



Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

Towards a New Civic Agenda for Universities?
James Coe

Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster Parliamentary Constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), Local Authority Districts (December 2018), Boundaries (December 2018 - ONS) and Combined Authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

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Key takeaways

1. The fallout from COVID-19 will have significant economic consequences for Liverpool City Region (LCR). The recovery process should be supported by the coordination of effort in leveraging research investment, skills development, and our cultural offer, between higher education institutions (HEIs) and the diverse ecosystem of public, private and third sector organisations within the City Region.
2. Together, the public, private, and education sectors, will continue to support the development of our skilled graduates and in turn create the demand to retain graduates in the City Region. Understanding and deploying our shared resources to meet the emergent skills need will be key in driving an equitable and sustained economic recovery.
3. Making the most of the research and development base in the City Region through coordinated effort to attract investment should be a key consideration as we look toward economic recovery.
4. Furthermore, the cultural economy is adapting to a new digital offer which can be coordinated to present a gateway to our City Region for when the visitor economy reopens.
5. The six policy proposals within this briefing paper, encompassing our people, research and development, and shared infrastructure, represent an ambitious framework for partnership between HEIs and stakeholders within LCR.

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play an important role in the economic fortunes of the places in which they are based. They create jobs, drive inward investment, and contribute to the cultural lives of their regions. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief our shared capacity to mobilise resources and expertise toward a greater good. Its economic impacts are, and will be, widely felt in higher education and beyond. As Universities UK (UUK) notes, the economic fortunes of universities in this period will be important to “ensure that universities are able to play a central role in the UK’s economic and social recovery following the crisis” (UUK 2020).

The UK is heading towards a financial downturn beyond anything it has experienced in recent years. The economic fallout from COVID-19 will be of greater magnitude, greater length, and will have even greater structural

consequences for the economy than the 2008 financial crash (Straus and Parker 2020). It is difficult to appreciate huge social upheaval while you are living through it but we can look toward Roosevelt’s New Deal, the Beveridge Report, and the Representation of the People Act 1918, as guides to understanding that huge social and economic changes are often plotted *during* crises, not after them.

The health response to COVID-19 has been to intentionally dampen economic activity to limit mobility and save lives; a unique response to a global tragedy. For Liverpool City Region (LCR), there are two initial consequences of this. The first is the need to consider how we restart economic activity that has been mothballed. The second is that for sectors like tourism, leisure, and higher education, which rely on mobile populations, we will need to consider how we make the City Region an even more attractive place to live, study, and work, as we exit lockdown.

HEIs do much more than educate students. Their research is world-changing and drives local and national economies. Their outreach work enhances attainment, aspiration, and closes educational disadvantage. And our collective efforts shape our key institutions, whether that is our NHS, our cultural assets, or our local businesses. The collaboration between anchor institutions has been particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the University of Liverpool's Executive Pro-Vice Chancellor for Health and Life Sciences, Professor Louise Kenny, has highlighted, a collective response to the crisis has involved collaborative projects, new partnerships, and shared use of infrastructure (University of Liverpool 2020). Harnessing our combined strengths is key to navigating LCR through this uncertain period and through the expected economic downturn.

This policy brief considers how LCR and its HEIs can work in tandem to build an equitable and inclusive economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic. It makes six policy recommendations to achieve these ends across our people, our research, and our shared infrastructure. Together, these proposals not only provide a blueprint for some of the actions we can take now, but point toward an enhanced civic role for our HEIs in the future.



The University of Liverpool is an anchor institution within the City Region.

Our people

1. Policy-makers across LCR will no doubt be carefully considering how to support the industries which will be key to economic recovery, and in turn planning for the workforce needed to support those industries. The last economic downturn saw a temporary increase in higher education participation (HESA 2019). Should this trend be repeated we will face a shrinking economy with an increasingly qualified graduate pool. These graduates will have gone through a once-in-a-lifetime recession *twice*. There will be demand for skilled workers but also demand for graduates who can create jobs and wealth in LCR. Understanding and deploying our shared resources to meet the emergent skill need will be key in driving an equitable and sustained economic recovery with particular attention to degree apprenticeships, access qualifications, internships and work experience, postgraduate routes, and technical programmes; building on the best of what already exists.

2. Equally, retaining these graduates is important to the future of LCR. Graduates will be entering a challenging employment marketplace and we know unemployment in youth has a scarring effect on future prospects. HEIs provide the education, training, experience, advice, and support to our students. For LCR, the question is how to create jobs to meet this demand. As is well noted, it will be vital to continue capital investment, and seek further investment, to support high-quality spaces to bring large employers to the region. Secondly: as funding packages like the LCR Business Growth Package will be in greater demand, careful consideration should be given to how funding maintains current business, grows smaller businesses to become larger employers, and supports skills development in LCR. Together, we can support the development of our highly skilled

graduates and in turn create the demand to retain graduates in the City Region.

Our research and development

3. Translational research has been of national importance throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability of HEIs to redirect their resources, collaborate, and work at pace, has been facilitated by a collegiate approach to sharing expertise, materials, and data, towards a greater good. This way of working has been vital in times of crisis, but it also speaks to our shared capacity for change, and for collaboration. Regionally, we have to make decisions about our requests to government for the support we need to recover. A collective ask, in line with UUK, should be for government to fund 100% of the cost of research through funding councils. This would support HEIs to enhance their research base and in turn this expertise will bring new employers, people, and investment to the City Region. In particular, the work universities undertake to support businesses through consultancy, knowledge transfer partnerships, collaborations, and training, will take on a specific importance in growing SMEs in the City Region.

4. The Liverpool City Region Science and Innovation Audit of 2016 supported the City Region's devolution deal and set out how innovation assets could support transformational economic growth. The City Region's shared knowledge assets will be key to its recovery post COVID-19. Now would be the ideal time to assess how these assets can be leveraged to support recovery. HEIs and the City Region could look particularly at where leveraging joint investment might bring the most benefit, how we can jointly frame these assets to investors, and how we might make the most of the government's commitment to increase research spending. The LCR Local Enterprise Partnership could also have a key role.

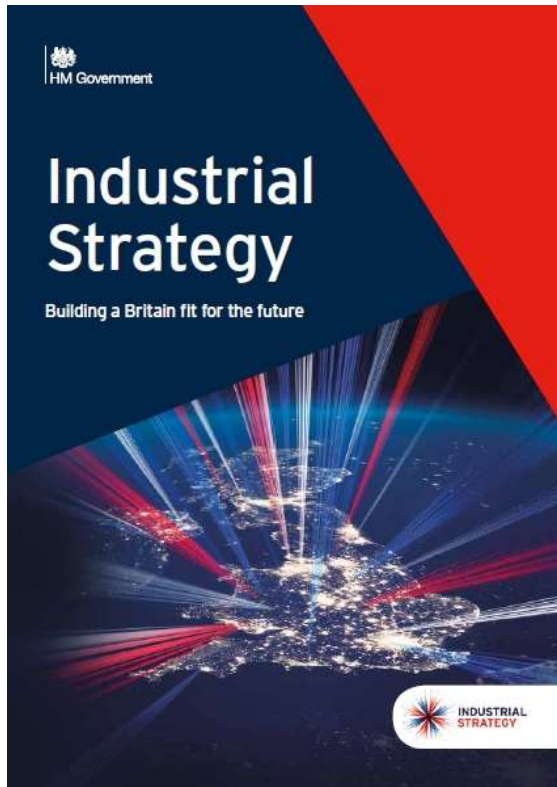
Our shared infrastructure

5. The visitor economy is crucially important to LCR. Our HEIs undertake initiatives to bring groups onto campus for lectures, performances, and outreach activity, and support the major cultural institutions in the City Region with collaborative programmes of activity. These efforts will be valuable as people reconnect with our institutions, but it will also be important for our institutions to reconnect with our City Region. The digitisation of our cultural offer currently under way across the City Region has been a boon for those locked down at home, with a wish to feel connected to their local communities. As we move away from the crisis, there will be an opportunity to use these materials to advertise the City Region. Connecting with people now will create new affinities when the lockdown is over. Serious consideration should be given to how our multiple digital platforms can be coordinated to support large cultural events planned for late 2020, and beyond.

6. Finally, we should acknowledge that the choices that lie ahead will be difficult. The issue of inclusive growth was already much debated before we faced a financial crisis which will have significantly uneven impacts. A key question is how a search for stability in higher education can bring stability elsewhere. From procurement, to employment, and the use of their buildings, HEIs and the City Region may wish to take this opportunity to set out shared measures which would support the stability of both the higher education sector and the City Region. This is particularly important as LCR seeks to address its existing wealth, business, and skills gap through the emerging *Local Industrial Strategy* (LCRCA 2019).

This new activity should of course build on ongoing work; from sustainability, energy, transport, investment, technology, and dozens of other projects undertaken by

partners across the City Region. Our partnerships have been historically valuable and we must improve upon the best of what already exists in these unprecedented times.



The UK Government's Industrial Strategy White Paper was launched in 2017.

In total, these six policy proposals represent an ambitious framework for partnership between HEIs and LCR. We know our HEIs are already seen to be good civic partners and the collective response to the crisis shows we can achieve remarkable things through collaboration. The objective for us all now is to maintain this spirit to support our people, bring new investment to our City Region, and use our shared infrastructure to reconnect with our shared social and cultural heritage.

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