

Supply Chains as Conduits of Anchor Engagement

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Abstract

This paper explains how Leeds Beckett University (LBU) has developed a supply chain “collective” to deliver on its mission as an anchor institution. The supply chain collective is made up of 300 small and medium enterprises that trade with LBU. These organizations, by subscribing to anchor principles, gain access to LBU’s specialist business support advice and consultancy services provided by its Business School. This partnership arrangement offers the following benefits: it supports a shift to local purchasing and carbon reduction, provides direct business support to help small local businesses grow, and creates enriched service-learning opportunities for students and researchers.

We begin by defining LBU’s role within the Leeds City Anchor Network, and then examine how it has adapted its purchasing strategy to incorporate social value considerations, how it developed part of its supply chain as a small and medium enterprise (SME) “collective”, and how the Leeds Business School has begun to build mutually beneficial relationships by using this new supply chain as a conduit for positive regional engagement.

Keywords: leeds beckett university, local procurement, community engagement, inclusive economic development, anchor institution, ecosystems

Background Context

The role of universities as anchor institutions and their value to regional economies is indisputable. Literature concerning universities as anchor institutions primarily focuses on their impact on local economies (Comunian et al., 2014) and businesses (McCauley-Smith et al., 2020). There is also a focus on universities upskilling local people and enhancing employment rates (Frenette, 2009). Such work frames universities as institutions with sufficient scale to have meaningful economic impacts on their areas and to play leadership roles (Cantor et al., 2013; Goddard et al., 2014). Previous studies also suggest that anchor institutions can contribute to community wealth-building by coordinating procurement to maximize the local impact of spending (CLES, 2018; McInroy, 2018). Yet these studies have considered universities as standalone entities, and there is limited acknowledgement of the institutions' complex inter-relationships with other organisations within their regional ecosystem. Consequently, there is only limited research on the concept of aligning anchor institutions' strategies with wider local priorities and achieving local social and economic goals. This is even more the case when considering service learning, through support, collaboration, and interaction.

Over the past two decades, various policies have been implemented on international, national, and regional levels to support regional competitiveness, strengthen economic growth, and enhance social stability by assisting businesses in increasing productivity, becoming part of business networks, accessing development programs, and managing talent (Fischer & Nijkamp, 1988; Sternberg, 2012). Despite the high failure rate among small and medium enterprises (SMEs), some achieve excellent results and demonstrate growth, innovation, and sustainability. Therefore, the critical role of SMEs in driving economic growth and employment generation is widely acknowledged. Georgescu and Avasilcai (2022) argue that SMEs are an important economic factor in most countries and regions. They create jobs and serve as the foundation of inclusive and sustainable societies.

In this paper, we connect LBU's experience in purchasing strategy development and implementation with insights from suppliers (primarily local SMEs) who benefited from the agglomeration effects of the strategy, alongside literature on anchor institutions, regional ecosystems, and socio-economic value.

We began by providing an overview of the context and key relevant research on the role of anchor institutions within their local ecosystems, introducing the Leeds City Anchor Network. We then describe our approach, followed by an exploration of how LBU updated its procurement strategy to integrate social value and created the necessary infrastructure to support the creation of LBU's supply collective. Using LBU as a case study basis, and focusing on a specific supplier case study, the paper discusses the benefits, challenges, and outcomes achieved. Finally, it

presents a model for wider engagement before assessing the benefits and the limitations of this approach to anchor working.

Approach

This paper presents a practical model demonstrating how supply chain management can serve as a conduit for anchor engagement. This study takes a case study approach (Yin, 2003) with a longitudinal perspective, examining how LBU reshaped its purchasing strategy to reflect anchor institution principles and enhance local supply chain engagement. The data informing this work were drawn from two main sources: first, procurement records collected annually by the University's procurement team, based on live contracts; second, internal records held by the Business School, which track supplier involvement in training, student placements, and broader engagement activities. The featured case study was selected as an example of effective and sustained collaboration between an SME and the University. A purposive yet convenient sampling strategy was used, identifying a supplier with deep engagement across procurement and academic interfaces. The case was developed through a semi-structured interview with the SME's founder, lasting approximately 90 minutes. This covered the business's development, its experience working with LBU, and the outcomes of this partnership. Data were analysed using thematic and integrative techniques to ensure coherence and reduce bias. Multiple sources were triangulated to enhance reliability, combining secondary data with qualitative insights. This approach provides a structured yet practice-informed understanding of how local procurement strategies can deliver value to both HEIs and regional SMEs and enhance the delivery and effectiveness of service-learning offers.

Developing a Model for Wider Engagement

An important aspect of a university's anchor mission is to consider how it can support opportunities for its business partners to grow, thereby driving further economic development. Universities foster business thinking, influence actions and behaviors, and support the venture development cycle (Audretsch, 2014, as cited in Guerrero & Urbano, 2016; Cooke et al., 1997). Members of the academic community are trained and able to create "knowledge innovations", which can formally or informally be transferred to or absorbed by others through interactions, networking, education, presentations, and publications (Boucher et al., 2003).

Boucher et al. (2003) identify universities as critical institutional factors for regional knowledge development, and Ierapetritis (2019) considers universities as the connecting institutions within entrepreneurial ecosystems. One of the main factors contributing to the development of regional ecosystems is sufficient "institutional density" (Amin & Thrift, 1994; León et al., 2016; MacLeod, 1997). Institutional density encompasses social and cultural factors, including the presence of institutions, effective regulatory frameworks, intellectual property protection, and

high levels of interaction among regional institutions (Amin & Thrift, 1994; León et al., 2016; MacLeod, 1997).

“Institutionally dense” ecosystems provide platforms for sharing knowledge, gaining insights, and fostering collaboration. For SMEs, particularly, these platforms offer important market opportunities and access to relevant stakeholders. When universities are part of the ecosystem, they provide a broad range of opportunities for accessing knowledge, talent, and innovation. In these ecosystems, the interaction of suppliers and anchor institutions is traditionally linear, moving sequentially from supplier through to end user. As shown in Figure 1, the model includes five interconnected stages (supplier, manufacturer, distributor, retailer, end user), highlighting both forward and reverse flow to capture feedback and return mechanisms. Positioned alongside the supply chain is an infrastructure pillar, signalling infrastructure’s foundational role in enabling and sustaining supply chain operations. The model serves as a baseline reference when comparing more adaptive or locally embedded supply chain practices, particularly those shaped by anchor institutions, circular economy principles, or collaborative procurement approaches. However, prior studies suggest that specific properties of networks pertaining either to the nature of the companies/institutions or to their relationships, such as relationship intensity, density, reciprocity, network size and centrality, may contribute to gaining competitive advantages directly linked to the supply chain structure (Kim et al., 2006; Wincent et al., 2010; Palin, 2013; Swierczek, 2018).

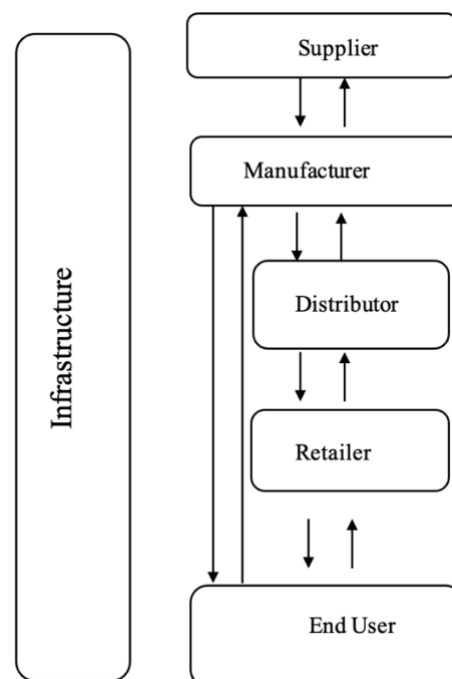


FIGURE 1. Linear supply chain.

Source: Sheremetov & Rocha-Mier (2004).

The Leeds City Anchor Network

The Leeds City Anchor Network was founded in 2018. It has 14 members, dominated by “Eds, Meds, and Feds” – higher and further educational institutions, hospitals, and local government – who operate at scale and are rooted in the city. The network has four aims, with members seeking to: 1) act as exemplary employers who support a diverse local workforce; 2) commit fully to the city’s carbon reduction ambitions; 3) increase the proportion of discretionary purchasing spend with local organizations; 4) increase the positive benefits of service delivery for local people. For the four educational members, including Leeds Beckett University, this means developing and redefining the concept of “service learning” (Denison et al., 2024).

At LBU, the core anchor network principles were incorporated into the university’s strategic plan in 2021. Since then, they have been influencing the development and implementation of core operating strategies on both the academic side (e.g., in student recruitment, teaching and learning, and research) and the operational side (e.g., in workforce development, estate planning, and decarbonization). For example, approaches to procurement have been redesigned to improve access for local suppliers; student learning has been increasingly aligned with live briefs linked to regional needs; and research projects have sought to respond more directly to regional priorities and challenges. Internally, senior leadership engagement with anchor priorities has also led to the inclusion of regional metrics in performance monitoring and the creation of cross-functional working groups to drive progress.

These steps were not undertaken in isolation. Building the university’s anchor strategy required coordinated engagement with external stakeholders, ongoing dialogue with the Anchor Network and other regional partners, and alignment of institutional communications to reinforce the commitment. The approach taken by LBU illustrates that effectively embedding anchor institution principles requires organisational alignment, ensuring that strategic objectives, core operations, and academic delivery are working together to deliver sustained local benefit. For other HEIs, this example underscores the value of formalising regional commitments and aligning them to institutional missions.

The LBU Approach to Service Learning

Leeds Beckett University, as an established anchor institution, places strong emphasis on supporting the local economy by working closely with SMEs. These partnerships go beyond traditional supplier relationships, offering opportunities for collaboration that connect local businesses with academic expertise, student innovation, and wider networks. Through service learning, students and staff work with these suppliers on real-world challenges, applying ideas, testing solutions, and developing mutual understanding that benefits both the learner and the business. Support for SMEs is built into the university’s procurement policy, which embraces

inclusive access, transparency, and sustainability: a specific commitment is made to remove barriers that prevent smaller businesses from bidding for work, and the university holds information sessions, provides practical guidance, and offers support to help SMEs meet procurement requirements as well as growth needs. Notably, LBU Procurement also monitors and reports engagement with small suppliers at the Anchor Network and to senior leaders within the university, ensuring accountability.

Recent data underlines the scale and the impact of this activity. In 2022/23, 45% of the university's direct procurement spend was with SMEs, significantly higher than the national university average; this rose to 47% in 2023/24. Over 1,000 small businesses supplied the university in 2022/23, with strong continuity into the following year. Suppliers also benefited from access to additional tools such as NETpositives, which support their sustainability planning and strengthen their alignment with university values.

This joined-up approach demonstrates how academic learning, institutional strategy, and local partnerships can come together to create measurable, long-term benefits. By involving students in these real-world processes and working alongside local businesses, the university builds capacity, fosters innovation, creates opportunities for knowledge exchange, and delivers real value for the region.

Propagating Agglomeration Effects Down the Developing Supply Chain

For decades, regional ecosystems have formed locations for the agglomeration of economic activity. "Agglomeration" in this context refers to the purposeful consolidation of SME activity around anchor demand, where a collective of suppliers begins to operate as a coordinated and place-responsive supply chain. The driving forces behind this are the presence of key institutions and a set of conditions favorable for the outbreak and development of activities that drive economic growth with social impact, including geographical location, infrastructure, and access to knowledge and networks.

Marshall (1920) was one of the first authors to demonstrate the benefits companies derive from locating in economic agglomerations, and categorizes them as skilled local labour pool, information spillovers, and non-traded local inputs. Malmberg (2001) uses a different agglomeration grouping, defining a horizontal category as composed of companies that provide similar activities, and a vertical category as consisting of companies that supply related activities.

Here, through the Leeds Anchor Network, this alignment fosters shared visibility and procurement coherence, acting as a platform for inclusive growth and a more resilient ecosystem. LBU plays a key role in the Leeds ecosystem and, in line with anchor principles, has developed a unique supply chain "collective" to propagate agglomeration effects down the developing supply

chain. The collective provides a potentially sustainable mechanism for SMEs to engage with anchor institutions (starting with but not limited to LBU) and supports sustainable business development. It enables both partners to move beyond transactional relationships, fostering opportunities for knowledge transfer, development, job creation, and socioeconomic impact.

The LBU supply chain collective is made up of 300 SMEs who trade with the university and form a practice-based community built through shared commitment to the Anchor Institution principles. These organizations also sign up to the anchor principles, and in return have access to LBU's specialist business support advice and consultancy services provided by its Business School. This structure helps businesses categorize both as horizontal and vertical in its supply chain to access advanced research, mentorship, new knowledge, and access to business leads and contacts, either through sharing of knowledge and experience or through collaborations.

Rather than a formal body, the collective functions as a dynamic network, enabling collaboration, knowledge exchange, and access to institutional resources. Participating SMEs benefit from tailored support and opportunities, while the university advances its anchor objectives through strategic supply chain integration and co-development. This approach strengthens both horizontal and vertical links across its procurement ecosystem, offering mutual benefit and a replicable model for other HEIs committed to inclusive, place-sensitive growth.

The Social Value Challenge in Purchasing

In 2021, LBU refocused its procurement plan to align with other core anchor commitments and with the university's wider strategy to improve its social value. This included a decision to support an increase in procurement with local organisations by integrating considerations of social value into procurement decisions. The university committed to factoring a 10% social value criterion into tenders and insisted that suppliers commit contractually both to adopt an ethical code of conduct and to support LBU's student employability program.

In making these changes, several challenges became apparent. LBU initially sought to increase local spend year on year, but soon recognized that patterns of spend could change significantly from one year to the next: for example, a high-value construction project could result in a 10%+ local spend increase, but only for that one year. The university then determined to change the focus of its efforts to developing a more local approach to *categories* of spend, and within each category, identifying practical opportunities to increase its SME and local supplier base, e.g., in catering and the building trades. Developing partnerships with other organizations proved slow and complicated at first, so a small number of organizations in the Network took the lead for others to follow, including publishing procurement pipelines together and organizing a 'Supply Leeds' event for local trade suppliers.

The process begins with local suppliers invited to events where the university lays out its procedures, simplifying the steps of responding to a procurement call. Then, at the contract stage, as part of the agreement, LBU sets an expectation for the supplier to engage with students by providing opportunities to gain real-life experiences through live projects, consultancy, placements, or graduate employment. In addition, the university offers new suppliers access to a series of key events and growth programs; these may have been co-developed with community stakeholders to target specific challenges (e.g. #WECAN, Business Boost), designed to help SMEs add value through procurement (e.g. events with the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply) or to provide skills specific to SMEs and the localities within which they are embedded.

As a result, in the last four years, LBU's annual local spend has risen from around 20% to a minimum of 35% in any one year. University spending with SMEs accounts for an average of 45% of total spend, rising to 60% on construction projects. Alongside instituting the 10% social value weighting, tenders now include commitments to create apprenticeship opportunities for local people, and the university measures the jobs created and retained on projects it funds. Around 30 suppliers a year commit to supporting LBU's student employability program, whether through placements, graduate recruitment, guest lectures, mentoring, or student projects.

Engagement Programs

As part of the partnership-building process, LBU Procurement has developed a highly innovative arrangement with the university's Business School, through which the university's SME suppliers have access to specialist support services and resources, including training, a sustainability tool, bespoke procurement advice, presentations, and workshops. LBU has developed a dedicated business engagement and networking space in the heart of the city, creating a "front door" for businesses and the community. Positioned to be the first thing visitors see on coming into the Business School, The Knowledge Exchange (TKE) has already made an impact, reinforcing LBU's role as an anchor institution and its commitment to supporting the local employment and procurement, the environment, service delivery, and corporate and civic behaviours. In its first 20 months, TKE hosted over 100 events with more than 4,000 attendees, supporting over 2,000 businesses. TKE has made a crucial contribution to the university's results in the recent Knowledge Exchange Framework 4 (KEF), achieving a top quintile rating for working with businesses, local government, and the third sector.

In 2024, Leeds Business School launched the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Knowledge Exchange (CEKE) to combine research, business support and engagement, student enterprise, and pedagogy to foster an entrepreneurial mindset and entrepreneurship within the university community and the area. CEKE supports students and the university community through its Business Lab, proof-of-concept competitions, and virtual business incubator, which is open to all Leeds Beckett University students and graduates. In collaboration with academics and

practitioners, the Centre also provides mentoring. It offers workshops on business planning and management, as well as tailored programs addressing the unique needs of SMEs in areas such as financial management, operational efficiency, and strategic planning.

A key initiative delivered through the Business School is Help to Grow: Management (HtGM), a nationwide program subsidised by the government and overseen by the Small Business Charter. HtGM drives up standards in business management and leadership by commissioning universities and other providers to offer support to small businesses, helping them to develop essential management and entrepreneurial skills, and thereby contributing to local economic growth. Being subsidised, HtGM opens the door to businesses that could not otherwise afford this progress, thereby facilitating productivity and continuous leadership development for small and medium-sized business managers (critical in a rapidly changing economy), which would not otherwise have taken place, and ultimately increasing business survival.

Suppliers are also encouraged to collaborate with the university on knowledge co-production and transfer through Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs). Crucial to inclusive growth, KTPs are a government-backed program that funds universities to work closely with businesses to develop innovative, research-informed solutions to critical development issues, thus increasing productivity, growth, and competitive advantage. Each KTP creates a unique partnership between a business, the university, and a highly skilled graduate to deliver a strategic innovation project typically lasting between 18 months and three years. LBU is currently delivering 21 KTPs, an exceptionally high number, with the Business School either leading or supporting on the vast majority.

Being part of the supply chain collective helps SMEs connect more easily with opportunities such as HtGM, KTPs, and local programs such as #WECAN (see case study), thanks to a trusted university partner acting as a bridge. The reach and positive impact of the Business School's engagement work are reflected in its Small Business Charter (SBC) Accreditation, which has been recently reissued for another five years. The recognition of the SBC highlights LBU's and, in particular, LBS's excellence in supporting small businesses, student entrepreneurship, and local economic development.

The SME Network as Non-Linear Supply Chain

The university's commitment to the Anchor Network's principles, and the purchasing and supply code of good practice, led to the creation of the LBU supply collective, aimed at supporting its suppliers in creating 'better jobs' in the region, improving their productivity, leadership development, networking, and ability to develop inclusive growth strategies, while increasing their societal impact. This model has led to the creation of communities of practice and networks that include both horizontal and vertical supply chain representatives, who benefit from strong

relationships with LBU and the diverse range of business support and engagement outlined above.

As illustrated in Figure 2 below, this supply chain model is a dynamic and networked configuration. Unlike linear models (as shown in Figure 1), this version illustrates how suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, and retailers exist in a reciprocal network of relationships embedded within a broader community of end users. The model reflects an ecosystem where end users are not simply passive recipients but active participants, shaping demand, contributing feedback, and in some cases, influencing innovation and service delivery. This configuration is particularly relevant for anchor institutions seeking to foster inclusive and sustainable growth. By creating strong relationships across the supply base, the model offers a framework for understanding how procurement, community benefit, and co-creation can intersect meaningfully in the context of place-based development.

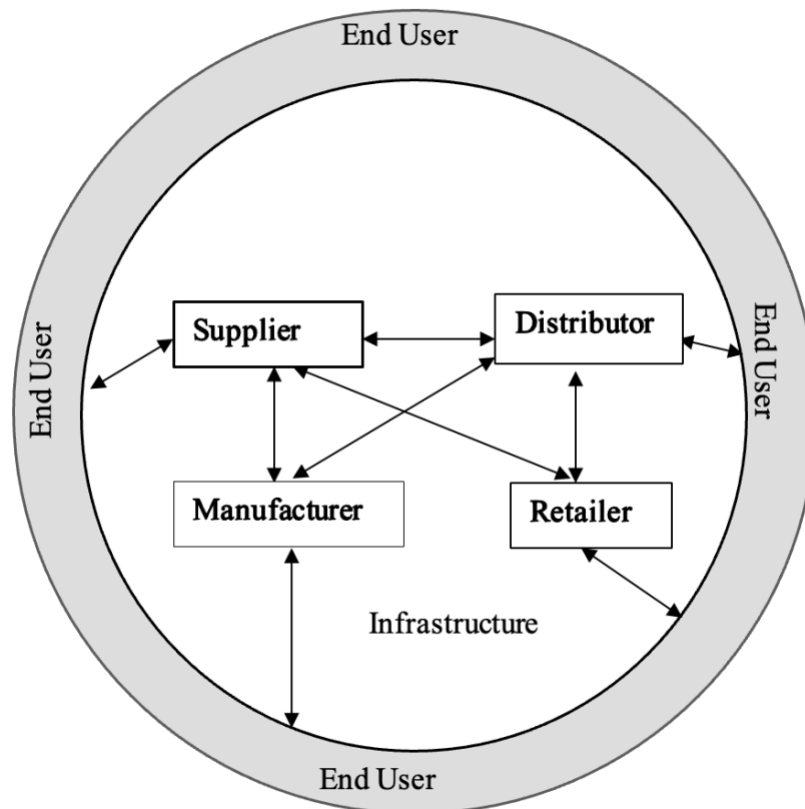


FIGURE 2. Non-linear supply chain basis for collaborative interactions.

Source: Adapted from Sheremetov & Rocha-Mier (2004).

Illustrative Case Study: SME-University Collaboration

LBU’s relationship with Company A, a local SME, began when the company joined the university’s business incubator. It was able to grow significantly by engaging in business support

programs such as Ad: Venture and Help to Grow. Initially a micro-enterprise, it has since evolved into a national service provider, supporting major recruitment initiatives for Help to Grow, the Small Business Leadership Program, and government-backed enterprise programs. The founder of the company now serves as a university Entrepreneur in Residence, offering mentorship, guest lectures, and enterprise workshops that support student development and institutional knowledge exchange.

Company A also participated in the EU-funded #WECAN initiative, aimed at enhancing leadership capacity among women in SMEs in the region. A dedicated cohort of sixteen employees undertook the program, with fifteen of them successfully achieving a nationally recognized leadership and management qualification. Delivery took place on company premises, enabling alignment with organisational needs and maximising participation. The intervention supported enhanced confidence, team cohesion, and leadership capabilities across the cohort, and it was recognised by Company A as a meaningful investment in staff development. Company A management described the program as transformative, providing tailored leadership training that addressed challenges faced by their predominantly female workforce. It gave participants confidence, fostered collaboration, and demonstrated the company's investment in its people.

The supplier-university relationship has remained active over many years, with Company A continuing to advertise graduate opportunities via the university's employment portal and participating in innovation-driven knowledge transfer. The company also maintains close collaboration with academic teams on applied research and enterprise initiatives.

This case demonstrates the benefits of embedding SMEs within university strategies for anchor engagement and inclusive growth. Through aligned programs, a commitment to support SMEs, and accessible procurement practices, the university has supported small businesses like Company A to scale, innovate, and contribute to regional economic development, while also enriching the student experience through work-based learning.

Company A is only one of multiple suppliers to benefit in a similar fashion. Positive impacts cited by other suppliers not selected for this case study include: “[ability to] jointly work on all areas of continuous improvement which seek to benefit all involved (students, teaching staff and all external workers)”; “[the LBU collective] opened doors to other Universities and the HE sector; [company] is now the largest single supplier into Universities Nationally...”; and that “holding the LBU contract for many years has enabled [us] to develop new business relationships.”

Limitations

There are, however, some limitations of this study that would benefit from further investigation. First, this case study is based on a large, generalist university in the north of the UK. Further comparisons observing the operation of a) smaller or specialised HEIs, b) large HEIs in different cultural, regional, and national contexts, would be instructive. Analyzing the role and dynamics of anchor institutions strongly depends on the local context—cultural, economic, infrastructural, and social—and the maturity of the relationships within the network. Related to this is a second limitation, that of this paper’s focus on LBU as it sits within the city of Leeds. Campus-like universities outside urban centres, or universities with outposts spread across wide geographical areas, may adopt different strategies, and relevant aspects of their circumstances may emerge. Future investigations could beneficially broaden the different types of HEIs studied and the diversity of contexts.

Thirdly, our propositions are based on our interactions with internal and external stakeholders, particularly local SME suppliers. The general focus has been on LBU’s role— that is, organization-centered. Therefore, to develop a complete picture of the ecosystem and the potential of the anchor network, further investigations are necessary to understand the broader needs of the full range of stakeholders in a local ecosystem.

Conclusion

This paper presents the idea that, as part of its commitment to increasing local prosperity and growth, by increasing discretionary purchasing with local organisations, LBU laid the ground to bring its SME suppliers into a supply chain “collective”. This collective has been instrumental in furthering LBU’s anchor mission by acting as a robust base for the development of the university’s commitment to service learning. It demonstrates how supply chains can be effective conduits for deepening anchor engagement.

We consider how LBU defines its role within the Leeds City Anchor Network and demonstrate that the network supports increased local purchasing, which in turn supports local workplace diversity and carbon reduction. By introducing a social value criterion in tenders, LBU has positively impacted local and SME engagement; through increasing local spend and the agreed framework of engagement, LBU has achieved significant benefits for suppliers, students, and the locality. Businesses in the network benefit from advanced research, mentorship, and new knowledge, leading to innovation, productivity improvements, and economic growth. Students benefit from practice-relevant experiences and opportunities for employment. The ecosystem that has emerged from this collaboration has enhanced university service delivery and impact for local communities.

The framework discussed in this paper will help shape universities’ missions, policy formulation, business operations, and regulatory practices for sustainable growth and development in regional

contexts. In conclusion, LBU's approach has demonstrated the importance of universities in supporting regional ecosystems and fostering economic growth. A supply chain collective initially inspired by an anchor commitment to increase local purchasing now provides a sustainable platform for SMEs to engage with anchor institutions, fostering knowledge transfer, development, job creation, and socioeconomic impact. The effectiveness of LBU's strategy provides a strong and developing framework for engagement between anchors and their communities.

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