Imagine waking up during term-time in 2014 on Portswood Road, one of the main student-housing drags in Southampton. Stepping outside, you find the road strangely deserted—not a student to be seen. Walking south along quieter streets, you find a huge expanse of grass where Southampton Solent University’s East Park Terrace building once stood. By the docks, the National Oceanography Centre—the University of Southampton’s research centre for the study of ocean and earth sciences—is now just a slab of wet concrete. Perplexed, you hop on a bus to the University of Southampton’s Highfield Campus, but the site opposite Southampton Common is just an empty space.

Southampton’s two universities have mysteriously disappeared. This is not a realistic prospect, of course: both the University of Southampton and Southampton Solent University recorded healthy financial surpluses in 2009-10. But at a time when the value of universities is being widely scrutinised and discussed, it is a novel way to consider their impact on and relationship with the local community. If the two universities were to vanish from the city, what would be lost?

The consequences for a city today would be very different from the state of affairs in earlier times. According to John Goddard, co-author of the forthcoming book *The University and the City* and emeritus professor of regional development studies at Newcastle University, universities have not always been helpful neighbours. The ancient universities served the church, not the city, and so “historically, universities were detached. They weren’t involved with issues of the city.” The 63 scholars killed by the townspeople of Oxford in the 1355 St Scholastica Day riot after two students forcefully complained about the quality of drinks in a tavern is a notorious example in a long history of conflict between town and gown.

As Goddard sees it, there was a temporary “flip” of engagement by the civic universities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle and others were created by an industrial bourgeoisie to provide skills for their cities. However, from the end of the First World War, universities were effectively nationalised as they drew more and more of their money from a government funding body. This shift meant that the university “turned its back on the city”.

...But in the past few decades, Goddard believes, this situation has changed. Universities now see that “their competitive strength comes from the relationship with cities re-emerging.”

“Universities need a good city to attract students and academic staff,” Goddard points out. The relationship between town and gown, once antagonistic, is now symbiotic.

One thing that would be noticed instantly if a university were to vanish overnight would be the sheer loss of student numbers. Almost 40,000 of Southampton’s 239,700-strong population are students, of whom roughly 4,000 are from the local area. So removing the universities would severely affect...