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PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1301663>

PUBLISHER

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VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Harrison, John, Darren Smith, and Chloe Kinton. 2019. "Relational Regions 'in the Making': Institutionalising New Regional Geographies of Higher Education". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/24474>.

RELATIONAL REGIONS ‘IN THE MAKING’: INSTITUTIONALISING NEW REGIONAL GEOGRAPHIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Final author version – February 2017

Accepted for publication in Regional Studies.

Abstract This paper advances current debates on relational regions and higher education through a unique focus on the rise of transregional university alliances. We examine the formation of university research and training consortia to make a series of wider arguments about the new spatialities of higher education praxis, the construction of new regional identities, and processes of institutionalising relational regions. Our research shows new partnership working between universities to be conducive to the weakening of fixed regional territories. It then illustrates how and why some relational imaginaries are beginning to crystallise into harder institutional forms, before revealing significant political-economic and societal implications arising from new institutional geographies of higher education. Furthermore, our research reveals the concerted theoretical and empirical attention required to develop vocabulary and frameworks better able to comprehend emergent regional worlds. For our part, we distinguish between territorial, archipelagic, de facto and constellatory regionalism to exact more precise interpretations of unfolding configurations of relational regions a new conceptual perspective on the increasingly complex spatialities characterising and shaping our globalizing world.

Key words Relational regionalism
Constellatory regionalism
Higher Education
University alliances
Doctoral training

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“In the ‘unbounded’ or ‘relational region’ thesis there is no automatic promise of territorial integrity.” (Jones and Woods, 2013, p. 34)

1. INTRODUCTION

While important work has examined the merits of territorial and relational approaches to conceptualising the region, one aspect of this continuing debate where fewer inroads have been made is in exacting a deeper understanding of how these processes unfold in practice. This is not a new accusation – Massey (2004, p. 3), for example, claimed the relational approach “is, as with so many things, more easily cited in general than excavated in practice” – but one which, despite a growing body of work claiming to ‘empirically ground’ the territorial-relational debate, still lingers. Indicative of this is Allmendinger, Chilla and Sielker’s (2014) contention that territorial-relational debates remain abstract, normative, and where ‘few inroads’ have been made into policy spheres and disciplines.

Where territorial-relational debates have started to make incursions into policy spheres and disciplines is in relation to spatial planning and economic governance (Harrison and Grove, 2015; Paasi and Zimmerbauer, 2016). Nevertheless, despite well-defined scholarship examining how territoriality and relationality are ‘negotiated, constructed and contested’ in the formation of regions (Jonas, 2012, p. 265), how these new regional spaces ‘evolve and sometimes stabilize’ is only just being understood (Metzger, 2013, p. 1368). Exacting a deeper understanding of how the process of institutionalising new regional spaces is unfolding in practice is essential given the interplay between territoriality and

relationality is largely inconsequential if new expressions of regionalism do not develop spatial integrity and the deeper-rooted sense of regionalism necessary to be considered meaningful in any significant way. This requires understanding how and why some spatial imaginaries might be short-lived and ultimately disappear, which might 'harden' towards strongly institutionalised forms, and which might remain 'soft' over a long period (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012).

In a direct response to these concerns, this paper explores a policy sphere – higher education – where the interplay of territorial and relational forces is producing new spatialities of regional praxis. Specifically, our research examines the rise of transregional university alliances. Transregional alliances are institutional arrangements which cross-cut the traditional territorial boundaries of regions, have self-selected memberships where members assemble based on a shared aim, operate with indefinite life-spans, and can take on multiple spatial and institutional forms. In this paper, we focus on the United Kingdom (UK) where more than fifty transregional university alliances have been established over the past decade. We attach particular significance to this emerging institutional landscape since transregional university alliances represent a new regionalisation of higher education, one which is clearly demonstrating the hallmarks of relational regionalism in action. More than this, our analysis breaks with other studies – which have focused the initial construction of university alliances (see Beerkens and Derwende, 2007; Gunn and Mintrom, 2013) – to make important arguments relating to why some regionally-scaled alliances crystallise into harder institutional forms, others remain soft over time, and some fade away altogether.

To achieve this, the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we open up debates around the new spatialities of higher education praxis to reveal an increasingly complex and decidedly messy landscape of new regional (and other spatial) imaginaries. We

disentangle this complex web by identifying three processes of regionalisation – territorial, archipelagic, and de facto. We demonstrate how each process of regionalisation produces its own distinct form of regional arrangement – reflecting how the ‘region’ is being mobilised in different ways, by different actors, in pursuit of different end goals. Providing vital context for understanding why consolidating new regional spaces into harder institutional forms represents a major challenge, the second half of our paper examines recent attempts by six university alliances in the UK to consolidate and ‘fix’ their relationally-imagined region. Despite being similar in appearance our research reveals how and, more crucially, why these relational regions are on different trajectories towards becoming harder institutional forms. This approach allows us to uncover deepening uneven geographies within UK higher education and to consider the wider political-economic and societal implications this raises. Finally, our analysis reveals how concerted theoretical and empirical attention is required to develop vocabulary and frameworks better able to comprehend emergent regional worlds. For our part, we develop the concept of ‘constellatory regionalism’ to strengthen emergent theories of regionalism, and exact a more precise conceptual perspective on the increasingly complex spatialities characterising and shaping our globalizing world.

2. CONCEPTUALISING NEW ‘REGIONAL’ GEOGRAPHIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Exploring the relationship between universities, regions and regionalism has been of longstanding interest to the field of regional studies. However, in the vast majority of studies the region is assumed – to be the territorial region – and not the focus for critical research. This is no longer the case. Recent years have seen a notable shift towards unpacking the constitutive role of universities in producing new urban and regional

landscapes (Addie, Keil, and Olds, 2015; Goddard and Vallance, 2013; Goddard, Coombes, Kempton, and Vallance, 2014; Harrison, Smith, and Kinton, 2016). This manoeuvre is significant in allowing researchers to connect-up research examining new spatialities of higher education praxis to ongoing theoretical debates over the merits of territorial and relational approaches to conceptualising the region. For as Allmendinger et al. (2014) and others note, the degree to which relationality and territoriality are present in processes of region-making is “a matter to be resolved ex post and empirically rather than a priori and theoretically” (MacLeod and Jones, 2007, p. 1186). What matters most is how regions or regional arrangements are ‘made up’ in practice (or through a range of practices) (see Cochrane, 2012). Indeed, this is vital for understanding the rise of transregional university alliances and their political-economic and societal implications.

Antecedent to transregional university alliances were twelve Higher Education Regional Associations (HERA) in the UK. Part of a wider package of measures to unlock the perceived latent potential of UK regions in the late-1990s, HERA were tasked with facilitating higher education institutions located in their region becoming more regionally-engaged and making a greater contribution to the development of these regions. Presented in this way, HERA represented a new regionalisation of higher education, albeit imposed top-down by the state, their membership prescribed, and the geographical basis of the region going unquestioned. To be sure, this placing of universities into regional alliances was symptomatic of *territorial regionalism* and a more general adherence to the disciplined Keynesian logic for regional policy to adopt spatially inclusive approaches to regional development.

Over the past 20 years territorial approaches to regionalism have been challenged, both intellectually and practically: intellectually by scholars keen to replace what they view

as antiquated and nostalgic territorial approaches with more sophisticated relational perspectives; practically by the declining importance of HERA and other territorial regional frameworks vis-à-vis the emergent power structures of transregional university alliances and other increasingly complex spatialities and institutional architectures. More specifically, within the UK, universities came to recognise that territorial regionalism was inhibiting more 'natural' collaboration with institutions in 'neighbouring regions' (Brickwood and Brown, 2005). This concern emerged because territorial regionalism and the HERA approach forced universities who would not ordinarily have reason or want to collaborate to work together. The result was a set of very uneasy coalitions which, despite being labelled 'regional', never hardened towards strong institutional forms and by implication achieve a deep-rooted sense of regionalism.

One reflection of the growing unease with territorial regionalism is how universities began actively (re)imagining regions through their own collaborative practices. The first notable product of this was the White Rose Consortium. Established in 1997, the White Rose Consortium comprises the three large research-intensive Russell Groupⁱ universities in the Yorkshire and Humberside region: Leeds, Sheffield and York. Operating in parallel to Yorkshire Universities – the territorially-inclusive regional association comprising all twelve higher education institutions – the White Rose Consortium offered the first indication of universities engaging in a process of 'making up' their own regional identity through their own collaborative practices (Cochrane, 2012). Over the past 10-15 years this process has unfolded across the UK with research consortia consisting only of the most powerful universities being established nationwide (Figure 1).

Throughout the 2000s the UK was characterised by this twin-track approach to regionalising higher education, with the official, state-led, and inclusive HERA approach

increasingly challenged by the emergence of non-prescriptive, university-led, and exclusive research consortia. Indeed, this dual approach was to have important spatial and institutional connotations. Spatially, the HERA approach was underpinned by, and reflected, a singular logic for territorial regionalism. In contrast, the emergence of research consortia was producing regional collaborations more reflective of the negotiated outcome of territorial and non-territorial approaches to regionalism. Non-territoriality came to be reflected in the 'fuzzy' geographies of consortia – the outcome of elite universities exercising their nodal power to bring about closer proximity and juxtaposition through formalising and strengthening relational ties with other powerful institutions. But as the map in Figure 1 reveals, territoriality remains important. For although research consortia are relationally-constituted regions they are all self-contained within territorial regional frameworks (in the cases of White Rose Consortium, St David's Day Group, and Scottish University Physics Alliance) or panregional territorial frameworks (in the cases of N8 Research Partnership, Midlands Innovation, GW4, Science and Engineering South, and Eastern ARC). Producing an *archipelagic regionalism* this process of regionalisation reflects a reimagining of inclusive territorial regions along more exclusive relational lines. Alongside this, institutionally, there is evidently a related tension in the dynamic by which each type of regional arrangement is instigated, between what we might usefully term regionally-engaged *coalitions of the obliged*, evident in the HERA approach and how universities were forced to work together by the UK state, and *coalitions of the willing*, viewed through research consortia and universities becoming more actively engaged in processes of region-building.

Notwithstanding this a third process of regionalisation emerged in the mid-2000s. This time the focus was on the UK Research Councils and their programme to establish new

national networks of doctoral training provision for research students. Heralded as “the most significant trend” shaping research training provision at UK universities (Universities UK, 2014, p. 4)ⁱⁱ, the requirement on universities to establish Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs) produced a mix of institutional and consortia level arrangements. This approach is noteworthy because, institutionally, DTCs are being co-determined by the state and universities, and, spatially, DTCs are not designed to be regional per se. Nonetheless, the pressure on universities to collaborate is leading to *de facto regionalism*.

For their part the UK state is driving an agenda which increasingly requires universities to collaborate to access public funding. Paraphrasing the 2003 *Future of Higher Education* White Paper the UK government has signalled that collaboration ‘should be encouraged’ but cannot ‘be imposed top-down’, with no ‘blueprint’ for the ‘precise shape and formation’ these collaborations take (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p. 29). Research Councils UK (RCUK), who annually invest £3 billion of public money in research, responded to this by establishing national networks of DTCs to fund research training. Between 2009 and 2013, RCUK accredited 148 doctoral training programmes for arts and humanities, social sciences, biotechnology and biological sciences, engineering and physical sciences, and natural and environmental sciences, comprising 100 institutional and 48 consortia level awardsⁱⁱⁱ.

Many universities have been complicit in creating institutional spaces to deliver more concentration, competition and collaboration. Pre-dating formal requirements to collaborate, universities could be seen organising themselves into putative alliances. Indeed, the early forerunners – White Rose Consortium, N8 Research Partnership, and Scottish Universities Physics Alliance – were all subsequently used by the research-intensive universities and research and funding councils to demonstrate efficiencies and collaborative

advantage to the UK state (Kitagawa, 2009). In this new institutionalisation of higher education, university managers are actively engaged in building regional alliances and brands in the firm belief that they will benefit, simultaneously insulating their institutions from external threats (e.g. increased competition for staff, students and research funding) through collective resistance while organising to take advantage of whatever new strategy emerges from the government, funding councils, and other agencies.

From this perspective, new regional formations could be construed as little more than the opportunistic practices of institutions and professional actors establishing responsive and anticipatory governance mechanisms – everything to do with the deepening marketization and neoliberalisation of the university sector and very little to do with region-making. But in this context, we must remember that research consortia and DTCs emerge from higher education policy, not regional policy (as was the case with HERA). This is important because where HERA were established within a very clearly demarcated political and discursive framing of territorial regionalism, but were left to negotiate their role within higher education policy and initiatives, research consortia and DTCs face quite a different challenge – they have a largely scripted role within higher education but where they fit in relation to other regional (be they territorial or post-territorial) imaginaries, strategies and institutional frameworks remains unclear. From this we can argue that these different networks are not ontologically more or less regional than the other, rather their ‘regionness’ derives from dual processes of institutionalisation which are necessary to generate spatial integrity and a deeper-rooted sense of regionalism: namely, the institutionalisation of these networks within a particular policy sphere (e.g. higher education) *and* the institutionalisation of the region per se.

Although the principle of concentrating research activity where excellence exists is spatially blind, it is not spatially neutral. The state, research councils and universities have all played an active role in co-determining new spatialities of higher education praxis. For example, a recent review of social science DTCs revealed a cut to the research council's budget by the UK Government led to reductions in the overall number of studentships, which in turn delivered further concentration and more institutions falling 'off the map' (Bartholomew Review, 2015). For their part, the research councils set their own funding thresholds, largely determining which universities have sufficient critical mass to apply for an institutional level doctoral training programme, and which are forced to collaborate. Likewise, for universities, collaboration may no longer be an option, but deciding which institutions – or perversely which not – to collaborate with is. By entering into collaborative arrangements, universities trade autonomy for success. To this end, universities are both strategic and opportunistic in who they partner with and the factors involved can be very diverse, ranging from proximity which enables the sharing of physical resources (e.g. equipment, laboratories), to reputation and prestige accrued by partnering with high-ranking universities, complementarity in mission or research specialisms, or institutional ties (e.g. geographical, historical, personal).

Taken together, these three processes of regionalisation reveal how far and how quickly the regionalisation of higher education is evolving. Significantly, each process is producing its own distinctive regional geography, but what, we might ask, is the significance of these geographies? While it is certainly possible to talk about the rise of new regional geographies in higher education (and equally, in other policy spheres), it would be seriously misleading to attach particular significance to them without first exacting deeper understanding of what makes these activities regional in any meaningful sense. By this we

refer to the need to better understand which ‘new’ regional imaginaries might be short-lived and ultimately disappear, which are ‘hardening’ towards strongly institutionalised regional forms, and which will remain ‘soft’ over a long period (Metzger and Schmitt, 2012). Only by doing this can we identify those ‘new’ regions likely to develop the spatial integrity and deeper-rooted sense of regionalism necessary to become meaningful in a significant way. Achieving this, Paasi (2011, p. 13) usefully reminds us, requires “look[ing] beyond the ‘region’ itself to the institutional practices through which regions are perpetually becoming”. It is to this issue that we now turn.

3. RELATIONAL REGIONS IN THE MAKING – TOWARDS SPATIAL INTEGRITY?

The new institutional geographies of higher education documented above reflect how different processes of regionalisation produce distinctive regional geographies. Of particular significance is how these practices reflect recent trends in regional thinking, reflecting moves away from: ‘old style’ territorial regionalism to more ‘ad hoc’ competitiveness driven regional arrangements (Paasi, 2009), bounded spaces to relational complexity (Paasi, 2013), inclusive Keynesian approaches to more targeted forms of neoliberal regional development (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, and Tomaney, 2017), and a recognition, intellectually, of the need to invest in a plurality of regional logics as opposed to a singular logic for regions (Agnew, 2013). As Massey (2007, p. 89) foretold a decade ago the result is an emerging ‘alternative regional geography’ (more accurately, alternative regional geographies) of ‘jostling’ as actors on ‘potentially conflicting, trajectories’ fight to maintain or improve their standing. Indeed, this presents a significant challenge for those of us engaged in the task of conceptualising emergent regional worlds – a challenge neatly summarised by Jessop (2012, p. 26):

“given that there are many competing regional imaginaries (as well as other spatial or spatially-attuned imaginaries), the configuration is the unintended, unanticipated, and, indeed, ‘messy’ result of the pursuit of numerous regional projects in conjunctures that cannot be grasped in all their complexity in real time.”

Making sense of the inherently complex landscape of competing regional imaginaries, spaces, projects, and strategies that both characterise and shape our modern regional worlds is arguably the biggest challenge facing regional scholars today.

Marking out higher education for particular attention in this regard is that following the emergence of a plurality of alternative regional geographies universities are now actively engaged in a process of region building consolidated around six research consortia in England and Wales. This process of consolidation is important because it seeks to develop spatial integrity and a deeper-rooted sense of regionalism around a series of relational configured regional spaces; it signifies attempts to rationalise and simplify the inherently complex configuration of regional spaces that characterise new institutional geographies of higher education; and, additionally, it aims to make the relational processes of archipelagic and de facto regionalism complementary.

Methods

To illustrate how some relational imaginaries are beginning to crystallise into harder institutional forms our research mapped doctoral training provision for five UK research councils – Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)^{iv} – on to the six main research and equipment sharing consortia in England and Wales (Figures 2-7). Institutions providing doctoral training are indicated by white

circles, with lead institutions identified by a black circle. Circles below the table indicate partner institutions external to the research consortium, the number corresponding to a footnote key identifying the external institution. Solid vertical lines represent where institutions have entered into a collaborate arrangement to provide of doctoral training. A circle with no connecting vertical lines represents an institution providing doctoral training without entering into a partnership arrangement. To identify intra-/inter-regional partnerships horizontal dotted lines indicate territorial regional boundaries. This analysis is further supported by desk-top research and quotations from 23 interviews conducted with key stakeholders (2014-2016).

White Rose Consortium

White Rose is the longest established research consortium, and this is reflected in it being the most strongly institutionalised. **Figure 2** reveals how each White Rose institution is accredited by the five research councils, but more important is how the consortium has secured successive rounds of investment by operating predominantly with exclusively 'White Rose' DTCs. Further to this, initiatives such as White Rose Libraries (2004), White Rose Collaboration Fund (2008), White Rose University Press (2016), and White Rose Brussels Office (2016) – which aims “to influence EU research policy” – have been launched, enabling the White Rose to stabilise into a 'harder' institutional form. Nevertheless, the White Rose is not without its challenges, particularly beyond higher education:

“The thing that the White Rose struggles on is collaborative partners because no private sector company or public authority or third sector operates on the scale of the White Rose, because the White Rose is a fuzzy region. It's an artificial space so you can't mobilise a local authority that can play the White Rose as a whole because there is no such thing called the White Rose region. The problem we have is

engaging city councils that only engage with one of the players, and that creates politics in turn within the White Rose” (Interview, WRC Executive).

N8 Research Partnership (N8)

Ten years younger than the White Rose, N8 comprises the eight most research-intensive universities in the North of England. Collectively N8 universities bring in £800m in research income (19.4% of the UK total) and are awarded £295m in central funding (19.5% of UK total). **Figure 3** reveals that, with one exception, N8 universities have DTC accreditation across all five research councils, but unlike the White Rose there are no N8 DTCs. There are 15 consortia level arrangements but of these seven could reasonably be classified as regional DTCs. Furthermore, only two DTCs involve collaboration with N8 universities beyond their territorial region, compared to six which partner with a total of 15 different institutions beyond N8. In short, there is very little to suggest the N8 is becoming an institutionalised region. What we see, instead, is a very different approach in the N8 compared to the White Rose, a situation made more challenging by White Rose institutions being part of N8:

“We generally say a minimum of three universities to be counted as an N8 project. We do also work with other universities as well, outside of the N8. It’s not an exclusive club. It’s not a closed shop ... we work with others on a project needs basis” (Interview, N8 Executive).

“There is an argument that DTCs need to map more on to regional groupings ... [and] there are players out there arguing for an N8 DTC. We resist this because the N8 as a region is geographically too big” (Interview, WRC Executive).

This issue of geography in relation to N8 is particularly pertinent for wider political-economic reasons. In 2014, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, made the

case that a lack of economic and physical connection between cities in the North of England meant they were “individually strong, but collectively not strong enough”. The result, Osborne argued, is “the whole is less than the sum of its parts ... so the powerhouse of London dominates more and more ... and that’s not healthy for our economy [and] for our country”. For Osborne, the solution to this challenge is to create a ‘Northern Powerhouse’ – “not one city, but a collection of northern cities – sufficiently close to each other that combined they can take on the world” (Osborne, 2014). A raft of announcements and interventions means that creation of a ‘Northern Powerhouse’ has proceeded apace since Osborne’s speech, quickly becoming a key priority for the UK Government. That said, it can reasonably be argued that the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ is proving more successful as a political brand, less convincing is its coherence as an economic development strategy – not least because it is ‘geographically fuzzy’ about the region it covers (Lee, 2016).

Relating this back to higher education, where the White Rose geography is strongly institutionalised within higher education but struggles for political recognition beyond the university sector without connecting to the territorial regional identity of Yorkshire, the N8 appears weakly institutionalised within the higher education sector but is benefitting from connection into wider political-economic strategies and imaginaries. In part, this is due to the N8 emerging from a previous North of England economic development initiative – the Northern Way – and an ability to draw upon a long-standing cultural tradition of ‘northernness’ (Taylor, 2003). Secondly, the threat from “the powerhouse of London” requiring a ‘Northern Powerhouse’ in economic development could simply read the threat from the powerhouse of Golden Triangle institutions^v in UK higher education necessitates creating alliances such as the N8^{vi}. As one interviewee put it “however much they are presented by their advocates as being offensive, most alliances are defensive” to the threat

of other university alliances, and, more broadly, a hardened national and international competitive climate for higher education (Interview, Senior Manager, Midlands Innovation university). Lastly, the potential for deep-rooted regionalism appears weak:

“Just because you’ve got N8 isn’t going to make the North act as a region. There will never be a coherent North because of the N8” (Interview, HE Policy Official).

Great Western Four (GW4)

GW4 is the south west research consortia and was formed in 2013 by the leading research-intensive universities in the South West of England (Bath, Bristol and Exeter) and Wales (Cardiff). Prior to this Bath, Bristol and Exeter worked together as the Great Western Research consortium (established 2006), and this is evident in the early rounds of DTC accreditation (ESRC and BBSRC) where institutionalisation occurred on this geography. **Figure 4** reveals that since GW4 was established, attempts are being made to institutionalise the GW4 region by having an in-principle agreement to work together – solely as GW4 or with external partners as GW4+ – akin to the White Rose. What Figure 4 does not reveal, however, is the complexity of institutionalising regional research consortia once the DTC accreditation process had begun:

“In GW4 you’ve got two ESRC rounds of investment. You’ve got Wales DTC and South West DTC. They overlap potentially in GW4, but Southampton’s in it, but so is Aberystwyth. Then it gets interesting. The AHRC configuration is Bath, Bristol, Exeter, Cardiff, Southampton, Aberystwyth, Bath Spa and Reading ... now geographically, that’s stretched out nonsense” (interview, ESRC DTC Director).

Midlands Innovation

Midlands Innovation emerged from an equipment sharing agreement (established in 2008) between the research-intensive universities in the East and West Midlands, which

subsequently crystallised into a research consortium in 2015 around a £180 million joint investment by the UK government, universities, and industry partners in the Energy Research Accelerator. This investment is significant because unlike the White Rose, N8 and GW4 consortia, whose institutionalisation could be characterised as deriving from multiple small rounds of investment and collaboration, Midlands Innovation is currently institutionalised around a much smaller number of larger rounds of investment: the Kit-Catalogue™ equipment-sharing service and Energy Research Accelerator. This is evident in **Figure 5** which reveals DTC accreditation across Midlands Innovation institutions is patchy, no Midlands Innovation DTCs, and only seven connections between Midlands Innovation institutions. Indeed, Aston University is the only member institution of a research consortium with no DTC accreditation. According to interviewees, including Aston has the potential to weaken the integrity of the regional consortia because “it has set a precedent for less research intensive universities to become part of Midlands Innovation” (Interview, Midlands Innovation University).

Science and Engineering South (SES)

Including the powerhouse Golden Triangle institutions of UK higher education the SES consortium is potentially the most powerful regional research consortia. In 2016/17 SES institutions collectively received 34% of the total research fund administered by HEFCE; individually they all ranked in the top ten, including occupying the first four places. To put this in context, N8, GW4 and Midlands Innovation only have one institution ranked higher than the lowest ranked SES institution – Southampton (9th) – while White Rose and Eastern ARC have none.

The individual and collective research strength of SES institutions is recognised with DTC accreditations, yet what is most striking about **Figure 6** is only three connections exist between SES institutions. One possible reason is that SES institutions are individually strong enough not to require collaboration to receive accreditation. Yet, what is clear from Figure 6 is that SES institutions do collaborate in DTCs, it is just not with each other; rather SES institutions favour external partners (30) reflecting their strategic aim which is to “work with other centres of research excellence in the UK and around the world ... to achieve things which would otherwise be impossible” (SES, 2016).

In the context of this paper, SES is important because member institutions emphasising external collaboration over internal collaboration in DTCs reveals an association to the south east being the least regional – certainly in the traditional sense of regional policy and as a political territory. Allied to this the south east region has been used prominently to ground the relational view of regions as constituted by networks of social relations, with its emphasis – though not exclusively – on ‘external’ influences and connections (Cochrane, 2012). In this way, the SES approach is less geared towards institutionalising the region; of more concern is mobilising the region to position member institutions within wider circuits of knowledge production. One component of this, as revealed by our interviewees, is how SES appears more open and flexible in its institutional make-up:

“It started off life as SES-5 but the ‘5’ has been deleted. The reason is that we’re hoping to make it more inclusive so that we can bring other partners into play. There’ll be some big players in the south of England that are not part of this but would like to be – Bristol particularly. What other people would have noticed is Kings College London and Queen Mary are not part of SES ... so it’s to provide a more flexible umbrella” (Interview, SES university research officer #1).^{vii}

Nonetheless, there is growing awareness that institutionalising the SES region through DTC collaboration is important:

“One of the discussion points is about cross-institutional DTCs amongst SES. Was there areas where we could support each other to develop bids that had not been successful in the areas of research that we felt should be? So that is definitely on the agenda” (Interview, SES university research officer #2)

What we interpret from this is that collaboration is not always the preferred option but the rules of the game mean more – and by implication larger, more powerful – institutions are increasingly required to collaborate. Indeed, when collaboration is a requirement, more than a preference, it is likely that regional alliances which have remained soft over time begin to crystallise towards becoming harder institutional forms. For SES, this presents a particular challenge beyond DTCs because various constituent members are already collaborating in large-scale, internationally-recognised research consortia, notably the Global Medical Excellence Cluster, Francis Crick Institute, and MedCity.

Eastern Academic Research Consortium (Eastern ARC)

As the last research consortium to be established Eastern ARC is interesting, in part, because the reason for its formation – a defensive move to “research funding becoming more concentrated and perhaps inevitably concentrated on the Golden Triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London” (Interview, Eastern ARC research officer) – is identical to the White Rose, N8, GW4 and Midlands Innovation consortia. Nonetheless, Eastern ARC is distinct by virtue of not containing any Russell Group institutions^{viii} and, therefore, emerged as a “response to the increased domination of the Russell Group” nationally (interview, Eastern ARC research officer). This is evident in **Figure 7** where, prior to formation Eastern ARC,

institutions had struggled to secure DTC accreditations. Falling 'off the map' initially, noteworthy is how in the rounds subsequent to their formation, as Eastern ARC (NERC) and Eastern ARC+ (AHRC) these institutions have been recognised. Reflecting on this, one interviewee remarked that:

"It's strange, it's something I wouldn't have predicted ten years ago ... But the early rounds of DTC accreditation and the broader narrative about research concentration around these regional grouping left us with no choice. The problem for us is that we're only just finding our feet" (interview, Eastern ARC research officer).

Once more the point which emerges most strongly is this important distinction between *coalitions of the obliged* and *coalitions of the willing*. Indeed, this interviewee went on to highlight important historical-geographical unevenness in the willingness of institutions to work together:

"In the North West, North East, Yorkshire and the Midlands, there's a lot more universities in a much smaller area. It would make sense for them to coalesce more quickly and certainly gives them an advantage over us in parts of the south and east which are relatively sparsely served for universities" (Interview, Eastern ARC research officer).

4. DISCUSSION: CONSTELLATORY REGIONALISM OR DEEP-ROOTED REGIONALISM?

Connecting-up current debates on relational regions and higher education this paper has explored the process by which actors are institutionalising new regional spaces. Our conceptual starting point was a recognition that despite a critical body of work examining the merits of the 'relational region' thesis, an important gap in our knowledge has remained the degree to which these new regional spaces can, or will, develop spatial integrity and the deeper rooted sense of regionalism to be considered meaningful in any essential sense.

Through our focus on the rise of transregional university alliances we have sought to address this by comparing six relational regions in the making, and in the process, respond to complaints that conceptual debate in regional studies remains too abstract, normative, and lacking policy relevance.

On this we have highlighted four important points for advancing regional debate. First, there is no singular process of relational regionalism we can speak of. In the unfolding geographies of higher education archipelagic (in the form of research consortia) and de facto (in the case of DTCs) regionalism are distinct processes, each producing their own distinctive, alternative regional geographies. Moreover, we have demonstrated the interplay between territoriality and relationality in the praxis of regionalising UK higher education is both indicative and reflective of the current intellectual position of territorial-relational debates in regional studies.

Second, mapping new regional geographies alone is insufficient if we are to reveal the realpolitik of relational regionalism. Relational regions may appear very similar in their appearance and discursive framing, but this belies stark differences in their political, economic, and institutional capacity to make an impact (Table 1). For our part, we have illustrated the varying degrees of institutionalisation and spatial integrity among the six research consortia in England and Wales. Of course, institutionalisation and spatial integrity are only one factor. Other factors, notably the research capacity of consortia, are important indicators of the relative political-economic power and position of consortia within UK higher education. Nonetheless, our contention in this paper is that aggregating the individual strengths of institutions by mobilising the region might create the impression of powerful regions when that region is neither purposively regional nor able to act regionally in any convincing way. SES is the most powerful regional consortia in terms of the research

strength of its constituent members but, paradoxically, it is arguably the weakest region because it lacks spatial integrity and any sense of regionalism.

Related to this, third, our research draws attention to how the bordering of regional spaces cannot be considered or labelled in any straightforward way – be it, porous, soft, fuzzy, semi-permeable or hard. Here we see a clear connection to what Paasi and Zimmerbauer (2016) have taken to be borders as penumbral. By penumbral these authors refer to how borders are more or less relevant in certain discourses, practices and contexts. What our cartograms reveal – and for the first time make visible – is that institutions and professional actors (in higher education) are selective in how, when and why they make the border (of their research consortium) porous, soft, fuzzy, semi-permeable or hard. For example, in the initial phase of DTC accreditation the White Rose Consortium opted for a hard border but when necessary softened the border to enable Liverpool into a NERC DTC. By contrast, consortia in their infancy are shown to be moving towards making their borders harder, or at least semi-permeable. Moreover, we have shown universities preventing entry into research consortia by generally opting for hard borders that cut off ties to non-consortia institutions, while at the same time being more flexible in the process of orchestrating DTCs, where the border appears more or less porous, permeable, soft, fuzzy, hard, as each layer is viewed individually and collectively.

Finally, fourth, the region is mobilised in ways that accelerate and accentuate already uneven geographies of higher education. Research consortia are by their very nature the outcome of reimagining inclusive territorial regions along exclusive lines. The DTC model allows universities to be even more selective about organisations for partnership forming. Integral to this has been the transition from a regional world where universities were ostensibly recipients of regionalisation, placed within an existing template of

territorially-bounded and fixed regions by the state, to new regional worlds where universities are active agents in co-determining with the state and other actors variously defined regional structures. Whether it is offensive or defensive in its design, universities are collaborating regionally to better insulate themselves from external threats posed by the intensification of a neoliberal political economy in higher education. While better insulating these institutions from this hostile environment contemporary regionalisation is making the world more hostile for those competitor institutions they choose to exclude. What is interesting is how those excluded institutions are choosing (or more accurately, being forced) to respond because we have seen in this paper there has been a domino effect among research-intensive universities, but as evidenced by University Alliance^{ix} establishing its own Doctoral Training Alliance in September 2015 this consortia model is being replicated among smaller universities – albeit on a national scale to create sufficient critical mass – to try and compete.

Last, in terms of its analytical contribution, the key argument put forward is how we need conceptual vocabulary and frameworks better able to comprehend emergent regional worlds. For our part, we have distinguished between territorial, archipelagic and de facto regionalism. In this final part we return to the main aim of our paper to put forward constellatory regionalism as an analytical tool for comprehending and critically interrogating relational regions in the making. Constellation – “the configuration or position of ‘stars’ in regard to one another, as supposed to have ‘influence’ on terrestrial things” (Oxford English Dictionary) – is a term which has rarely been heard in regional debates^x, but is an apt descriptor for an unfolding trend in regional studies.

The trend under investigation is actors instrumentally aggregating smaller units into bigger units, giving them a regional – or increasingly meta/mega regional – label, and

assuming they have wider political, economic and societal resonance by virtue of self-identifying or being identified as regions. We refer to this as constellatory regionalism because in astrology constellations result from joining together the brightest stars, giving them a label that allows an identity to develop and elevates them above other stars and parts of the night sky, all to a point where people believe they have ‘influence’ on terrestrial things. But fundamentally, nothing has changed. So are relational regions, of the type discussed in this paper, constellations? Arguably yes, certainly to begin with.

To advance this argument we defer not to abstract and normative territorial/relational debates (cf. Allmendinger et al., 2014) but to our empirical research on UK higher education, from where a strong view about how actors are mobilising the region in pursuing their own agendas emerged:

“People think that regional consortia mean things have changed; nothing has changed, we are just doing a better job of packaging it and selling it” (interview, Research Consortia executive).

From this perspective, consortia are presented as little more than “big brands” to sell to government, industry and students (interview, Eastern ARC research officer) – a tactical regionalism in other words, or what Cochrane (2012) might see as further evidence for the ‘making up’ of regions. In contrast, our research has revealed that some relational regions are developing spatial integrity, and a deeper rooted sense of regionalism through their own collaborative practices. Nevertheless, it is hard to escape from what the following interviewee conferred:

“There is a definitely game going on, which is if you add enough things together, of course you can be bigger than any other one thing. The question is how much it

develops and that will partly depend on how much the Research Councils continue to use regional funding models – for things like doctoral training – because that gives them the glue to stick together. It depends how much other research resources require them to stick together ... I think they could stick, they could quite as easily fall apart because of money” (Interview, ex-HERA executive).

To this end, constellatory regionalism is not an aspiration but a stark warning not to assume spaces which are given the regional ‘label’ are regional in more than their appearance and framing. In a world of increasingly complex spatialities the challenge is not identifying regional imaginaries but scrutinising their meaning to better understand which (are likely to) have meaningful political, economic and societal impacts. It is to this that we need to more fully devote our efforts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to the editor and reviewers for their insightful comments, and audiences at Newcastle University (CURDS), University of Nottingham, and 2016 RSA and SRHE annual conferences, where we presented earlier versions of the paper. We are grateful to Mark Szegner for Figure 1 and Loughborough University Enterprise Office for financial support through the EPG Higher Education Innovation Fund.

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FIGURE 1: Major UK Research Consortia

FIGURE 2: White Rose Consortium

1 = University of Liverpool

FIGURE 3: N8 Research Partnership

FIGURE 4: GW4

1 = Aberystwyth University, 2 = Bangor University, 3 = Swansea University, 4 = Bath Spa University, 5 = University of Reading, 6 = University of Southampton

FIGURE 5: Midlands Innovation

1 = University of Brighton, 2 = Goldsmiths, University of London, 3 = The Open University, 4 = University of Reading, 5 = Birmingham City University, 6 = De Montfort University, 7 = Nottingham Trent University, 8 = Bangor University, 9 = Lancaster University

FIGURE 6: Science and Engineering South

1 = Lancaster University, 2 = University of Reading, 3 = University of Surrey, 4 = Royal Holloway, University of London, 5 = Birkbeck, University of London, 6 = King's College London, 7 = London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 8 = University of Aberdeen, 9 = Bangor University, 10 = University of Edinburgh, 11 = University of Glasgow, 12 = University of the Highlands and Islands, 13 = Queen's University, Belfast, 14 = Swansea University, 15 = University of Ulster, 16 = University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 17 = University of Manchester, 18 = Aberystwyth University, 19 = University of Bath, 20 = Bath Spa University, 21 = University of Bristol, 22 = Cardiff University, 23 = University of Exeter, 24 = Brunel University, 25 = Queen Mary, University of London

FIGURE 7: Eastern ARC

1 = University of Reading, 2 = Royal Holloway, University of London, 3 = University of Surrey, 4 = Goldsmiths, University of London 5 = The Open University, 6 = University of Sussex

TABLE 1: The uneven institutional geographies of UK higher education research consortia

	White Rose	N8	GW4	Midlands Innovation	SES	Eastern ARC
RCUK Doctoral Training coverage (%)	100%	97.5%	85%	67%	92%	60%
Legacy of territorial regionalism	Very strong	Strong	Strong	Weak	None	None
Internal links (n=)	13	31	14	10	3	6
External links (n=) / Russell Group institutions (%)	1 / 100%	15 / 87%	7 / 14%	10 / 50%	30 / 37%	6 / 0%
Internal / external lead institution (%)	100% / 0%	91% / 9%	100% / 0%	85% / 15%	88% / 12%	60% / 40%
Total Research Funding (£m) 2016-17 / UK Total (%) (HEFCE, 2016)	£110m / 10%	£286m / 18%	£127m / 8%	£169m / 11%	£539m / 34%	£38m / 2%

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Established in 1994 the Russell Group represents and lobbies on behalf of 24 leading UK universities.

ⁱⁱ Universities UK (UUK) is the representative organisation for the UK's universities and has 134 members.

ⁱⁱⁱ Indications are the next generation of DTCs will result in a smaller number of larger consortia with the call for arts and humanities and social science DTCs planning decreases from 18 to 10 and 21 to 15 awards respectively (AHRC, 2015; ESRC, 2015).

^{iv} The Medical Research Council and Science and Technology Research Council are not included in our research because they make awards to single institutions and therefore do not add significantly to our analysis.

^v The Golden Triangle is the collective name given to a group of elite universities located in south east England, in the cities of Cambridge, London and Oxford, which consistently rank at the top of research rankings.

^{vi} Interesting to note is how economic development initiatives similar to the Northern Powerhouse (e.g. Severn Powerhouse, Midlands Engine, Eastern Powerhouse) have since emerged around the same broad geographies that the GW4, Midlands Innovation, and SES/Eastern Arc research consortia operate.

^{vii} March 2016 saw evidence of this when Kings College London joined the SES consortium.

^{viii} Members of Eastern ARC are referred to as 'plate-glass' universities, a name given to the group of UK universities established following the 1963 Robbins Report recommending a major expansion of the HE sector.

^{ix} University Alliance is the representative group for smaller 'business-engaged' universities. It currently has 19 member institutions of which 14 and 11 are included in each of the two strands of its Doctorial Training Alliance for Applied Bioscience for Health and Energy.

^x Web of Science reveals only one article published in the 50 volumes of Regional Studies contains "constell*" within its bibliographic information. More broadly, where the term constellation is to be found in regional debates (e.g. Musterd and Salet, 2003; Paasi 2008) it is used primarily as a descriptor and not advanced as offering a new conceptual perspective.