Queen Mary
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Mile End Institute

Civic Universities - where's the beef?

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Introduction

Being removed as Permanent Secretary of the Department for Education in the summer of 2020 had a number of consequences, of which one was, perhaps counter-intuitively, to increase the opportunity for me to do my bit in support of education.

Joining the boards of a school's trust, an adult education college and a university has connected me more closely with classroom practice (so energising), as well as placing me on the receiving end of DfE guidance (hmmm). Charity work has offered me insights into the sometimes untrusting attitude of officialdom. And becoming - who would have guessed it? - a visiting academic has provided me with a fabulous opportunity to explore the connection between government, the education sector and the public in as much depth as I want, through lecturing and research with all sorts of interesting new colleagues.

One such piece of research has been into the world of the civic university.

I first became aware of the idea when I visited Sheffield Hallam as Permanent Secretary. I took a short stroll from the DfE's Sheffield base, and enjoyed my visit enormously, seeing the concept of applied learning brought to life in discussion with students and lecturers. But what intrigued me the most was hearing about the role the university was starting to play as convenor and driver of public service improvement across the city. Operating in the space that I would have previously thought of as local government's domain - certainly that was my memory from my 1990s Islington days.

In a way, I thought, no surprise, for an institution whose Board is chaired by the ex Chief Executive of Sheffield Council. And whose finances, albeit like everyone's under pressure, have being treated much more generously than local government in recent years.

But even so, I was very interested in what I was learning. And maybe it was even bringing back some of my own memories of university student days. Why yes! I found - buried in a filing cabinet - a yellowing copy of the York Times (July 18, 1984), with a front page splash: 'Students help city jobless'. And as I read on, what should I come across but:

"President of the Students Union Jonathan Slater says the students feel isolated from the city in which they've chosen to study. 'After all, we didn't just choose to come to York because it's an attractive campus, we want to be a full part of the city. Many people don't realise that our sports hall is open to the public, but for the unemployed it can be rather expensive. So we've reduced the fees to just 40p per session to people who can produce a UB40 card'".

So when Patrick Diamond, Director of the Mile End Institute at Queen Mary University London asked me if I would be interested to explore the civic university idea in more detail, I jumped at the chance. And when he invited me to work on the project with Farah Hassain, Queen Mary PhD student and local councillor in the London Borough of Redbridge, I felt I'd really landed on my feet.

And this is what we learned…

The concept

In 2018, the UPP Foundation established a Commission to investigate the civic work of universities. In February 2019, they published their fundings and recommendations.

To quote from the foreword:

"The good news is that we found much enthusiasm for the civic role and many excellent individual initiatives. We also found through our survey work that people are generally proud of having a university in their area. However, we found few examples of a systematic and strategic approach to the civic role, based on an analysis of the needs of the place. Our proposal, that universities need to do this if they want to go beyond civic engagement to become truly civic universities, forms a central recommendation of the report."

The report went on to propose that universities should develop a:

"Civic University Agreement … co-created and signed by other key civic partners. This could include several universities or educational institutions coming together in a single agreement. We think that the starting point for Civic University Agreements has to be:

- *Understanding local populations, and asking them what they want…*

- *Understanding themselves…The first step is for universities to 'know thyself ' and decide where to focus their "civic" endeavours.*

- *Working with other local anchor institutions, businesses and community organisations to agree where the short, medium and long-term opportunities and problems lie in a given area, but also how they interact…*

- *A clear set of priorities…*

The output of all this strategic analysis, local engagement and prioritisation will be a clear plan of action."

This seemed very clear, and indeed compelling, certainly for the ex-President of York University Students Union.

It was received positively by Government. Chris Skidmore, the then Universities Minister, spoke at the report's launch, saying: *"I'm truly grateful to the UPP Foundation for commissioning this important project, and I hope that the Foundation will continue to lead the agenda and debate on the civic university going forwards. I particularly welcome the suggestion for new initiatives such as civic agreements, which aim to encourage universities to take a more strategic approach to their civic activity. It will be important that universities do not create these in isolation, and that we consider further how universities can be encouraged to join up with other key actors in their local areas to create agreements that best serve their entire community."*

And plenty of universities themselves showed enthusiasm, with nearly 60 committing to develop their own Civic University Agreements (CUAs).

Initial conversations with colleagues at Queen Mary (who are developing their own CUA) and Sheffield Hallam (who host the network of all universities interested in doing so) certainly suggested plenty of activity we could explore. Though there was a word of warning for me on an early phone call with Nick Hillman at the Higher Education Policy Institute, who wondered if universities really were grappling with the balance between local, national and international *('Universities and Brexit: past, present and future', July 2020)*, or were perhaps already beginning to move on to the next initiative.

So the next question was what we should explore.

The exam question

Given Sheffield Hallam's role in hosting the Civic University network, I started by asking them. They shared with me the results of a survey of network members, which showed that many were struggling with the question of how to measure impact, and wanted help.

Which seemed like a good challenge to look into. After all, it's not that hard to convince oneself that working very hard, attending lots of meetings, and publishing well-written documents are all signs of progress. But what difference is actually being achieved? And would the public actually notice it? Certainly I've had plenty of experience in my working life of wondering after the event if all that effort was really worth it…

And of course, although impact, or the lack of it, is what it's all about in the end, this is often very hard to measure. Again, my working life has been full of measuring the wrong thing (perhaps the common denominator is me, rather than the subject matter!). One of my favourite examples was measuring the proportion of patients offered an appointment with a GP within 48 hours (an early Blair target). How many people do you know who want to see a GP in two days' time? Either you or your child has woken up feeling ill and want to see a doctor today, or you have a chronic illness and want a regular check up every few weeks with the doctor who knows you (rather than whoever happens to be available the day after tomorrow).

Anyway, I was very happy to look into the measurement question. So long, of course, as this hadn't been done already. Ed Ferrari, Director of Sheffield Hallam's Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research was doing interesting work to develop a civic impact framework, a tool for universities to use to determine how advanced they are in developing their agreements, and what more needs to be done, For example, the framework invites them to consider whether or not they are measuring their social impact and are working with local communities to make sure that indicators are meaningful, but it doesn't offer advice on what these indicators might be. So there definitely seemed to be the space for a complementary piece of work on actual measurement.

In doing so, we started by looking back at the UPP Foundation's advice:

"There should be a three-part approach to measuring – and therefore incentivising – the success of the civic university.

- *A Civic University Agreement should include clear, measurable objectives agreed by the university and its partners…*
- *Removing perverse measurement…[e.g. in the LEO[1]]*
- *National measurement…making sure that existing measures reflect civic activity [and] a new peer review model."*

This all seemed sensible. The next thing was to find out how universities had been going about the task over the two and a half years since the UPP report (and 18 months since the launch of the Civic University Network).

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[1] Longitudinal Educational Outcomes - a technique for comparing differences in graduates' earnings with their degrees

The evidence

We started by asking Sheffield Hallam to point us to universities which they thought might have something interesting to say on the subject, and which provided a widespread across the whole of the UK.

We weren't looking for a random sample of universities, as our aim wasn't to analyse the extent of measurement in place across the sector. Rather, we thought there would be value in identifying good practice, and sharing this with others who might be interested. Equally, we thought it would be useful to learn where those institutions which had made the most progress were still struggling, and set ourselves the challenge of offering our own ideas, if we had any.

Ed Ferrari joined forces with Paul Manners, Policy Director at the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (one of Hallam's strategic partners in their role as Civic University Network host) in suggesting the following 12 universities: QMUL, Manchester, Staffordshire, Solent, Sheffield Hallam, Bath, Aberdeen, St Andrews, Swansea, Cardiff, Wrexham, and Ulster.

We met with the civic engagement leads at 9 of these universities (the other 3 didn't respond to our requests), including coverage in all four nations of the UK, and subsequently with three more in London recommended to us during one or more of these meetings: London Metropolitan University, King's College London, and the University of London.

In all of these 12 meetings the people we spoke to were open and engaging, and we are grateful to all of them. All were clearly committed to the objective of improving their university's civic role, and all spoke with genuine enthusiasm for the task. There was no 'spin' - each was honest about the challenges they faced. And there was plenty of follow-up too, with many sharing and answering questions on documents they shared with us, even before they had been to their Board for sign off.

The findings

As would be expected, each university was taking to the task in different ways - there is no national 'template'. Some were developing Civic University Agreements, others weren't.

Some had already got draft agreements, others were at the beginning of the journey. Some were aiming for something specific and quantifiable, others for something more 'visionary'. Some were collaborating with other universities in their region with a view to a joint CUA, others were going it alone. Some were seeking formal agreement of the document with strategic partners like the local authority, others weren't.

There seems nothing wrong in principle with a great deal of variety. Indeed, there are obvious benefits in learning from different approaches. And the context facing individual institutions clearly varies significantly, from universities which stand alone as higher education institutions in their local area, to others (most obviously in London, but also in Greater Manchester and elsewhere) which are part of something much more complicated. As well of course as universities which have been working on their civic role for a lot longer than others.

However, we were generally more impressed by those universities which had set themselves the objective of producing a CUA which goes beyond a series of declaratory sentences with ambitious adjectives, into the space of well-defined activities which members of the public would be able to relate to. And not just because this made our task of assessing impact easier. It did seem to us that more than one university (though not many, to be fair) had approached the development of their CUA as more of a public relations or reputation-management task than as a way of delivering genuine improvement to the lives of local people. Whereas some others had spelt out very clearly what they were going to do differently and why, whether they had decided to encapsulate this in a formal CUA or not.

We were also more impressed by those which had been taking a strategic approach to the development of their CUAs. Some of the universities we talked to had conducted an overall assessment of their current civic activities, consulted with local partners and people about what they thought of this and what they would like to be different, and set clear priorities for change as a result. This seemed to us very much to be desired. But it was, perhaps surprisingly, also very much the minority approach.

It is possible that, at least for some of the universities we spoke to who weren't following each of these steps, this was simply because it is work in progress. In fact, none of the 12 had actually produced a complete CUA when we talked to them, and only one has published one at the time of writing. However, this was not the sense we got in most of our conversations. It seemed to us that there was often something of a disconnect between the enthusiastic work of the civic engagement leads we were talking to and the deliberations of their Boards.

A common story we heard was of a one-person civic 'team', sometimes housed within a group of public affairs and other engagement and communications people. The civic leads typically pointed to their reliance on strong support from their Vice Chancellor or other senior sponsor, but this did not often extend to the sort of active engagement that is needed to turn enthusiasm into strategic impact.

There was also sometimes a tendency for the amount of activity to distract from the question of what would make the most helpful difference a university might make to local people's lives. Of course, there is a certain inevitability about the cost of partnership, not least in the number of meetings that need to be attended. But in the absence of clear prioritisation, either from the Board, or from strategic partners, it can be hard for even the most committed civic engagement lead to distinguish the wood from the trees. This led to us sometimes finding it hard to move the conversations we were having on from enthusiastic expositions of partnership working to the more interesting question of what difference this was actually making to local people.

Good practice

That said, we did find some great examples of universities acting strategically and with clear purpose in developing their civic role.

Sheffield Hallam, perhaps unsurprisingly given their role as Network host, to say nothing of the fact that the chair of their Board also chaired the UPP Foundation Commission, seemed to us to have made the most progress in developing a strategic, measurable CUA, informed by a process which was both top-down and bottom-up. At the time of our meeting it was in draft form, but it has now been published. We were particularly struck by the way in which the university sought views from local partners and people on what they thought of Hallam and what they wanted of it, both through consultations and polling commissioned from YouGov, and then by the way the university responded by setting clear priorities (no more than 5), and defining them in quantifiable ways which thereby have the potential to provide real impact locally and for that impact to be measured to see what difference it has made. For example, the most popular request of Hallam was that they should train more nurses and other local NHS workers; the CUA commits the university to doubling the intake by 2025.

At the same time, we should note that Hallam's CUA hasn't actually been 'agreed' with any of its partners, albeit that they were consulted on its contents. It may well be that it's no coincidence that the most well-defined, quantitative approach we found was in a university which has chosen to be clearly in control of the process. Some other universities we spoke to had decided to cede a certain amount of such control to partners, or indeed to other universities in the region, and it would not be surprising if such a process led to less specificity, at least over the timescales we have been considering. Though Hallam's approach has been cooperative, as is evident in the number of very supportive comments from partners contained within the CUA (to say nothing of the fact that the doubling of NHS training can only be done with the support of the local NHS).

Queen Mary, also a founding member of the Network, is one of two universities we spoke to (the other is Staffordshire) which bought in the services of Hatch to carry out a comprehensive analysis of their current impact on local communities. This is obviously not a cheap option, something which was given as a reason by at least one other not to follow suit, but has the advantage of providing a detailed assessment of the status quo, and of opportunities for improvement. For example, how to reach out to more disadvantaged students, how to help more graduates into local employment, how to focus R&D more effectively in support of the local economy, and how to make the university more accessible. Queen Mary is still developing its CUA, but this analysis, combined with a thorough process of bottom-up consultation with local people and partners, demonstrates strong potential.

We also found a number of examples of universities working in strong partnership with other agencies, and reaching agreement to improve services together, even if these are typically not as clear and quantifiable as Hallam's. For example, King's College London has agreed a 'Statement of Intent' with each of Westminster and Lambeth councils, and will shortly be finalising one with Southwark too. These identify agreed priorities, and initial projects to make progress e.g. in providing health checks for local residents, and providing business advice to SMEs identified by the council (albeit not quantified to date). In Greater Manchester, five higher education institutes have come together with the Mayor and ten local authority leaders to agree six priority areas for collective action, including education and skills; reducing inequalities, net zero, the digital economy and the creative Zand cultural economy.

Even where universities had not (yet) reached the stage of defining priorities, we found a number of interesting ways in which some had sought to quantify the impact of their civic work. For example, Wrexham students offer free digital support to local charities who need help creating new websites and the like. They have estimated what it would cost these charities to buy this service, and have - perfectly reasonably in our view - scored this as an impact of their civic role.

Don't forget that universities aren't universally welcomed by local people

As we said earlier, Farah is a councillor in the London Borough of Redbridge. There are no universities based there, and there is unsurprisingly quite a bit of political interest in changing that.

But for a councillor representing local people, a good question is whether such a move might actually create more problems than benefits. Would housing be even more difficult for local people to secure, for example? What about noise? Pollution? The list goes on.

Of course, there are ways for universities to address these legitimate concerns. But we were struck that almost none of the people we spoke to at the 12 universities had really thought about this. They were giving plenty of thought to how their universities could make a positive difference, but not to the more prosaic question of how to mitigate the negatives.

The one example we did hear of was from Solent University, which funds the local council for extra rubbish collections. Less exciting than using research funding to establish new start-ups, no doubt, but potentially more straightforwardly impactful on local people's lives.

Conclusions

Talking to 12 universities means that we aren't in a position to report conclusively on the entire field of civil engagement, of course. But it's nevertheless enough to offer an informed perspective on opportunities for improvement, particularly given that the universities were chosen because they were considered to be at the leading edge of engagement.

First, it is important that universities wanting to develop a CUA should do so with their eyes open as to the scale of the challenge. Of the 12 universities we spoke to, only one has finalised a CUA to date, and this one hasn't actually been agreed with its partners. Of course, it is certainly possible to produce a document which describes plenty of civic engagement and call that a CUA, but that would be to miss the point of the UPP Foundation's call to arms, which was about the importance of taking a strategic approach, setting clear priorities informed by genuine partnership.

There are plenty of perfectly respectable reasons why universities might have chosen not to prioritise the development of a CUA in the last two years, of which dealing with the pandemic and financial constraints are only the most obvious ones. Anyway, it's not our job to call on universities to develop them. What we are saying, however, is that where universities do decide to do so, they need to understand that this is a task which will require proper resourcing and senior sponsorship, an openness to really asking local partners and people for their views and acting accordingly, and the confidence to set clear priorities. And we didn't find very much of that.

Second, we were asked to look into the question of measuring impact, but of course this can only be done meaningfully where a university has done all of the above. Where it has, we conclude that it is perfectly possible to develop a quantified CUA, and further that an unquantified one risks being little more than a piece of PR. Hallam's CUA includes not just a plan to increase the number of healthcare professions they train from 2700 to 5400 over the next three years, but also a commitment to offer at least 2,500 fully work-based degree apprenticeships. Conversely, most of their commitments aren't quantified, and many could be (e.g. reduction in carbon emissions, extent of CPD offer to local schools, increased research in support of improving local healthcare pathways).

Hatch's work for Queen Mary and Staffordshire also points to how measurement can be done. For example, estimates can be made of local gross value added (GVA), and of the number of local jobs supported in the local economy over and above direct employment by a university. Similarly, it is perfectly possible to measure things like the percentage of local school children supported by the university through outreach, volunteering etc.

Of course, measuring genuine impact rather than simply levels of activity is always going to be a challenge. It would be very difficult, for example, for a university to prove that its outreach activities have enabled schoolchildren to (say) do better in their exams. But it is important not to let the best be the enemy of the good. In our view, it would be perfectly satisfactory for a university to measure its reach (in this case numbers of children supported) and to track what happens (e.g. GCSE results), even if cause and effect can't be formally assessed. And much better to do this than simply publish a commitment to support local children, as this could mean anything or nothing.

But our main conclusion is that the civic university as envisaged by the UPP Foundation is pretty elusive in practice at the moment, and will require a very significant push if it is to gain real traction and make a big difference to local people's lives, which is surely the point. The sector needs to decide if it really wants to determine its contribution to the local places where universities are based and, if so, collectively put its shoulder to the wheel. Government also needs to decide if this is something that it wants to encourage, perhaps as part of the levelling-up agenda, albeit that the institutional independence of universities limits Government's powers here. We saw in Wrexham how the leadership (and funds) of the Welsh Government kick-started their work there.

Through this project, we have found that it is perfectly possible for universities to do the necessary work in this area - to listen to local people and partners, to decide what to do as a result, either in consultation or in formal partnership, to set some measurable objectives, and to get on with it. And though there is clearly a whole range of significant challenges facing the sector, the case for universities to work with directly elected Mayors, with local government more generally, and with other partners to play a strategic role in their locality is strong. As to whether or not this becomes more than a minority sport, that's a question for universities themselves to answer. But if not, why not?

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