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Delivering Higher Education Policies within a Challenging Community

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine how the University of Huddersfield embraced the ethos of community cohesion and made moves into a problematic community. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Oldham in Greater Manchester the paper presents insights into how higher education is viewed in the area. The research reveals that higher education in a deprived community is successful but one of the complications in such an environment is related to the policy context. The paper acknowledges the transformation in higher education but argues that central government and higher education bodies need to clarify and consolidate policy initiatives.

Keywords: community, community cohesion, Oldham, widening participation

1. Introduction

“In 1997 we inherited a system where the number of qualified people able to go to university was capped. Today, the numbers are rising and universities have the funds to expand, with new two-year foundation degrees to offer students the option of a vocationally relevant, high-quality qualification as a way into skilled work or further study. Over the next three years, we will continue to expand student numbers, taking us towards our 50 per cent target.

We will maintain university entry standards while intensifying efforts to extend the huge advantages that a university education confers to able young people from all backgrounds. University summer schools, master classes and mentoring support will be offered to potential students from disadvantaged areas through a new Excellence Challenge programme, backed up by £190 million of funding.” (Labour, 2001, p. 20)

This quote is from the Labour Party’s 2001 manifesto and as the citation states the Labour Party is committed to expanding higher education for the most disadvantaged groups in society. For the 13 years that the Labour Party was in government higher education was at the forefront of the policy dimension. The government was a key advocate of the Dearing Report of 1997, which recommended that tuition fees be introduced. One of the criticisms of the Labour Government was the implementation of tuition fees. The Dearing Report was not all about university finance but a new emphasis on student teaching and learning. As Ryan (2005, p. 91) notes ‘The commission was charged to consider not only higher education in the traditional sense, but ‘lifelong learning ‘as well.’ Since the Dearing Report there has been more importance placed on lifelong learning. The success of lifelong learning is making institutions local. Marks (2000, p. 364) has noted that local institutions have become a vehicle in the higher education sector, to quote:

“... ‘local’ identity must be more than just an excuse given by an institution unable to attract national and international students. It should be a deliberate policy to attract local students. If they are to pay anything more than the merest lip service to notions of lifelong learning then, as a prerequisite, a sincere embracing (as opposed to a grudging acceptance) of mature students from a variety of backgrounds by universities will be essential.”

This locality context has been a driving force behind the Labour government’s target of 50% of 18-30 year olds attending university by 2015. Over the last five years universities across Britain such as, Anglia Ruskin University, University of Central Lancashire and University of Huddersfield have been opening university centres. The vision of university centres is developing higher education institutions, which are more accessible to

the local community. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section will explain how the research was undertaken. Following on from this the second section will establish the theoretical concepts, which will underpin the research. Finally, the last section will present the research findings relating to the issues and debates of the case study.

2. Research Approach

Before setting any specific aims and objectives for this research study, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken in order to examine the issues and debates relating to the scope of the study. Conducting a literature review served to identify gaps in the research area. The aim of this research was to examine the establishment of a university centre into a deprived community. In order to undertake research in a deprived community a number of research objectives were identified (see figure 1 which shows an overview of the research).

When undertaking research on community development it is common practice to adapt structuration as a theoretical approach (Blackmore & Griggs, 2007; Ledwith, 2005). Johnston and Sidaway (2004, p. 242) have defined this approach as exploring ‘the constitutive role of space in social life... in which people learn about and transform social structures.’ Hence, this project has followed a structuration approach as this school of thought is related to a set of transformation relations, within a policy context (Giddens, 1984). In addition David, (2007, p. 676) has conceptualised this theoretical approach within a higher education context by stating that:

“In the twenty-first century alone, we have witnessed massive global social and economic change that has influenced all of our conceptualisations and understandings of higher education in relation to the economy, society, states, work or labour, markets and knowledge.”

Within the context the structuration approach has had a long association with structure and agency. The main focus of this investigation was to examine a higher education institution working in a deprived area. In this research structure refers to ethnicity, religion and social class. Whilst agency is concerned with the capacity of individuals to behave independently, making their own decisions.

The case study approach was selected to conduct this research. As Robson (1993, p. 5) clearly points out a case study approach ‘... is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.’ Using the case study method allowed the study of a social phenomenon through the analysis of an individual case. This approach enabled the researcher to grasp the scope and complexity of a single case. Punch (1998) has pointed out that using a case study approach facilitates an understanding of the case in detail and in its natural setting. Furthermore, adapting a case study approach can give it a ‘holistic focus,’ which aims to protect and try to comprehend the ‘wholeness’ and ‘unity of the case’ (Punch, 1998). Overall, using the selected case study as the focus of the investigation enables the selection of relevant data and provides the opportunity for intensive analysis (Kumar, 2005). Moreover, a case study approach enabled the researcher to access the community and build relationships founded on trust while conducting a neutral and objective line of enquiry.

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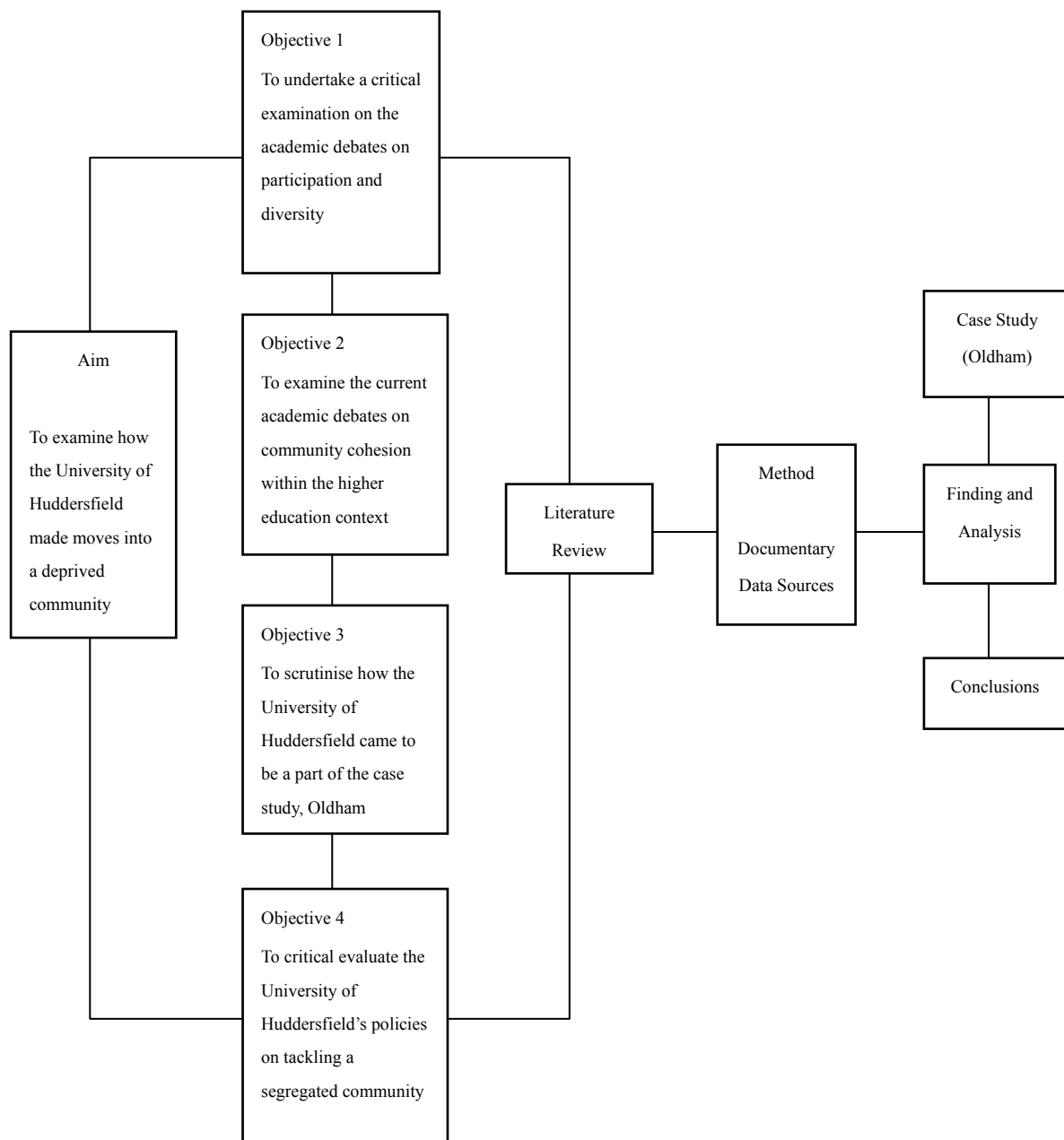


Figure 1. Overview of research

Several factors resulted in the selection of Oldham as a case study. Jackson (2005, p. 167), for example, notes that Oldham as a place provides an ‘unusual social makeup and typology of its urban fabric.’ Building on this observation there were four principal reasons why Oldham was selected as appropriate for this investigation. First, Oldham, historically, has a traditional ethnic minority population. Since the early 1960s Oldham, as a town, has had its fair share of social problems within the British Asian communities, such as unfit housing and social exclusion. Coupled with this the population censuses of 1991 and 2001 have provided geographical illustrations of ethnic minorities living and working in the area. Second, Oldham was one of the areas that experienced civil disturbances, or as the media coined them ‘race riots.’ Moreover, following these disturbances Oldham was one of the first areas where a policy of community cohesion was introduced at both local and central government levels, therefore becoming the model which subsequent statutory and voluntary sectors referred to. Finally, as a

true reflection of the ethos of participation and diversity Oldham was one of the first places to provide access to higher education for all in the form of the University of Huddersfield.

Documentary research played an important role in this research with respect to the background and scope of the project. This research has relied on documentary data to present findings and check particular events. May (1997, p.151) defines documentary research as ‘the sedimentations of social practices.’ Indeed May (1997, p. 151) goes on to say that documentary research has ‘the potential to inform and structure the decisions which people make on a daily and long-term basis; they also constitute particular reading of social events.’ There are many examples whereby social scientists have used documentary data sources for qualitative research (Yudkin, 1969; Horsburgh, 1999; Kogan & Hanney, 2000).

After the qualitative data (documentary sources) was collected, the analysis was organised into three stages of qualitative data analysis. This approach is labelled as ‘transcendental realism.’ Transcendental realism has been defined and contrasted with empiricist ideology by Philip (1995, p. 28) as being ‘The basic framework which... sets out to establish... that the real is, the real world, [and] exists independently of our experience; our knowledge of the world is thus provided by means of experience; while for empiricists, experience contains all there is about reality – experience constitutes what is.’

Qualitative data analysis has three main components which are: (1) data reduction; (2) data display and (3) drawing and verifying conclusions. This form of analysis was adopted from Miles & Huberman (1994) who completed a comprehensive study on how social scientists should analyse qualitative data. Having discussed the methodology approach the paper now moves on to discuss the key concepts that were involved with this research.

3. The Policy Context

Community cohesion is a concept that has become progressively fashionable in public policy debates. Notions about community have always played a role in urban strategies but now community cohesion is the driving force behind central government policy. In 1997, the arrival of the New Labour Government placed renewed emphasis on involvement and development in communities. The concept is held to be innovative, both for British institutions and in the public debate. The ideas of community cohesion originate from North America and Canada (Cantle, 2001). Significantly, community cohesion overlaps with the concept of multiculturalism and social capital (Gifford et al. 2013; Cheong et al. 2007). What is relatively important about the concept of community cohesion is that it is widely regarded as the new framework for governing race relations in Britain. Since the introduction of community cohesion in 2001, there have been numerous written and debated contributions. The relevance of this analytical discussion is that the case study will effectively test the community cohesion strategy, within the context of higher education.

The term community cohesion was effectively developed as a direct response to the riots in the northern towns of England. Throughout the spring and summer of 2001, northern mill towns were at the epicentre of disorder. The civil disturbances had widely been understood by central Government as resulting from a lack of, and the decline of, social cohesion (Halsall, 2012a). The Government responded to the disturbances by introducing community cohesion as a policy, which initially would deal with race. Two reports were published by the Home Office (Cantle, 2001; Denham, 2001). Both recommended that the concept of community cohesion should be integrated into ethnic and white areas. In October 2005 the launch of Cantle’s (2005) new book provided a more detailed examination of community cohesion. The newly created Institute of Community Cohesion, led by Cantle, aims to test new models of community cohesion in practice.

Table 1. A definition of community cohesion

Domain	Description
Common values and a civic culture	Common aims and objectives. Common moral principles and codes of behaviour. Support for political institutions and participation in politics.
Social order and social control	Absence of general conflict and threats to the existing order. Absence of incivility. Effective informal social control. Tolerance; respect for differences; inter-group co-operation.
Social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities	Harmonious economic and social development and common standards. Redistribution of public finances and of opportunities. Equal access to services and welfare benefits. Ready acknowledgement of social obligations and willingness to assist others.
Social Networks and Social Capital	High degree of social interaction within communities and families. Civic engagement and associational activity. Easy resolution of collective action problems.
Place Attachment and Identity	Strong attachment to place. Inter-twining of personal and place identity.

Source: Cantle, 2001, p. 13

There are conflicting debates on a clear definition of community cohesion. The term is capable of multiple interpretations and Harrison (2005) has argued that community cohesion can be linked with other broad concepts such as 'social capital', 'social cohesion', or 'the social glue.' According to Cantle (2001), community cohesion originates from economic terms but now the concept involves a broader range of issues. Community cohesion includes issues such as access to education and employment, poverty and social inequalities, social and cultural diversity and communication and information technologies. Modood (1993) has noted that higher education is an influence in tackling ethnic segregation because it creates ambition for social mobility that leads to better prospects and therefore professional status. In Cantle's report, an analytical definition of community cohesion is not given but a tabular representation of five domains is offered (see table 1). This categorising of community cohesion is useful because it shows linkages with social cohesion. Moreover, it could be said that community cohesion is simply a build on from social cohesion. Cantle (2005) has argued that the terms community cohesion and social cohesion are interchangeable. Cantle (2005, p. 52) defines both concepts:

"Social Cohesion reflects divisions based on social class and economic factors and is complemented by social capital theories relating to the 'bonding' between people and the presence of mutual trust. It is seen to be undermined by the social exclusion experienced by individuals or groups, generally defined by their social class and economic position."

"Community Cohesion reflects divisions based upon identifiable communities, generally on the basis of faith or ethnic distinctions. It is also complemented by the social capital theory of 'bridging' between communities. It is undermined by the disadvantage, discrimination and disaffection experienced by the identifiable community as a whole."

Cantle (2005) recognises that there are some distinctions between these two concepts. First, social cohesion has inclined to be used more broadly and aligned with more socio-economic factors. Kearns and Forrest (2000) argued that social cohesion is 'nebulous' and 'everyone knows' what the key elements are. They also say that

social cohesion is seen in a positive light - 'social cohesion is a good thing.' However, Kearns and Forrest (2000) have argued that there is a need for greater clarity and consensus about its meaning and its effects in public policies. In brief, social cohesion means that:

“... a cohesive society ‘hangs together’; all the component parts somehow fit in and contribute to society’s collective project and well-being; and conflict between societal goals and groups, and disruptive behaviours, are largely absent or minimal” (Kearns & Forrest, 2000, p. 996).

Social cohesion involves a number of elements which include: common values and a civic culture; social order and social control; social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities; social networks and social capital and territorial belonging and identity. Secondly, community cohesion has tended to be a more exact term to describe societal fractures, which are based on identifiable communities defined by faith or ethnicity, rather than social class. Nevertheless, community cohesion has been based within the British context because of race, faith and the necessity to develop shared values across ethnic divisions as a response to community conflict and unrest. As Cantle (2005, p. 48) points out:

“It is easy to focus on systems, processes and institutions and to forget that community cohesion fundamentally depends on people and their values. Indeed, many of our present problems seem to owe a great deal to our failure to communicate and agree a set of common values that can govern behaviour.”

But the view from central government is that social cohesion and community cohesion’s principle aims are to not only reduce social exclusion in all communities but also to tackle the ever growing segregation between the white and British Asian communities. The introduction of this policy has caused much critical discussion. In particular McGhee (2003, p. 382) has argued that community cohesion has become a highly ‘problematic political project.’ McGhee goes on to add that this type of policy is a classic new Labour ‘third way policy.’ Thus, as Robinson (2008, p. 22) argues, community cohesion is an ‘empty concept’ that the government failed to respond to the civil disturbances of 2001.

There are two clear criticisms of community cohesion. The first being how the policy tackles integration with different ethnic groups in society. Flint & Robinson (2008) have accused central government of watering down the community cohesion policy and creating crisis with regard to issues related to cohesion in Britain. In addition Worley (2005) has argued that the policy from central government is not specific and does not take into account each area that has a local problem. This can directly cause relationship problems when integrating the policy at a local level. As McGhee (2005) states, the community cohesion policy has to be reviewed and rewritten to assist local authorities to tackle integration. A second criticism of community cohesion that McGhee (2003) points out is how to tackle diversity. Since the introduction of the policy politicians, according to McGhee, have simply ‘politicised’ this policy and as Worley (2005, p. 491) notes:

“One of my main concerns with the current policy framework is the assimilationist tone of the rhetoric; alongside a discourse of blame directed towards new migrants and especially British Muslim communities, who are expected to show ‘which side they are on’, through an allegiance to a ‘phoney’ (Kundnani, 2005) construction of Britishness.”

This accusation states that all communities that are facing segregation are forced to change their identity where they live or, as Amin (2002, p. 14) argues, could further create ‘a naïve pursuit sense of place.’ With this politicisation occurring there is a tendency for the far right, such as the National Front and the British National Party, to create and cause fears in local communities jeopardising efforts to tackle segregation (McGhee, 2006). Moreover, with this conflict occurring Burnett (2004) has questioned what the future is for community cohesion because in the past the British Asian community has suffered criminalisation and victimisation and at the moment community cohesion offers little safeguard. In summary, community cohesion represents a new political approach to tackle the problems in urban areas but as discussed its implementation is not without problems. The next section of the paper will focus on the case study and analytical critique community cohesion, within a higher education context.

4. Tackling a Problematic Community

As stated earlier in this paper over the last decade there have been many changes in the higher education system. What is evident is that locality has played a fundamental role in expanding higher education. However, this concept is nothing new because Kneller (1955) stated that students consider locality is the most important aspect when choosing a university. Over the recent decade further education colleges and universities have benefited from forming reflexive relationships. Figure 2 shows the key feature of this new remit in Post 16 education.

- A common system of colleges and universities marked by diversity and a broad division of labour
- A central authority with strategic responsibility for higher education and the education and training of adults
- A more independent role for colleges at the undergraduate levels of education based on direct funding and awarding powers
- A single qualifications and credit framework spanning secondary and post-secondary education to promote access, progression and transfer
- A re-balancing of funding and student support to underpin part-time education and training

Source: (Teaching & Learning Research Briefing, 2008, p. 3)

Figure 2. Features of an open system of further/higher education

The University Centre in Oldham was established in May 2005. The new centre is part of the University of Huddersfield, formerly known as Huddersfield Polytechnic. The Post 1992 University attracts students from diverse social and economic backgrounds. The university's ethos is to provide students with transferable skills in preparation for the world of work and therefore able to contribute to the British economy. The visionary statement promises that:

“The University of Huddersfield focuses on providing opportunities for all, especially groups not currently well represented in universities, and supporting students to ensure the maintenance of high standards in their qualifications” (University of Huddersfield, 2008, p. 7).

Huddersfield's Oldham campus modernised higher education provision for the locality because the previous structure was labelled a ‘makeshift arrangement’ between Oldham College, Oldham Council and Oldham Sixth Form College (Kadembo, 2009, p. 16). Moreover, in recent times Oldham has seen education performance fail with levels of unemployment on the increase (Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council, 1993; 2004; Kundnani, 2007). Another factor in setting up the University Centre was the reaction by central and local government to the civil disturbances that occurred in Oldham in 2001 (see figure 3).

- Increase Higher Education opportunities
- Major catalyst for the regeneration of the town centre and the borough as a whole
- Boost employment prospects
- Increase business opportunities in the area
- Provide support for local business development through research and start-up opportunities
- Enhance employment opportunities by increasing the skill base of the borough
- Development and construction of an expanded campus
- Produce well educated and highly skilled people

Source: (Oldham Local Learning Partnership, 2005, p. 3)

Figure 3. The benefits of the University Centre in Oldham

Back in 2001 an independent inquiry into the civil disturbances perceived Oldham as segregated in terms of education, employment and housing. Additionally, the education requirements and employment opportunities in Oldham were seen to be poor because graduates tended to migrate from the area. One of the main recommendations from this review was for the authorities to have a fundamental rethink on how education is run from primary to post 16. The independent review report recommended that ‘The Council, Connexions, the OLLP and the LSC need to carry out more detailed analysis to identify the needs and concerns of post-16 years olds, and ensure that this evidence is published’ (Ritchie, 2001, p. 92). For this recommendation to work effectively the policy integration of community cohesion and regeneration was crucial in securing Oldham's success in tackling segregation in education.

Hence, from the outset the University Centre emphasized the importance that Oldham placed on education regeneration. The University of Huddersfield introduced a policy initiative called ‘Towns Like Us.’ The purpose of this new higher education framework is to guarantee that Oldham's University Centre has a distinct identity within the community and thus provides quality higher education and training (Halsallb, 2012). At the heart of

this policy are four strategic models set out by Gibbs (2005) which are: (1) strong partnership in higher education and further education; (2) regeneration to provide economic change and growth; (3) building capacity of the use of existing outreach centres and (4) shared campuses to create new facilities. This strategic model complements the 'social inclusion and cohesion in terms of both ethnicity and socio-economic background' (Oldham Strategic Partnership, 2004, p. 10).

As discussed earlier in the literature review achieving social and economic mobility has become a key emphasis in higher education. Consequently one of the key driving features in the last years of the Labour government has been promoting the importance of social mobility. Breen (1997) has defined social mobility as a tool in providing an individual to aspire better prosperity in terms of education and employment. In recent years leading politicians, academics, religious leaders and respected media commentators have argued that Britain has become a broken society. Hence, Alan Milburn's July 2009 report on 'Unleashing Aspiration' argues there should be more opportunities to the most disadvantaged groups in society. The report recommends that the government's main priority in education is to develop greater 'opportunities and widening the winners' circle so that more people can fulfil their aspirations' (Milburn, 2009, p. 8). In this view expressed by Milburn he encouraged the government to provide access to higher education to deprived students then, more than ever before, they would have the opportunity to go to the best universities. This proposal set out by Milburn was singled out by the government and in October (2009) the then Secretary for State for Business, Innovation and Skills Peter Mandelson, argued for a new framework on universities. This framework to be implemented by the government saw higher education: (1) continue commitment to wider participation and create fairness; and (2) maintain global excellence in research. This new structure was essentially a response to the economic recession and therefore it will be interesting to see if this approach will stay in place in a period of economic recovery.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore how higher education works in a problematic community. This research used one school of thought namely structuration because it is conceptualised within the policy context. The documentary evidence that was provided was derived from central and local government documentation. By using documentary sources this work has chronologically pieced together the key driving forces behind creating a higher education centre in a problematic area.

The literature review deliberated on the concepts of community cohesion and social cohesion and how these concepts are associated with the case study. It was discovered that there are clear linkages between social cohesion and community. Cattle (2001) provides a framework for the study of community cohesion by devising five domains of a cohesive society. As segregation is related to ethnicity, as much as social and economic circumstances, it is considered helpful to investigate segregation and community cohesion with reference to regeneration policies, which aim to benefit deprived and excluded communities. Indicators developed for measuring social and economic changes brought about by regeneration policies will also be useful as research tools to explore the issues of segregation and community cohesion.

The research has discovered that social and economic forces are the key processes to tackle Oldham's segregation problems. At the heart of the social and economic forces is education. The new University Centre has brought a new emphasis on regeneration and therefore created new job opportunities. Moreover, the higher education institution has brought a contemporary vision to the area and thus a positive impact on community cohesion. The centre is in its 5th year of existence and in the words of Cattle (2006, p. 4):

"... Oldham has every right to be proud of its record to date and now needs to unlock and make its learning available to other communities."

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