

University of Warwick: the gear that could lead West Midlands into a key region of social and economic development

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According to the Office of National Statistics¹ the West Midland region seems to be a complex scenario characterized (and marked) by contrasted statistics. The region is characterized by its manufacturing jobs, a high rate of working-age population, a low rate of crime and the highest proportion non-White regional population outside of London. On another hand, the region is also characterized by the highest fertility rate of all the UK (including high rates of teenage pregnancy), infant mortality rate, gender-based violence (GBV) and high rates of depression (including other similar incapacitated psychological disorders). Although some of the previous stats are improving², there is much that could actually be done by relevant stakeholder to improve both the social variables and the financial situation of the region as a whole.

The University of Warwick, currently located in Coventry, is a public research university which stands as a world class university³ marked by its research capacity, multi-ethnic population and state-of-the-art facilities. This particular university could be considered as the most relevant learning institution of its region and could be (as its actually doing) a major player in the development of the West Midlands.

This brief essay proposes several categories of actions in certain domains that seems to be mutually exclusive, but when are implemented as one holistic strategy, the probability of obtaining long-term positive outcomes is exponentially increased. Generally speaking the domains are three: A) *General Research for Evidence Based Decision Making* (which itself is the pillar for all the other domains and actions), B) *Social Integration and Improvement* (which will be mostly related to the improvement of health indicators) and C) *Economic Engagement and Globalization*. The domains, focused by the University of Warwick, could radically transform the West Midland into one key region characterized by positive economic growth, social inclusion and development and research for both present actions and future actions.

The first cluster of action (*General Research for Evidence Based Decision Making*) is indeed the most relevant domain. The University of Warwick is characterized by its research-focused courses and the role of its publications in the general advancement of the country⁴. This effort needs to be appreciated, published even more (on mass media) and slowly (but steadily) needs to create a body of knowledge accessible not only to highly-technical individuals, but also to the non-research individuals who in one way or another are relevant stake holders.

As the University of Warwick is characterized by its research capabilities, a sub-committee (or voluntary association) could be created to compile all the information regarding the West Midlands and to fill any information gaps by actually implementing must-needed research in those areas. Compiling the available information would be the first stage, as this information is all over the place, the National Office of Statistics, e.g., have a (generally speaking) large body of statistics relevant to the region. Nevertheless, the real information for decision making is published on peer-reviewed journals, abstracts for conferences or any other

¹ Portrait of the West Midlands, Office for National Statistics (2011)

² The West Midlands Report, BDO (2015)

³ University of Warwick, A comparison of Ranks, Rankings.ch (2015)

⁴ See, e.g., Research's create world's first ibuprofen patch, Warwick (2015)

imaginable and plausible highly-technical formats which are not generally accessible to the population. Here is where the committee or the voluntary organization would begin to shine: if all of that information could be summarized, categorized and transformed into a more easy-to-use data for decision making, then more individuals (and organizations) could actually make sound decisions in any relevant topic. The argument here is: most of the health, social and financial indicators of the region are affected by multiple variables, and the only path of improving those variables (and thus, the final indicator) is by understanding those particular variables and the peculiarity of their interactions. Any researcher could easily locate descriptive (and even causal) information regarding GBV or partner-violence in Coventry⁵ (or about any other subject for that matter). But, how easily is for non-technical individuals to find this information and actually make a decision based on it? Multiple stake-holders could be benefited by having an accessible pool of information for sound decision making, including Social Organizations, Non-governmental Associations and even that altruistic individual who wants to do something for the homeless people this holiday but does not know where to start (how many homeless people are in the region?, could I actually do something? Is there an organization implementing an evidence-based poverty reduction program in which I could help? Could I be involved in the modification of the root of the problem instead of just giving out some basic help? Etc.). The first palpable outcome of this particular committee is that general pool of information followed by a Work Plan directed to stakeholders (and the general population) to increase awareness of the importance of evidence for decision making, and how it plays a vital role in the improvement of the region.

The second stage of the committee is to actually fill-up vital research gaps by encouraging and implementing research for it. This particular group will have the task of classifying any missing information, locating possible funding for the research and to actually implement the research. This committee should link research students to these gaps, so students may choose one of these topics for their actual final research. Any links or agreements between the University of Warwick and other Universities or colleges in the region may provide beneficial, and in the first place, this committee should be formed by an interdisciplinary team of members and students of all the Universities and Colleges across the region.

The second set of actions by the University of Warwick that could very well improve the region is related to *Social Integration and improvement*. This particular domain also has two seemingly mutually exclusive sets of actions which could greatly improve the community engagement and the overall regional improvement. The first cluster of action is related to the implementation of Evidence Based Interventions for Behavioral Change related to those indicators that really needs to decrease (e.g. teenage pregnancy, GBV and Intimate Partner Violence). I have found a lot of actions by different stakeholders related to the prevention of unwanted pregnancies and the reduction of those two types of violence, nevertheless, those efforts seem to be reduced by the lack of evidence on which they are constructed. Most of them are aimed to inform individuals and to handout leaflets, which would only increase knowledge among the population. No behavioral change will result by the implementation and funding of that kind of activities⁶, sure, information is always good, but it is one of the smallest statistically variables related to an actual behavior (e.g. knowing how to use a condom, and the

⁵ Liza, L. & Glenda, K. Using Ecological Theory to Understand Intimate Partner Violence and Child Maltreatment (2002).

⁶ Corace, K. & Garber, G. When Knowledge is not enough: Changing behavior to change vaccination results (2014); Prochaska, J. & Diclemente, P. The Transtheoretical model for Behavioral Change (2015)

importance of it, would not necessarily be translated into the actual behavior of using the condom).

All the information produced by the committee (in the *General Research for Evidence Based Decision Making*) could be useful for creating or adapting evidence based interventions which would lower the seemingly unhealthy rates of teenage pregnancy, GBV and intimate partner violence (among other indicators of the region). The implementation of any kind of intervention would also require the association of the University of Warwick with other universities and organizations, including received (and encouraging) support from its students.

The second cluster of actions related to the *Social Integration and Improvement* domain, is the involvement of the international community and minorities into a formalized Work Plan of actions related to the community itself. That is, the University could take the opportunity and involve international societies and communities into the preparation and planning of Behavioral Interventions, and even more, the University should form a sub-committee solely integrated by international community members. That particular community can help to bridge the invisible barriers that some international members of the community have among different institutions, including healthcare access. In a sense, this group will be funded by the University of Warwick (and inspired by it) but it would be a separated, cross-regional and separated entity integrated solely by community leaders and international individuals. The group will seek an active participation within the community and can serve as mediators before other institutions or groups. It could also serve as a technical team to provide answers to the international community enquires, or just provide support to the preparation of initiatives which involve any minority.

The last domain in which the University of Warwick could help the development of the region is closely related to *Economic Engagement and Globalization*. As Birmingham and Coventry are in the region, there is a granted understanding about the industrial capabilities of the West Midlands, nevertheless, the times are indeed changing and the industrial revolution is slowly lagging behind by the ever-growing informatics evolution. I'm not saying that classic industries or manufacturing enterprises will close their doors, since they are not (nor will in the near future), but there is an opportunity to transform West Midlands into an industry of information while continuing the collection of benefits from the industrial sector. As of today, the region has one of the highest rates of working populations with no qualifications⁷. The University of Warwick could lead and even larger multi-institutional agreement with multiple manufactures and training facilities to reach and train even more individuals, and thus, regaining some of the regional former glory as the State-of-the-art region in manufacturing. The key point here will be the range and extension of the agreement. This particular agreement must include different universities, colleges and training facilities, while also creating training spots for basic, middle and highly-technical jobs. If this one-of-a-kind Memorandum of Understanding between all these institutions could be made, it would be easy to access new funding, increase the local capacities and efficiently link different stakeholders with what they need. In order of this kind of agreement to survive, the University of Warwick must be humble and allow other training institutions to actively participate. This agreement would never work on a "closed environment", and with more institutions, more benefits for both the community and the manufacturing sector. The University of Warwick could be the founder of the initiative, but never the only key player.

⁷ Office for National Statistics (2014)

Lastly the university could take advantage of the informatics revolution by massively capacitating and training individuals into professionals related to software development and its links with the manufacturing industry. The key point here, is to offer highly-technical training that could provide answers to common problems of the manufacturing sector. That is, to explore software-based solutions to hardware-based problems, there is a lot of room for this particular perspective and it could very well be the future of manufacturing.

As stated throughout this particular essay, the University of Warwick have a lot to offer to the region, and the region have a lot to receive from the University. The University has to take a new approach related to its community involvement (outside of the university per se) and be able to perceive its own capabilities that could be used at a regional level. There is a lot of action going on in the university, but there is so little going *off* the university. The university have all that is needed for improving regional success: research oriented individuals, state-of-the-art capacities, an international community, and most importantly, the will to actually get things going. The key missing part? A structured (and ambitious) Work Plan based on the integration of key actors from the community (both national and international, and without forgetting minorities), the university (including students) and the manufacturing sector to pursue this much-needed development of the region. The real question is, having all those resources and commodities, why the University of Warwick is not taking the lead in regional development?