

Social Cohesion

Market-based globalisation has driven accelerating innovation and change, creating a powerful engine for economic growth in many countries. But it has done so at considerable social cost. People's sense of connectedness and identity is under challenge from the forces of suburbanisation, increased economic migration, a breakdown in social order and cohesion, growing inequalities, the pressures of modern living, divisive politics and the threat of terrorism.

The nature and speed of change is such that the very fabric of societies is being challenged, raising questions about how to maintain social cohesion. Successful economies and societies need financial, physical and human capital but they also require social capital - or social 'glue' - the network of ties, information, trust and norms that bind people and enable them to cooperate more effectively.

The importance of social capital lies at the heart of the concept of civil society. Its scope reaches beyond the market and the state, asking people to go beyond asserting their rights and calling for them to go further in taking on board wider personal and community responsibilities.

Manchester has joined forces with Harvard in a joint project on 'Social Change' to help Britain and America better understand the challenges of contemporary society. This will be directed by Professor Robert Putnam, who charted the 30-year decline of social connectivity in the US and articulated the atomized nature of modern life in his book called 'Bowling Alone'.

Professor Putnam, Professor in the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, now holds a Visiting Professorship at Manchester. The new joint initiative with Harvard will include a series of collaborative projects at both national and local community level, graduate summer school coursework and postgraduate programmes.

Future research projects will include:

- Civic Engagement in the UK and US
- Immigration and Diversity
- Religion and Religiosity
- Work, Employment and the Impact of the Twenty-Four-Seven Economy
- Inequalities Amongst Young People

Manchester already hosts a number of centres of excellence specialising in the exploration of social change and is home to the £3.7 million Economic and Social Research Council Funded Centre for Research on Socio Cultural Change. It also hosts the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research an interdisciplinary research centre in the School of Social Sciences (awarded the top 5* rating in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise).

Pragmatic research programmes are being complemented by a major new initiative at undergraduate level. As the largest campus-based University in the UK, Manchester feels an obligation to encourage students to reflect on their own responsibilities to the societies they will go on to lead and serve. This is being developed through a flagship programme at the University - the Manchester Leadership Programme (MLP) - incorporating seminars with expert guest speakers from the public, private and voluntary sectors, together with structured programmes where students work closely with community groups in Greater Manchester. The ultimate vision is for thousands of Manchester students to graduate each year equipped to make a real and practical difference to fulfill their role as global citizens and in sustaining civil societies.