ and ‘levelling up’, producing position papers, responding to calls for evidence, and ensuring that our academic expertise is brought to bear in this area. It is essential that the needs of our communities are recognised; there is a real danger that our region is overlooked in the continuing work to identify national need; this point is made in our position paper on the place agenda.

At institutional level ‘place’ is integrated into each university’s strategy or plan.

- The University of East Anglia is a member of the Civic Universities Network. This commitment to and engagement with place is embedded in the UEA Plan 2016-20 (to be ‘a leader in regional economic and cultural development’). The University is currently reimagining its strategy in time for its 60th anniversary in 2023, and is working with local stakeholders to understand and define its role within and for the benefit of the community.
- The University of Essex is also a member of the Civic Universities Network, and its place-based civic mission is clear in its 2025 Vision, which states that it will use its research to ‘tackle with rigour the questions that matter for people and communities and putting ideas into action to improve people’s lives.’ Its Strategy 2019-25 goes further, making a commitment to
  - connect researchers with communities to realise the benefits of a world-class university for the region through sustainable partnerships;
  - engage with the local communities in which the University and its campuses are located, to increase its opportunities to have impact in the world.

The University is also an Essex Anchor Organisation, and has made six Anchor Pledges whose delivery will further support the University’s partnership with, and impact within, our local and regional community.

- The University of Kent defines itself as a ‘dual-intensity university grounded in place,’ serving its communities by contributing actively and substantially to their health, wellbeing, prosperity and success.’ Its Strategy 2025 makes clear that it will work in partnership with organisations in Kent and Medway to support activity which brings resources into the region, enables economic growth and contributes to long term sustainability and quality of life in Kent, as well as working with disadvantaged groups across the region in order to promote access to the university.
Taking account of regional need at a granular level

Although the East and South-East of England are seen as relatively affluent, their coastline is home to some of the most deprived communities in the country, including Great Yarmouth, Tendring, Castle Point, and Thanet (Corfe 2017); indeed, Jaywick in Tendring was identified as the most deprived area in the UK. 11 of the 100 ‘priority places’ identified by the government in its Community Renewal Fund are in our region; nine of them are coastal communities. The House of Lords has recognised the challenges that have led to this situation and stated that it ‘warrants dedicated attention and support.’

There is a very real danger that the specific needs of the region are overlooked in the wider conversation around the place agenda, and that local communities and economies lose out as a result.

There is a need, then, for national agencies to take account of regional need at a granular level and are careful in differentiating significant variations within regions. This was recognised by Nesta in its report, *The Missing £4 Billion: Making R&D work for the whole UK*, which broke UK R&D funding down into subregions.

Within regions of prosperity, there are areas that need additional investment. Conversely, within regions of relative under-investment there are areas (or institutions) that do not need any further funding and are as prosperous as the most affluent elsewhere.
How should research and innovation be supported in the regions?

We believe that there are two fundamental principles that should be borne in mind in providing funding to the regions: devolution of decision-making (or recognition of regional need), and long-term investment.

First, it is important to recognise that innovation has a clear and discrete set of challenges and opportunities. The Manufacturing Commission’s report, Level Up Industry, made seven recommendations that addressed these. Although focused primarily on manufacturing, we believe they offer a good framework for the government’s actions in encouraging innovation, and ensuring it is used to greatest effect.

Primarily, there is a need to give businesses the certainty to invest for the long-term. With the twin seismic changes of coronavirus and Brexit, business needs assurance that policy (and associated funding) will not shift under its feet.

Leading on from this, there should be more devolution and autonomy to the regions to enable local enterprise partnerships to assess and exploit synergies and intra-regional opportunities for collaboration and growth. SMEs should play a key part in this: they make up 99 per cent of businesses in the UK, and their involvement is therefore crucial.
Within fundamental research, devolution would also be welcome. Our experience in managing the ‘block grant’ element of the Global Challenges Research Fund showed the benefit of doing so and demonstrated that universities could and should be trusted to make investments, particularly for pilot projects or small-scale interventions. It enables a flexibility and speed that encourages agile thinking and facilitates the most interesting and ground-breaking research.

Similarly, our joint CCF project, FIRE, was responsible for managing its own funding programme, and the results have been exceptional. Such devolution and flexibility is essential to enable successful long-term partnerships between universities and industry on innovation.

Devolution would also enable us to identify and map the areas where we can make a difference to the national effort, based on a close knowledge of our strengths. At a time when much of the national narrative is about science and technology, there should also be a recognition of the part that can be played by the arts, humanities and social sciences.

We have incorporated these within our four themes, but it is also reflected in projects such as the Thames Estuary Production Corridor, and the response to Covid, including the uptake of the vaccine, has shown that the behavioural sciences play a crucial role in ensuring our safety and resilience in the face of the infection.

More broadly, devolution would allow a more nuanced understanding of institutions within each region. The Eastern Arc area has been portrayed as synonymous with the ‘golden triangle’ of universities; the R&D Roadmap described the triangle as being ‘London, the South East and the East of England’, not the six institutions that traditionally make up the triangle.

The Government’s place agenda should ensure ‘that excellent research continues to be well supported wherever it is found,’ as it does with the Research Excellence Framework, and not just in the larger institutions. Eastern Arc endorses CaSE’s recommendations that ‘investment should be focussed on R&D excellence that already exists – even if it is small and nascent’, and that ‘places should clarify their distinctive strengths and sectors.’

We would recommend that the Government should work with Research England and Innovate UK, together with local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), to undertake a comprehensive study on a sub-regional basis to identify areas that are underperforming in terms of investment in research and development, but are punching above their weight in terms of excellence.

In parallel with this, it should work with the University Partnerships Programme (UPP) to further understand how universities connect with their cities and their regions, and how they can be the catalyst for regional development and growth.

**Fig 2: The Thames Estuary Production Corridor** The TEPC is a collaboration between the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP), Kent and Essex County Councils, 11 local authority areas represented by Thames Gateway Kent Partnership and Opportunity South Essex, South East Creative Economy Network (SECECN), the GLA, Royal Docks and seven East London boroughs, the University of Kent, the University of Essex, and cultural organisations Metal and Whitstable Biennale. It aims to unlock long term, transformational, culture-led growth across North Kent and South Essex and establish the region as a creative hub connected to London, the UK, Europe and other global markets. (Source and image: SELEP).
How are the Eastern Arc universities currently working with regional stakeholders?

We have established, developed, and nurtured strong relationships with individuals and organisations within our region who work within and on behalf of their communities. These include county and borough councils, local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), businesses, charities and individuals.

These relationships take many forms, from acting as board members, to being advisers, research providers, and funders. It is important to note, too, that this relationship works in both directions (CEOs and others sit on the councils of each university, for instance), and is integrated into the work and structures of the organisations involved. The following are examples of how we engage with a wide range of local and regional stakeholders, but provide only a small indication of our involvement.

Local councils

We work on many different levels with our local councils. For example, Essex has worked with Essex County Council to establish a Chief Scientific Adviser. His role is to apply the University's internationally-recognised expertise in big data and advanced analytics to inform and support Essex County Council decisions and policy development.

In Norwich, UEA is working closely with Norwich City Council on the Norwich Good Economy Commission, more detail of which is in Section 3. Together, and with other stakeholders, they have pinpointed key issues that pressurise the performance of the local economy, developing proposals to explore and address these issues, and delivering meaningful projects that have impact.

The University of Kent has been working closely with Medway Council on issues of regeneration, including developing a University Enterprise Zone around its Medway campus, and being part of the recent successful bid with Medway Council for £14.5m levelling up funding for Chatham dockyard and city.

Local enterprise

All three universities work closely with their Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), NLEP and SELEP. Members of universities are on a range of the boards and panels of both LEPs, helping to develop and drive policy agendas within the region.

In addition, they work closely with their local chambers of commerce and with individual businesses, as directors, board members or advisers. Eastern Arc has also provided funding to and worked closely with local businesses for knowledge exchange activity through the Research England-backed Enabling Innovation: Research to Application programme.

Our work – and in particular our data analysis – helps to inform and drive policy locally and nationally. Examples of this, such as the Smart Data Analytics for Business and Local Government, are given in Section 3.

Local NHS Trusts

Through our research and education we have strong links with local NHS trusts. This includes a role in coordinating and facilitating their work (for example, through the UEA Health and Social Care Partners), as well as increasing capacity (such as through the new Kent and Medway Medical School).

Local charities

As with commercial organisations, many of our members are board members or directors of local charities. However, our work also helps to inform and drive policy. The Institute for Volunteering Research, for instance, is based at UEA and provides analysis and advice to regional and national charities on developing and supporting their volunteer base. One of its recent projects, funded by the ESRC, brought together researchers across EARC to look at volunteering during the pandemic. A discussion about this is available on our podcasts page, here.
What does regional policy engagement look like in practice?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre for Public and Policy engagement (CPPE)</th>
<th>Creative Estuary</th>
<th>Norwic Institute for Healthy Ageing</th>
<th>Bids by Medway and Great Yarmouth &amp; East Suffolk to be UK City of Culture 2023</th>
<th>The Essex Centre for Data Analysis</th>
<th>Food Innovation Cluster</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The CPPE was established to ensure research at the University of Essex improves people’s lives by acting as a hub, bringing together diverse public and policy engagement activities across the university to raise our local, regional, national and global reputation for using research for societal benefit.</td>
<td>Creative Estuary is a consortium of public sector and cultural organisations, working together to support the Thames Estuary Production Corridor. The universities of Kent and Essex are working with SELDP, Kent and Essex County Councils and 11 local authority areas, as well as Opportunity South Essex, South East Creative Economy Network (SECEN), and cultural organisations Metal, and Cement Fields</td>
<td>NIH is a collaboration between UEA, Norwich City Council, UEA Health &amp; Social Care Partners (HSCP), Norfolk County Council, NNUH, John Innes Centre, Quadram Institute of Bioscience and the Earlham Institute, and provides research and policy recommendations around behaviour change to promote human flourishing and health and reduces the risk of premature disease by up to 70%</td>
<td>Both Kent and UEA worked closely with local councils and other agencies on bids that formed part of a process of regeneration and place-making. Although neither bid was in the final shortlist, the process of working with regional policymakers, creative industries, and community organisations was important in developing identity, purpose and belief in areas of significant deprivation.</td>
<td>This centre is a partnership venture between Essex County Council, Essex Police and The University of Essex. It aims to support the Essex public sector in making evidence-led decisions, intervene early, and prevent some of the biggest challenges facing people and places in the county. ECDA has been transformational in supporting communities to recover from COVID-19 and building a data culture with citizens and colleagues throughout the county.</td>
<td>The Norwich Research Park (NRP), including UEA, has gained Department for International Trade (DIT) designation as a ‘high performance opportunity’ (HPO). This identifies Norfolk and Suffolk as a global centre of excellence for plant science focusing on nutritious food. The plan, driven by New Anglia LEP, is intended to attract investment, but also to act as an advocate for the world-leading plant science in the region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Catalyst Project</td>
<td>Norwich Good Economy Commission</td>
<td>In collaboration with Norwich City Council, the University of East Anglia and other organisations, the NGEC carries out research to identify key issues and works collaboratively to explore how we can improve people’s lives. Issues the NGEC has tackled include digital inclusion, social enterprise, and skills training, and it has produced reports and outputs including research on zero hours contracts, an economic strategy, and an event exploring how to ‘build back better’ after the pandemic.</td>
<td>In collaboration with Norwich City Council, the University of East Anglia and other organisations, the NGEC carries out research to identify key issues and works collaboratively to explore how we can improve people’s lives. Issues the NGEC has tackled include digital inclusion, social enterprise, and skills training, and it has produced reports and outputs including research on zero hours contracts, an economic strategy, and an event exploring how to ‘build back better’ after the pandemic.</td>
<td>In collaboration with the County Council and involves a wide range of stakeholders. Recognizing the dramatic effect of Covid on sectors such as retail and hospitality in particular – and with the employment market likely to be challenging for some time – the Task Force is backing a range of measures introduced by Government to open up new job opportunities and to support jobseekers.</td>
<td>Growing Kent &amp; Medway is a collaborative project that aims to support practical and policy development in making the region a centre in climate-smart technology in food production, processing, packaging and supply chains. The University of Kent, one of its academic partners, is developing a Mentoring Hub that will provide local enterprises with specialist advice from business and management experts on how to improve their marketing and promotion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Our universities have a strong history of working with our communities and our regions. We believe that we now have an opportunity to develop these further, but only if the Government understands the UK regions at a granular level, and is creative in its response to this through devolution of funding and decision-making, trusting and working with universities and other stakeholders to harness regional strengths and address specific local needs.