Stakeholder analysis in higher education

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Stakeholder analysis in higher education:
A case study of the University of Portsmouth

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[bionotes]
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Introduction

The issue of stakeholder identification and management is relatively well understood in the literature for private sector organisations (Christopher et al. 2002, Rutterford et al. 2006), and its importance is increasing across all developed countries (Maassen 2000, Wit and Verhoeven 2000, Peters 1996, Kettle 2002). However, whilst stakeholder theory has been advanced in commercial arenas (Donaldson and Preston 1995), there is less research in the public and non-profit areas (Bryson 2004), particularly with regard to universities.

Stakeholder identification and management are important disciplines in terms of effective management (Mitchell et al. 1997) 'making decisions' and planning strategy (Bryson 2004), identifying problems to be solved (Freeman 1984), and ultimately knowing who may exert their influence over the organisation (Mitchell et al. 1997). Identifying and understanding the stakeholders of relevance to an organisation, and their influence or interest, is therefore of key importance to managers and policy-makers.

The aim of this paper is to investigate this gap in the literature, namely specific understanding of stakeholders and the nature of stakeholder management for universities. In this context the study focuses on the identification and prioritisation of stakeholders for a UK university, a process that may be 'key to the success of public sector organisations' (Bryson 2004). Whilst stakeholder identification and classification is a familiar concept, its application to the particular context of a UK university is less explored, and this paper aims to drive more effective university stakeholder management through 'improving management, creating public value and advancing the common good' (Bryson 2004).

The paper employs a case study approach that focuses on the University of Portsmouth, a large, modern UK university.

The University of Portsmouth

The University of Portsmouth was established as a Higher Education Institution in 1969 and gained university status in 1992. In the academic year 2005-06 it joined the fifty largest universities and today has over 19,000 students (University of Portsmouth, 2009). The University, with over 1,900 staff and income of £7.1 million (2005), is an organisation of clear importance in the Portsmouth area (Harris 1997).

The University's mission statement is: 'The University of Portsmouth aims for excellence in the creation, interpretation and communication of knowledge.'

Literature review

The importance of stakeholder management
Stakeholder management is important to both public and private sector organisations, as reflected in Nutt and Backoff's (1992) early definition of stakeholders as 'all parties who will be affected by or will affect strategy'. Organisations must place sufficient emphasis on these stakeholders (Burby 2003, Margerum 2002, Bryson 1995, Baumgartner and Jones 1993), as they can have an important effect on their success (Eden and Ackermann 1998). Therefore identifying, understanding, and managing stakeholders are key organisational activities.

Stakeholder identification and analysis
The term 'stakeholder' can potentially apply to a broad number of groups, and stakeholder management can be complex. Therefore defining an organisation's stakeholders, and their impact, is of importance (Mitchell et al. 1997), as it can lead to the identification of a 'winning coalition' (Bryson 2004). The identification of relevant stakeholders seemingly underpins stakeholder management, and therefore forms the first area of investigation for this study.

Stakeholders compete for managerial resources (Neville and Menguc 2006), which creates a need to identify strategies for managing them (Gomes and Gomes 2009). Identifying those of importance to different areas of strategic decision-making is therefore important, and this is the second area of investigation for this study. However, it should be noted that the relative importance of each group can vary over time (Mitchell et al. 1997) and because of this identification of factors that affect the level of importance over time forms a third area of focus.

Classifying stakeholders: a higher education context
From the generic literature on stakeholder management it is clear that developing an understanding of how different stakeholder groups vary in their importance is a salient issue (Gomes and Liddle 2009). In this context stakeholders can effectively represent opportunities or threats to an organisation (Gomes and Liddle 2009), depending on whether they are identified and actively managed or not, to the extent where not understanding them may be considered an example of 'dumb practice' (Bryson 2004). The variety of approaches to stakeholder analysis that has developed in the literature has arguably given rise to confusion over what exactly is meant by the term (Reed et al. 2009). A number of classifications have been proposed based on such factors as whether stakeholders are voluntary or involuntary (Clarkson 1995), power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al. 1997), their level of power and degree of interest (Johnson and Scholes 2002), and participation (Reed 2008). However, whilst these frameworks are clearly of some relevance to the education sector, no studies have explored the factors specifically affecting the importance of a stakeholder group to universities.

Within the literature limited research has been undertaken in the context of public and non-profit organisations (Bryson, 2004; Gomes & Liddle, 2009; Gomes & Gomes, 2009) and there is seemingly a gap in the literature in relation to the higher education sector. Whilst it is likely that some of the stakeholder groups identified for private sector organisations will also be relevant to universities, there is a need to further explore this issue particularly with regard to the unique nature of university operations and responsibilities to different groups. Indeed universities arguably have a particularly complex stakeholder environment, and therefore examination of their stakeholder environment and management is considered pertinent.

Research objectives
This research begins to address gaps in the literature discussed above by examining four key research areas:

1. Who are the stakeholders of a university and what is the relevance of each group?
2. Which stakeholders are of the greatest priority to the university?
3. Which factors affect the prioritisation of each stakeholder group?
4. What are the key issues in managing the stakeholder groups over a period of time?

Methodology

Case study research

The use of a case study was considered appropriate for this work, as it involves intensive analysis with a view to identifying issues and generating insights (Bryman and Bell 2003). The investigation of stakeholders in a UK university was conceived as a 'revelatory case' (Yin 1984) with a predominantly inductive approach. This study focuses on a single higher education institution. It is not uncommon in research studies to select a single case for purely practical reasons (Daymon and Holloway 2004), especially if it is considered that that case has 'intrinsic value' (Stake 1995), and is appropriate. Indeed using a single case, with a grounded theory methodology, can be appropriate to building new theory. The University of Portsmouth was selected for the research as it was considered a fairly typical post-1992 UK university in terms of size, structure and courses.

The authors, whilst seeking to achieve a degree of theoretical generalisability from this research, were mindful of external validity issues, which mean that with a case study methodology it is not always possible to identify typical cases that can be used to represent a class of objects or events (Bryman and Bell 2003). The crucial question, according to Bryman and Bell (2003: 56) is not 'whether the findings can be generalised to a wider universe, but how well the researcher generates theory out of the findings'. Therefore the authors are wary of generalising based on the results, with the intention of the research rather being to 'act as test site for theory' (Daymon and Holloway 2004) in comparing current stakeholder theory to the particular example of UK universities. The focus is one of a reasonably 'holistic analysis' (Yin 1984) exploring stakeholder connections across much of the organisation.

Once a case study had been decided on as an appropriate methodology it was important to select an appropriate method of data collection. The chosen method was qualitative interviews, which case study design exponents often favour for an intensive detailed examination.

Interviewee selection

It is accepted that defining what constitutes a stakeholder can be problematic but one valid approach is that of identification by 'experts' utilised in this paper (Reed et al. 2009), the issue of whom to include in the sample was therefore of critical importance (Bryson 2004). In order to ensure the right interviewees were included a two-stage approach for the research was adopted, involving preliminary interviews with opinion formers within the University, which aided in defining the research direction, interview questions, and the selection of interviewees. The interview sample structure was also informed by the research of Wit et al. (2000), Enz et al. (1993) and Shanahan and Gerber (2004). The final interviewees selected were as follows:
1. Vice-Chancellor
2. Dean
3. Head of Department
4. Governor
5. Head of Marketing Department
6. Head of International Department
7. Head of Student Union
8. Head of Careers
9. Market Research Manager
10. Marketing and Communications Manager
11. Head of Enterprise and Knowledge Transfer
12. Head of Public Relations (PR)
13. Director of Planning

These interviewees were selected as 'opinion formers' within the University, and were considered appropriate because they have knowledge, expertise or information that will guide decision-making of opinion seekers (Eastman et al. 2002) and their use may allow a picture of a whole milieu to be established (Serraf 1978).

Data collection and analysis
Semi-structured interviews were considered suitable within the case study approach (Gomes and Gomes 2009), as 'complex and ambiguous issues can be penetrated' (Gummesson 2005: 309), providing illustration of the participant's true feelings on an issue (Chisnall 1992).

The research for the paper was clearly exploratory in nature, and the design of the data collection instrument reflected this. Therefore the interview guide was relatively loosely structured to allow the interviewees to guide the direction of the interview. The interviews were conducted in two stages, involving the identification of stakeholders, followed by prioritisation. The interviews were conducted among opinion formers within the University of Portsmouth over an eleven-month period between August 2007 and July 2008.

The analysis of the data was informed by the approach of Reed et al. (2009), with 'those conducting analysis embedded in some theoretical perspective of how a system functions'. Analysis was undertaken through coding and attributing content to identified dimensions, thus recognising any commonalities or trends (Schilling 2006, Miles and Huberman 1994).

Findings

The stakeholders and the relevance or interest of each stakeholder group
The breadth of stakeholder groups identified across the sample was notable; one interviewee in particular illustrated this by commenting that 'everybody' was effectively a stakeholder. The Vice-Chancellor (V-C) highlighted that 'stakeholder management is complex for universities, as customers supply only some of their funding'. The implication of this was that not only were a wide variety of stakeholders identifiable, but also a number of these were of a high level of importance to the University's success. The stakeholders identified are detailed in table 1, along with the total occurrences of each stakeholder across the interviews.

[Insert table 1 about here]

Table 1: Frequency of identification of stakeholders by interviewees

The most commonly cited stakeholder group was students, which interviewees divided into three sub groups:
• prospective, current, or alumni;
• UK-based or overseas;
• undergraduate or postgraduate.

Each sub group of students required a different managerial approach, ranging from recruitment (prospective), to satisfaction and retention (current). Two student-related stakeholder groups were also commonly mentioned: parents, as 'funders' and 'influencers', and schools, as a source of students as well as 'influencers'. One respondent also cited student bodies such as the Student Union and NUS (National Union of Students).

The second most commonly identified stakeholder group was local businesses. National business organisations were also identified, but were generally not considered to be quite so important.

Staff of the University were the next most frequently identified group and were divided by some into 'academic' and 'non-academic', considered significant as academic staff 'had interests that

went beyond the University alone, such as a commitment to their subject area', whilst non-academic staff were arguably more focused on the University overall.

A number of other stakeholder groups were identified (as illustrated in table 1), including:

- academic and research bodies, including funding councils, Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE);
- regionally focused stakeholders: local government, community, police and community forums;
- government bodies: Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), Department of Innovation, Universities, and Skills (DIUS) and Home Office. The Department of Education and Skills (DfES), was also cited, but has now been replaced by DCSF and DIUS);
- societies, bodies and groups relevant to universities as a whole, including: 'learned' societies, such as the British Academy of Management, networking societies such as the Association of Business Schools, and professional bodies.
- trustees and governors.

[Insert figure 1 about here]

Figure 1: Groupings and types of stakeholders observed from interviews

Figure 1 shows all the stakeholders that were identified in the research. These stakeholders can be grouped into nine stakeholder types (lighter boxes), based on some general commonalities discussed by interviewees; for example, different stakeholders that are largely relevant because of their geographic proximity to the University. These nine types of stakeholders can be further consolidated by their relevance to different areas of the University and its operations (represented in the central ovals). For example, students, relatives, parents, and student bodies all require consideration in student recruitment and other student-orientated management activities. From the interviews it was clear that these groupings were useful in simplifying conceptualisation of the apparently complex stakeholder environment, although it is conceded that they would need refinement to support practical strategic decision-making.

In addition to the groupings identified in the research, this section of the interviews suggested three key factors that can be utilised to evaluate the relative importance of different stakeholder groups at a strategic level across the university's operations. These factors can be categorised depending upon whether they have *direct influence*, *partial influence*, or *indirect influence* upon the university's operations, as has been done in figures 2-4.

The first factor identified was the importance of stakeholders in terms of whether they had a direct impact on *student recruitment and satisfaction*. Figure 2 reflects the key stakeholders broken down in terms of their impact on recruitment and satisfaction.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2: Stakeholders' influence on student recruitment and satisfaction

The second factor identified that influenced the relative importance of a stakeholder was the degree to which they had an impact on the university's *policies and strategies*. Those with high impact on strategies and policies needed significant attention because of their power to influence strategic direction.

[Insert figure 3 about here]

Figure 3: Stakeholders' impact on University's strategic direction and policies

The third factor identified through the interviews relates to stakeholders that have a direct *impact on the university's income*, such as students and funding bodies. This is represented in figure 4.

[Insert figure 4 about here]

Figure 4: Stakeholders' impact on funding and income

Conceptualising stakeholders in these groupings provides insight into their relevance to the core elements of the university's operations, and was thus considered pertinent in their management. Interestingly, from a number of the interviews it seemed that the decrease in importance between stakeholders in the three groups (represented in each of figures 2, 3, and 4), was not linear, with those stakeholders in the 'direct impact' group being considered to be of significantly greater importance than those in other groups.

By combining the analysis of stakeholders in terms of their impact upon recruitment, policies and income it is possible to visually suggest those stakeholders of a particularly high level of importance to the university, with clear implications for management in areas such as prioritisation and resource allocation.

[Insert figure 5 about here]

Figure 5: Understanding the key stakeholders and their type of influence on the University

The stakeholders of greatest salience or priority to the University
In order to develop further understanding of the relative importance of stakeholder groups interviewees prioritisation of the university's main stakeholders was explored. In order to do this, once interviewees identified a stakeholder group, they allocated the groups they considered important a score between 1 and 5, with the highest priority receiving 5 and lowest 1. These scores were totalled for each stakeholder group, therefore enabling a basic comparison of importance weighting (see table 2).

These results are intended to provide initial suggestions of the relative importance of different groups, and the factors that affected the interviewees' prioritisations, although obviously the exact scores are not particularly meaningful on such a small qualitative sample.

[Insert table 2 about here]

Table 2: Scoring of stakeholders

It is accepted within these results that there is a degree of overlap between the categories, such as 'funders' and research councils, but the distinction was made by some interviewees and therefore for completeness is represented here.

This section of the interviews provided further suggestion of the factors affecting stakeholder prioritisation. Once again, a stakeholder group's impact on funding and policies of the University were consistently highlighted as key. Interestingly, another factor raised by a small number of interviewees was the level of accountability the University had to a stakeholder, which some interviewees described as 'their ability to make demands on the University by their expectations'. Bodies such as HEFCE were suggested as an example of a stakeholder that places expectations on universities through their priorities and corresponding allocation of funding.

A final factor noted was 'proximity'; for example local companies and schools had a significant influence and were therefore of greater interest as stakeholders than corresponding national companies or schools.

Exploring the factors affecting prioritisation over time
The final section of the research explored the issue of which factors affected the importance of stakeholder groups at a particular point in time, and therefore what caused them to vary in importance. The results are summarised in table 3.

[Insert table 3 about here]

Table 3: Factors affecting the importance of each stakeholder group

The predominant factor that affected the importance of a stakeholder group seemed to be government policies for UK HE (eg widening participation), and corresponding changes in policies for key 'parent' bodies such as the QAA. It was considered that these often placed new responsibilities on the University, and therefore impacted on the importance of certain stakeholder groups. This also highlights a degree of link between influence on policy and accountability. The second key issue affecting the importance of stakeholders was the university's own strategic agenda, although some noted that to a significant degree this was obviously related to government policies.

This section of the interviews also raised a number of key issues affecting prioritisation in the current environment which can be summarised as follows:
- Government policy. Two examples in particular were highlighted: the current importance of science, technology, engineering and maths subjects (STEM) and agendas such the University's funding being dependent upon 'widening participation'. These factors suggested that anticipating the political future was important.
- The increasing role of the University in the local community and the growing importance of 'corporate social responsibility'.
- The issue of engaging academics and 'support staff', who were 'very different' in that academics prioritise subject and research whilst support staff prioritise the University overall.
- Communication with the Home Office and international agents was of significant importance to recruitment of international students.
- Research councils were suggested to be key 'vehicles of academic esteem'.
- Business and employers are 'increasingly being asked to fund higher education' and therefore their importance was growing.

A final issue worth detailing was that of appropriate communication with stakeholders related to agendas such as 'Research and Knowledge Transfer', where the need to 'talk a different language' was considered of importance as being 'overly academic or overly commercial' could potentially be a barrier to effective dialogue.

Finally, a significant insight was provided by the Vice-Chancellor who emphasised the need for delegation in ensuring 'that you don't leave a stakeholder unattached'. The diversity of the university stakeholder environment meant that this was considered an inherent challenge in effective management.

Conclusions

The issue of stakeholder analysis is 'arguably more important than ever' (Bryson 2004) and stakeholder management is seemingly a significant and dynamic issue (Mitchell et al. 1997). This research indicates that this is also the case for universities, particularly as their success is often reliant on an even broader range of 'customers' than many private sector organisations. It is also evident that a range of differing factors influence the importance of university stakeholders at any point in time, supporting the assertions of Mitchell *et al* (1997).

A review of the literature revealed that stakeholder theories are relatively mainstream (Donaldson and Preston 1995, Singhapakdi et al. 1996), but the existing literature largely relates to the private sector (Clarkson 1995, Mitchell et al. 1997, Johnson and Scholes 2002, Reed 2008), and has yet to address these issues in the university sector. Therefore there was a need for research into higher education stakeholders, and factors affecting their relative importance. This research provides initial insights into key university stakeholders, and the factors that affect their importance.

Thirty types of stakeholders that are relevant to the University of Portsmouth were identified, with twelve groups of 'particular importance'. The research highlighted three key factors that affected the influence of stakeholders on the University: *student recruitment and satisfaction* forms the first of these factors, with the diverse nature of funding also having significance, and this means a number of stakeholders therefore warrant a high level of attention based on *financial implications*. Finally there is also the need to consider stakeholders in terms of their *potential impact on the strategic direction* of the organisation, in particular those that have a direct influence on these policies and strategies (as summarised in figure 5).

Overall this research suggested that these three factors are of greatest importance in identifying and classifying university stakeholders. Perhaps the factor of most significance is the degree to which a stakeholder group affects university policy and strategy, as evidently this can affect the other two factors to some extent.

The high level of weighting placed on a stakeholders' impact on University strategy meant that government policies were generally considered to have a great influence on stakeholder management, as these directly impacted the strategic direction of the organisation which then influenced other operational areas. For example, whilst communicating with students was considered to be of great and growing importance, this was largely driven by the government's tuition fees policy. Similarly increased attention on communication with local business and employers could also be linked to government policies that placed greater emphasis on these organisations to fund higher education. This key role and high influence of government policies is clearly relatively pronounced in stakeholder management in this sector, and thus the need to consider current and future policies is crucial in stakeholder management.

Overall, the authors suggest that the initial attempt to classify and prioritise stakeholders in the particular context of UK HE contained in this paper will assist in advancing effective stakeholder management through 'smarter practice' in terms of prioritisation and planning. Which is particularly important as 'no one is wholly in charge, but many are affected, involved or have some responsibility to act' (Bryson 2004: 46); thus stakeholder understanding and management are key across university management and policy-making.

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Suggestions for exploded quotes, if needed

'it is clear that developing an understanding of how different stakeholder groups vary in their importance is a salient issue' (para 10)

'universities … have a particularly complex stakeholder environment, and therefore examination of their stakeholder environment and management is considered pertinent' (para 11)

'defining what constitutes a stakeholder can be problematic but one valid approach is that of identification by 'experts' ' (para 16)

'stakeholder analysis is '… more important than ever' … and stakeholder management is … a significant and dynamic issue' (para 43)

Group	Tally
Students	13
Local employers/businesses	10
University staff	10
Academic & research bodies/funding councils	9
Local Government/city/authorities	9
Local community	7
Local schools & colleges	7
Governors	6
Parents, influencers & student 'funders'	6
National Employers/businesses	6
Government & EU	6
Course accreditors & professional bodies	3
'Learnered' societies	3
Networking Societies/lobby groups	2
Partner Institutions	2
Media/press	2
Tax payer	2
DIUS	2
Agents	2
Trade unions	1
A level boards & bodies	1
UK HE marketing orgs (e.g. Hobsons)	1
Local police	1
Other NGO's	1
National charities	1
NUS	1
Other Student Organisations	1
Local Charities	1
Trustees	1
Chancellor	1

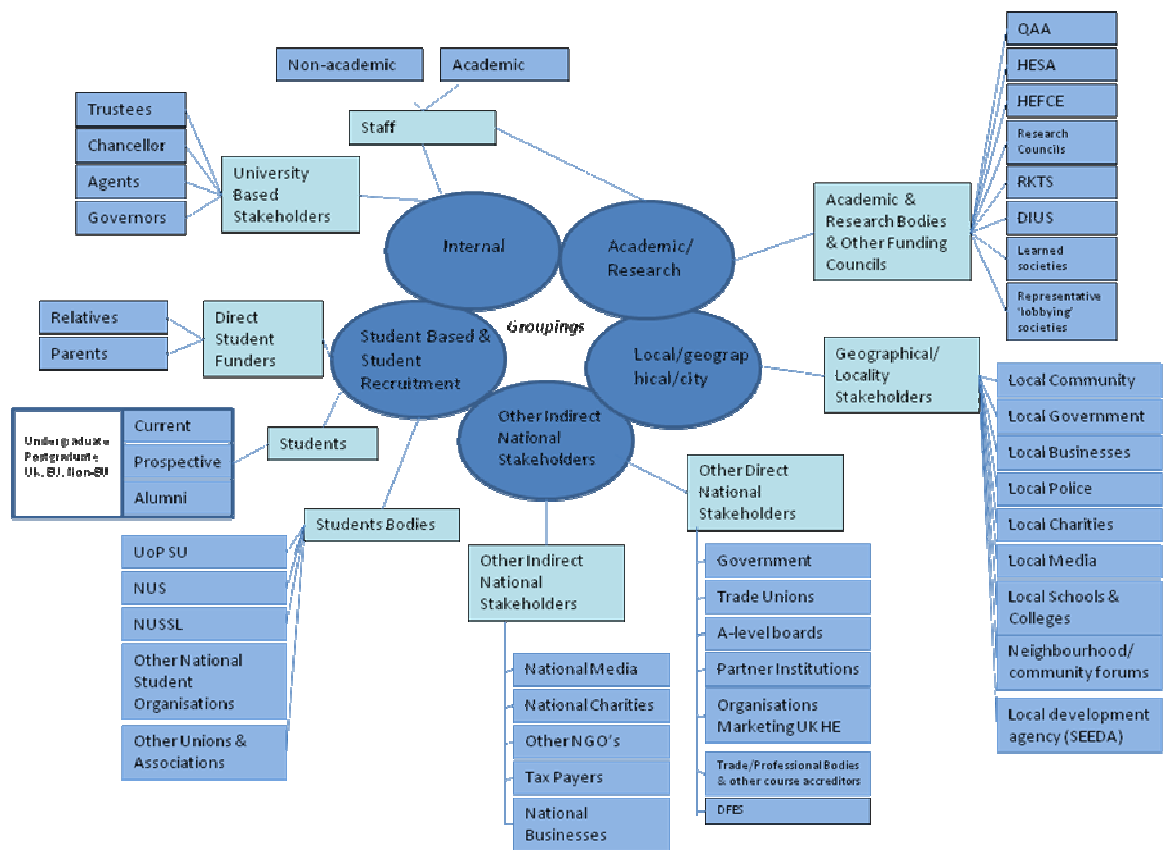Table 1: Frequency of identification of stakeholders by interviewees

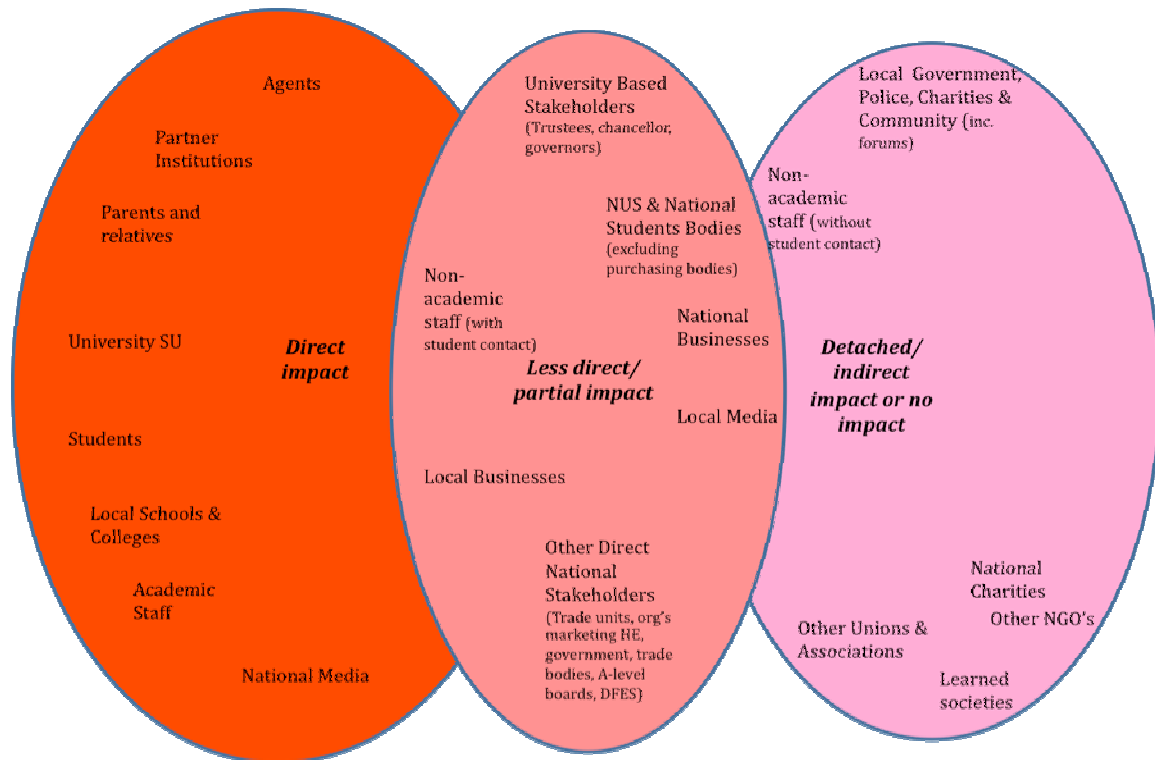Figure 1: Groupings and types of stakeholders observed from interviews.

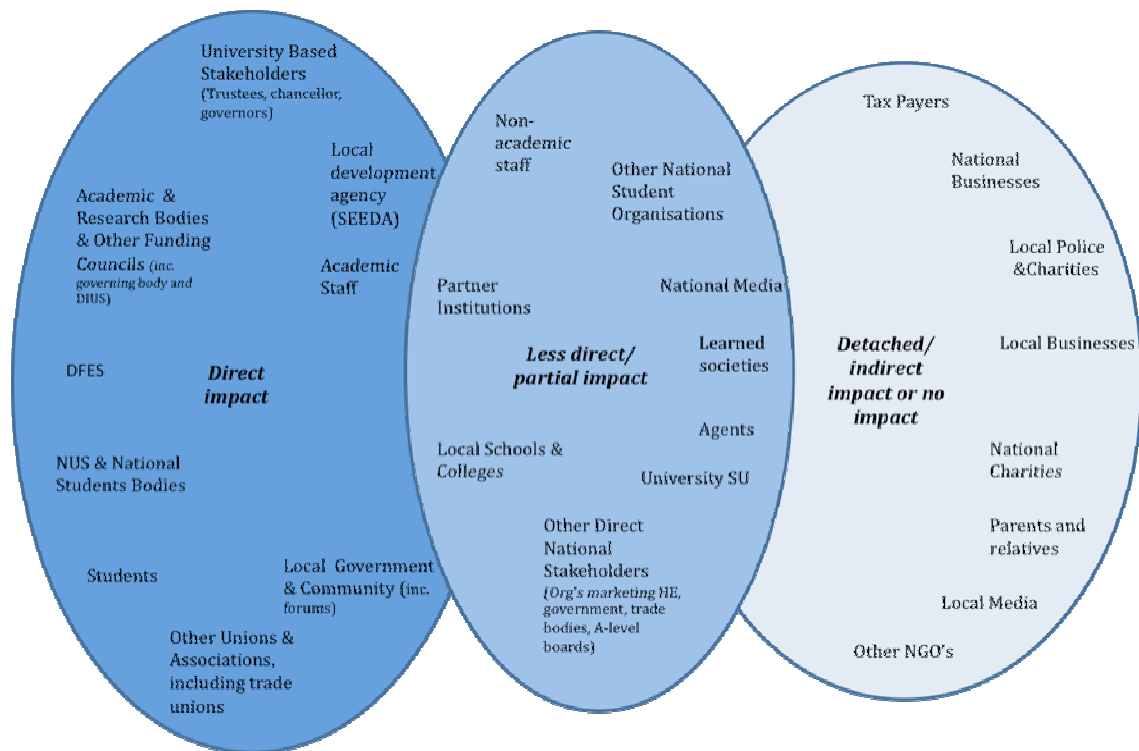Figure 2: Stakeholders' influence on student recruitment and satisfaction

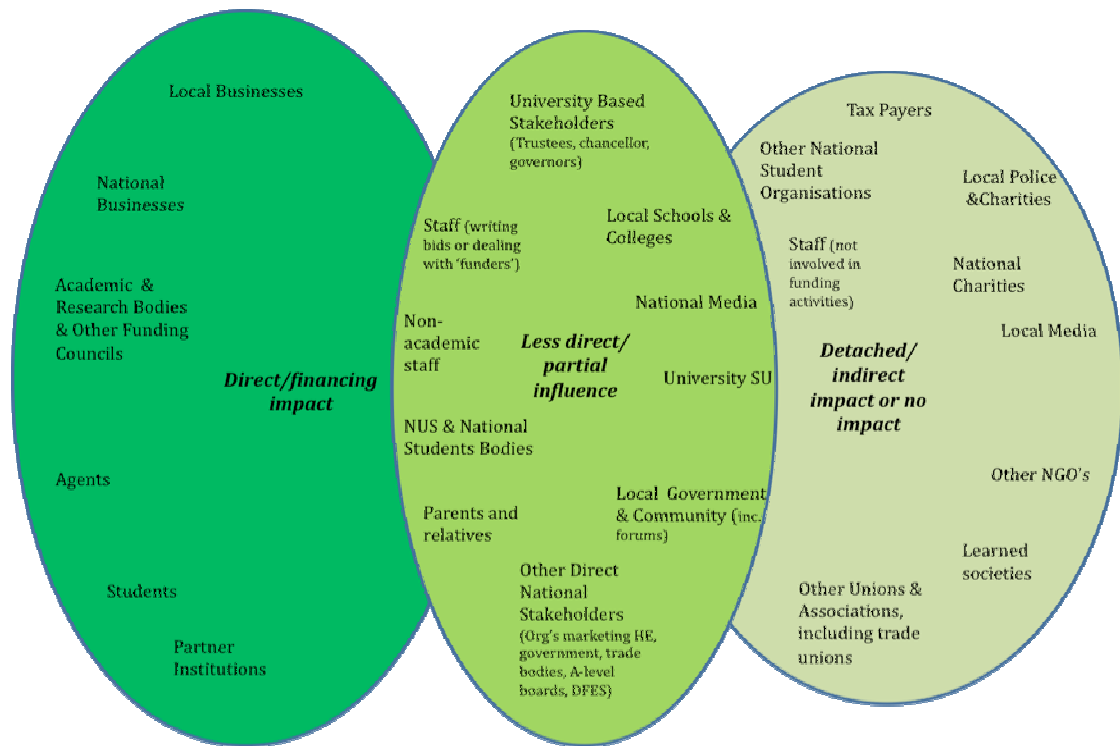Figure 3: Stakeholders' impact on University's strategic direction and policies

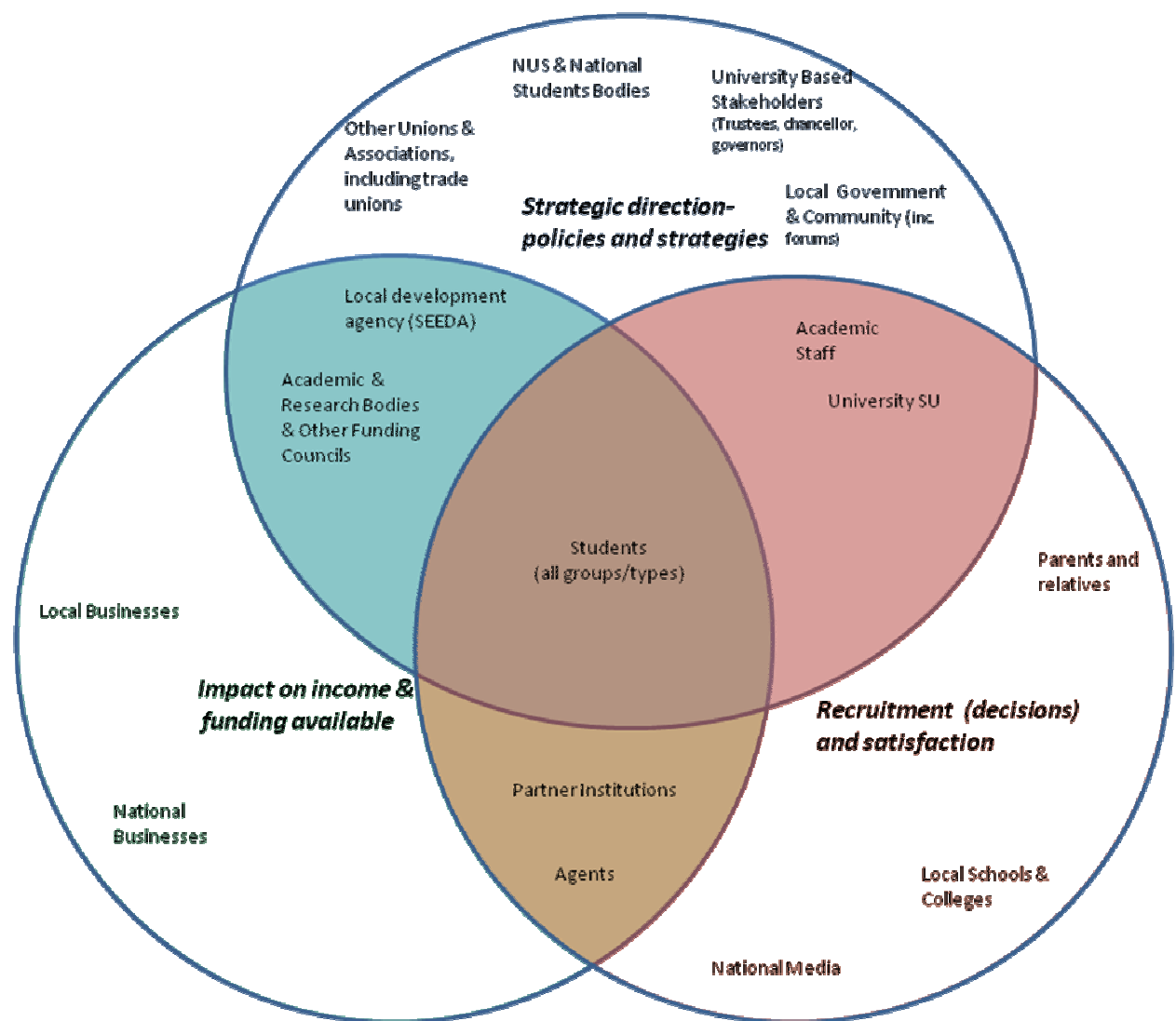Figure 4: Stakeholders' impact on funding and income

Figure 5: Understanding the key stakeholders and their type of influence on the University

Stakeholder group	Total score
Students	37
Staff	26
Funders/ HEFCE	21
Commercial and KT	9
Government*	8
Community and town	8
Governing body & DIUS	8
Research councils/bodies	6
Educational world/ community	6
Graduate Recruiters	5
SEEDA	4
Prospective students	3
NUS	2
Wider Public	1

Table 2: Scoring of stakeholders
*Indicates that a number of interviewees referred to the government generally to include sub-departments and related government funded organisations involved in higher education.

Factor Affecting Importance	No. of interviewees identifying factor
Government policies and agenda	6
Policies of key 'parent' bodies	5
Effect of group on credibility and reputation	3
Local government policies and changes	2
Demographic trends	2
University Strategic Agenda	2
Local community 'reliance'	2
Aging staff population affects sustainability of HE	1
Productivity of economy linked to HE	1
Economy and economic changes	1
Importance of group to income	1
Rising importance of environment	1
Rising importance of corporate social responsibility	1

Table 3: Factors affecting the importance of each stakeholder group