

Civic Universities: Responding to the economic and social consequences of the coronavirus event

A note for the Civic University Network¹

Over the past few weeks, UK Government Departments and the equivalent administration units in the devolved administrations have been looking to universities to support the health service in responding to the threat posed by coronavirus. Across the UK there has already been a substantial mobilisation of medically qualified staff and of experts in fields such as virology, epidemiology, public health medicine and human behaviour. There have also been approaches at more local level, not only from health bodies but from local government and other civic partners who are busy implementing emergency plans to deal with contingencies arising from the public health threat and the lockdown. Some of these requests are for practical assistance – availability of face masks, hand sanitiser etc and access to specialised equipment and buildings, others may be less specific – an additional shoulder to the wheel in a collective endeavour.

Although senior university managers are quite properly focused on business continuity and risk management considerations affecting their own institutions, including pastoral care for staff and students and making arrangements for assessment in the changed circumstances, vice chancellors are keen to support central government, local government, and other civic partners as well as health bodies in dealing with the consequences of the outbreak. Given the shutdown and the disruption they face, government departments, most agencies and civic partners, hardly surprisingly, do not have a coherent view of what is needed/would be most useful for universities to provide.

This raises three sets of issues:

- at local level, how might universities help co-ordinate activity across key ‘anchor’ institutions and contribute their expertise and evidence to inform understanding by civic partners of the economic and social consequences of the coronavirus event;
- at both local and national level, how might civic universities contribute to the scoping out and monitoring of policies in a complex setting where health and resilience considerations take precedence and economic and social policies are geared towards immediate mitigation and supporting targeted groups; and
- nationally and internationally, how can good practice be shared and lessons learned from one institution and from one place to another, without placing any additional (data gathering) burden on HEIs or civic partners in the emergency context when both universities and civic partners have their own pressing responsibilities to take care of.

The contribution of civic universities may not be limited to the commitments made in Civic University Agreements which focus in most instances on their role as anchor institutions. Universities can draw on internal expertise and the expertise of research partners with whom they have or can quickly create collaborative agreements. They can also access a deep pool of expertise via their wider networks and the global academy. Local government, health and economic development organisations and the community and voluntary sector all need help. By acting as a conduit for ideas and knowledge for these intermediary agencies, civic universities can maximise the support they give to business, communities and the wider public in the places we serve.

The UK and devolved governments (in the case of the UK Government through the Knowledge Exchange Unit in Parliament) are asking academics with relevant expertise to come forward. But although a range

of areas is identified, it is not clear how these experts will be utilised – even in normal circumstances trawls for academics lead to relatively few successful ‘matches’ and government departments tend to use a relatively limited pool of ‘experts’, with a bias towards the ‘Golden Triangle’. Some co-ordination of the search for expertise, involving the universities themselves might offer a more fruitful approach. From a sub-national, place perspective however, it is important that civic universities take the initiative to coordinate what they can offer in support of more regional and local tiers of government and civic partners. It is evident across the UK that university staff and students are providing support on their own initiative to affected individuals and communities. Organic ‘bottom up’ volunteering is by no means confined to people linked with universities, but universities are better placed than most other bodies to encourage and support such activities. The mobilisation underway at neighbourhood and community level to combat the threat posed by coronavirus is one of the few positive things to come out of the current crisis and it is **something of value that should be supported and built on for the future.**

¹ This note has been prepared by Des McNulty (Glasgow University) and John Goddard (Newcastle University) following a discussion of university partners in the Civic University Network Hub at Sheffield Hallam University that was facilitated by the Carnegie Foundation. It is work in progress and comments will be gratefully received by the authors

In a crisis, the demands of now - the immediate issues that have to be dealt with - pre-empt a more reflective approach making it difficult for those in the thick of managing the immediate response to look even a few weeks or months ahead. This is true of the health service, local government, central government and its agencies, and similar pressures will affect the ability of senior managers of universities. However, universities do have capacity for thinking and knowledge mobilisation they can draw on, through their staff who in present circumstances may have more time and freedom in the next few months to make positive contributions using their expertise and many of whom are eager to work together across disciplinary boundaries and with professional service colleagues in response to the crisis.

We should think about the crisis as having two distinct stages - immediate responses to the health threat and disruption caused by lockdown – contributions here might include how to mitigate effects on businesses by supporting firms, jobs by preventing redundancies etc., or the particular issues faced by vulnerable groups such as homeless people or those working in the gig economy. There are a variety of groups and communities with whom civic universities could and should be working - not just government and official bodies but also community organisations that are in the front line in the crisis. Many of these organisations will need support to come to terms with the disruption they are facing and continue the valuable work they are doing. The immediate phase of the crisis is not just the period until cases peak, when the focus is on suppression and social distancing. It also includes building resilience in the aftermath of the peak when the health focus will be on ensuring there is no significant resurgence or 'second wave' of infections. During this post-peak period we can expect many restrictions on personal freedom and economic activity to remain in place – they will only gradually be removed.

Part of this phase should involve civic universities working with others to a) identify what mechanisms and what communities in their area are most at risk and b) how they can contribute to mitigation. Questions being highlighted by one major university include:

- Resilience. What sectors, firms, households in our region are most at risk from various economic impacts? What is the likely scale of these impacts? What policies or investments have proven effective in other economic crises, in other times or places? E.g. are there business support programmes which have worked well in other countries, with lessons for UK regions?
- To what extent are the current government funding initiatives and risk-mitigation policies reaching their targeted organisations (what is the level of uptake) and what impact are these having in real-time?
- Contagion effects. What kinds of direct and indirect effects - e.g. between sectors and other sectors and on households - are likely to be triggered by redundancies and reduced incomes? What level of burden might this place on specific public-sector services and agencies (and where)?
- Geographical impacts – What are the spatial inequalities that are emerging – e.g. in terms of access to basic services at a micro-area level; 'food deserts'; concentrations of those unable to work at home and key workers.
- Employment support and those on the margins of the labour market – What challenges and opportunities are posed for employment support providers and beneficiaries? What are the support needs that are emerging? What are the implications for the non-employed and those at the margins of the labour market?

The second phase is the recovery or rehabilitation period, where priorities must include helping central and local government and businesses (including universities which in many localities are amongst the largest employers) identify and capture opportunities. The task here is to take the necessary steps to ensure not just that the regional/local economy bounces back from the shock but **that it builds back to a better- ideally more resilient, more inclusive and more productive way of working.** Responding sensitively and appropriately in the different phases of the crisis is important not only to maximise the contribution that civic universities can make but also **because good civic collaboration in this time of crisis will have positive effects on the reputation of universities and longer-term place-based working.**

As the President of the Regional Studies Association, Professor Ron Martin has said in a message to members *“It is very unlikely, when the pandemic is over that social and economic life will simply return to its pre-pandemic state – nor should it: how we organise our lives and our social and economic systems will need to be rethought. The importance of properly funding health and social services, of reducing social and spatial inequalities in incomes and welfare, of reorganising supply chains and production systems to make them less geographically fragmented and less fragile, of making future economic growth both more inclusive and sustainable, these all, it is to be hoped, will become key imperatives of policy innovation. What is certainly clear is that the impacts and consequences of the current crises will vary not only between countries, but also within them, between regions, cities and localities, thereby elevating the need for policies that incorporate explicit initiatives that are sensitive and specific to individual places”.*

Specific work on the economic response which takes account of the changes observed during the crisis could include:

- What growth opportunities are there likely to be for firms during the ‘bounce back?’ What kinds of investments and policy interventions have been effective in other post-recession upturns and/or other countries?
- What needs to be done in the short and medium term to support the self-employed who face particularly great uncertainty and will need to adapt to changed circumstances? Self-employment was already an issue prior to the pandemic – particularly the growth of the gig economy - but the lags in responding to the needs of those not in employment have highlighted the vulnerability of self-employed people to economic shocks that cannot be anticipated and over which they have no control.
- In what ways is the crisis changing behaviours amongst consumers and employees and promoting specific kinds of innovation and changes in business models as organisations and individuals adapt to working remotely, with supply limitations, reduced travel etc.? How does that impact differentially, by sector?
- Methodological and evaluation issues raised by the shock. e.g. What has COVID-19 shown us about the strengths and weaknesses of socio-economic data and are there better ways of linking information gathering and two-way communication between business and local government and economic development agencies.

This needs to be matched by work with communities possibly guided by the work of the Civil Exchange’s Call to Action for a better way of working so that “ *Everyone is heard and believe in, given a fair opportunity to thrive, and the ability to influence the things that matter to them. Every community comes together, looks out for each other, respects difference and enables everyone to belong and society as a whole, values and invests in everyone and in every community*”. Although the Exchange makes no reference to universities its messages are highly relevant to how Civic Universities might want to act to enable communities to recover viz:

- sharing power with communities,
- changing practises to help people thrive and just not cope,
- changing organisations to focus on communities and solutions and
- collaborative leadership to achieve systemic change

At present, health bodies, government officials and politicians are firefighting and responding to new contingencies as they arise. We are aware from informal contacts with colleagues in a number of the larger civic universities that work is already underway to mobilise useful evidence and make it available to local government and civic partners in ways that inform and help them implement appropriate policies in the immediate circumstances and responses for the future. It is likely that similar work by civic universities is underway in other places. Coronavirus has led to a substantial demand from government for expert advice, particularly from the biomedical sciences, with the ‘Golden Triangle of elite institutions in the South East to the fore. The bigger multi-faculty research intensives, located mainly in the major cities, have also been involved, not just because of their research expertise but also because they house the larger medical schools.

Going forward, there will be a need for advice from a wider range of disciplines including the social sciences and humanities, not just at central government but at regional and local level. There is potentially a role for the civic university hub, not just in sharing information and best practice, but also in ensuring that across the country there is access to the best and most appropriate advice and support for local economic and community resilience. It is important not just that civic universities support the places they are located in but also that they share expertise with each other and with places that would otherwise be left behind either because they have no local university or because the local university may not have the particular expertise they need. The experience of past shocks suggest that bounce back patterns are uneven and some negatively affected places are ‘left behind’. There is an urgent need for civic universities to pool or share ideas and experience with each other and with civic partners and to build capacity across the sector, learning from what works elsewhere while sharing thinking, expertise and experience as widely as possible. In the case of the larger conurbations where there are several universities, it would make sense for universities to work together with each other as well as with local government and civic partners, in the case of smaller cities and towns, local universities should be looking to work with the bigger civic universities in their regions. The distribution of universities is very uneven across the country and there is a worrying risk that those places remote from the major conurbations get less access to the full range of expertise or none at all.

The most urgent task, and one civic universities must prioritise to be credible, is to help inform the response to the immediate crisis. Rapid decisions are needed to focus capacity on the tasks at hand, strengthen partnerships and networks locally, at UK level and internationally to make their contribution more impactful. However, the widely acknowledged shortcomings of the territorially blind nature of higher education and research policies and the limited explicit support for the civic role of universities particularly in relation to levelling up must now be in sharper focus. Recent developments at UK level in

higher education and research policy - postponement of the REF, no date for the increase of the research budget and the possible implementation of a student number cap to ensure some universities do not go under, and the suspension of the spending review together pose a threat but also an opportunity for the Civic University movement. While there is a turn to experts in the national context, the reputation of universities will be determined in large part by perceptions of the way they

behave as an important local anchor institution, working with civic partners and community and voluntary organisations in addressing the crisis and the reconstruction work that follows.

The need for a rapid response is precipitated by the crisis but it meshes with a need to reconfigure established practises of university/business collaboration for a world in which global business logics and value systems, including what is required and expected of universities will change. Amongst the changes that might be ushered in are a shift in the balance in the higher education system from one grounded in competition to one based on collaboration and trust across the whole education system locally, nationally and globally. **Now is the time to re-set the agenda**

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