

Civic Universities and Inclusive Local Economic Recovery

A Background note for the Civic University Network Webinar

hosted by City-REDI, University of Birmingham.

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Introduction

This event is the third in a series organised by the Civic University Hub based at Sheffield Hallam University that brings together the network of universities across the UK that are developing or implementing agreements with their civic partners in line with the recommendations of the Civic University Commission.

The **focus** of this webinar, which is hosted by City-REDI at the University of Birmingham as part of its ongoing work, is on **how civic universities can mobilise their capabilities and resources in response to the Covid-19 pandemic by building on existing relationships and agreements with civic partners.** How can we co-create new areas and forms of collaboration with local stakeholders, businesses, local government, the NHS and the community and voluntary sectors with the aim of building resilience to underpin local economic recovery, renewal and inclusive growth and thereby contributing to the wellbeing of local communities and regional prosperity?

The **aim** of this event is **to share experience between members of the network, to highlight successes and areas where more needs to be done and to give participants an opportunity to hear from and question national policy influencers and leaders of well-established university-regional partnerships.** The current pandemic has highlighted the importance of civic engagement as a vital component of the mission of most, if not all, universities. There is a mutual recognition amongst those universities and their civic partners that universities need to connect, collaborate and contribute in a common endeavour with partners and that universities are both important anchor institutions and have capacities and capabilities that could be utilised at the local and regional level for the common good. We wish to explore how best to build and enhance relationships, what incentives, structures and arrangements lead to better collaborations and how universities can both contribute to better outcomes and evidence what they do. Other questions that Universities might ask themselves six months into the crisis, as new restrictions are imposed by the UK and devolved governments are:

- What forms of local partnerships have worked well, enabling universities to respond quickly and effectively, supporting civic partners and building the resilience of their regions at a time of need?

- Can civic university contributions to an immediate health and jobs crisis lay the foundations for enhanced future engagement and collaboration in delivering shared objectives such as local inclusive growth?
- What are the lessons from the Covid crisis that could help re-shape the institutional platforms and incentives within and between universities for civic engagement, making it more central to the purpose and mission of institutions?
- How can local practice and national policies connect more effectively in the fields of higher/further education, research and innovation and city/regional development?

The role of universities in city and regional development

There is a long history of policy interventions to mobilise universities to support city and regional development. Nevertheless, there have been huge challenges in connecting higher education and science policy makers with those responsible for the development of cities and regions, both at national policy level and internationally. The former group focus on teaching and research with limited regard to place while the latter have tended either to neglect higher education as a significant economic and social actor or to focus on a narrow aspect of the contribution that universities make to economic development. These policy silos are reflected in the academic research communities and the also in the way universities are organised internally.

Insofar as there has been a connection it has been around the contribution of university to business development through exploiting science (spin outs, technology transfer, attracting inward investors to science parks). This has been largely predicated on a linear model of innovation and supported by university technology transfer offices. Even in this domain, the contribution of students (pipeline of highly skilled labour/knowledge exchange through work placements) and of the social sciences and humanities to new ways of working and to the non-manufacturing sector have been ignored. The prevailing model has been the entrepreneurial university earning additional income from working with business and the associated Triple Helix movement of university researchers, business and those parts of local and central government responsible for business development.

In the light of new demands and new modes of innovation that recognise the role of citizens in the co-production of knowledge and the locality as a 'living lab', the civic university movement is beginning to challenge this dominant science push paradigm and looking to new ways to structure themselves internally. Most recently, the new CEO of UKRI, Ottoline Leyser, has set out for staff a new vision for their organisation:

“to build a thriving, inclusive research and innovation system that connects discovery to prosperity and the public good. To work together with many other actors including close partners at the heart of the R&I system such as HEIs and institutes, innovative businesses, investors and not-for-profit organisations and policy makers, and a wider set of partners such as the education system and civil society”.

She has also acknowledged that this resonates with the work of the UK **Civic University Network** composed of a diverse set of near on 100 universities in a wide variety of local settings. The members have pledged publicly to co-create **Civic University Agreements** with their local partners and to support the sharing of best practice in working with partners.

The pledge is worth quoting in full:

- Place: *As a place-based institution we are committed to attaching a high-priority to the economic, social, environmental, and cultural life of our local communities.*
- Public: *Our civic role will be informed by an evidence-based analysis of the needs of our place, developed collaboratively with local partners and informed by the voice of our local community.*
- Partnerships: *We will collaborate with other universities and anchor institutions and form partnerships to overcome the challenges facing our local communities.*
- Measurement and Impact: *With our partners, we will be clear about what we do and how we measure it, so we can say with confidence what we have achieved – and how we might do better in the future.*

Similar networks can be found in the US – for example Campus Compact “a national coalition of 1,000+ colleges and universities committed to the public purposes of higher education to build democracy through civic education and community development”. Likewise, the members of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities are seeking to rediscover their roots in their individual states.

Learning from international experience, the Civic University Network, based at Sheffield Hallam University and involving university and community development partners, is developing a framework for guiding collaborative action between universities and their communities that recognises differences between places – demographics, physical and institutional infrastructure, capability and the necessary resources – and the role of different sectors – local government, different parts of government, health, local and international business, arts, culture and the community and voluntary groups.

Civic Universities and Covid 19

Infection rates and the numbers of people requiring hospital care due to Covid-19 has been uneven across UK nations and regions, and at locality level, necessitating tighter restrictions in some places. This, together with underlying differences in the economic, health, social welfare and community challenges faced by local stakeholders in different places, has propelled the search for local solutions within the national policy framework set by central government. Each place has had to develop and manage its own response to the disruption caused by the pandemic. Those places where co-operation between local government and universities had become embedded pre-Covid have typically been better able to map out the impact of the crisis, plan and co-ordinate their responses and mobilise resources than places where for whatever reason these relationships either did not exist or were embryonic or fragile.

Significant variation in local governance and institutional forms and capacities exists across UK regions and nations and universities themselves are different in their ethos and approach to civic engagement. Many universities have historically worked closely with private and public-sector partners in their city-regions, making a major contribution as part of their civic commitment. Strong, existing ties – with local policy authorities, NHS Trusts, businesses or communities – have provided the platform to quickly deliver support to local stakeholders at a time of need. But across the nations and regions of the UK there are differences in the degree to which partnership between universities and their places is embedded and unevenness too in the extent to which universities located in the same city or region co-operate with each other in adopting a joint or collaborative approach. The

pandemic has however, in many places, been a catalyst for change, with new collaborative links being forged, irrespective of whether relationships and co-operation pre-Covid were strong or weak

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the Network. While universities are currently facing major challenges to their funding and business models as a result of the crisis, they have been presented with opportunities to connect and collaborate with NHS, local authorities, business and the community and voluntary sector in the areas they serve. In many instances, universities are making significant contributions as not only as **anchor** institutions with significant economic and employment impacts but also as sources of expert advice and support as **knowledge** institutions

There is broad agreement that recovery from this crisis needs to protect the vulnerable and tackle inequalities, focus upon supporting young people, prioritise the sectors and regions most impacted, boost productivity, and help the transition to a low carbon economy. But while regulatory and economic policy levers reside with central government, delivery - the process of re-emergence from lockdown and the transition, recovery and renewal phases - will in key respects have to be managed at the subnational level.

Civic Universities can play a vital role, in leadership and support capacities depending on circumstance, especially in those communities with a long history of economic and related social disadvantage. Going forward, many places, and in particular the so-called left-behind areas, will face great challenges in rebuilding their local economies and civil society. Impressed with the extent to which universities have *of their own volition* worked with real pace, skill and scale to mobilise their staff and students as part of the emergency phase, civic partners are now looking to them to contribute to the recovery process. How universities respond in this next phase will greatly influence, for better or worse, trust and confidence in the sector.

Through the Civic University Network, information about how universities are working to identify and map needs at city and regional levels and mobilising their expertise in supporting civic partners to find solutions is being shared and analysed. Nevertheless, there is a risk that the uneven distribution of research expertise and resources across the country, coupled with financial pressures on individual universities, variations in local government and other institutional capacity and uncertainty about the replacement of European regional funds, might further disadvantage 'left behind' places. Through the network, tools that universities, local authorities/agencies and civic partners at metropolitan/neighbourhood levels can be used to link user need(s) with university capability which can be developed and rolled out. Co-operation between research-intensive universities and partners across regions can provide access to expertise to support the recovery process in a wide range of localities where help is needed, including those without immediate access to higher education.

Looking to the future policy landscape

There is a very real danger that, in the face of the crisis confronting the sector, and in exchange for financial assistance, a piecemeal restructuring will take place that pays little regard to the contribution higher education and research can play in meeting both the immediate and the longer terms needs of communities most affected by the crisis. To forestall this happening, there is an urgent need for universities to seize the initiative and from the bottom up come up with their own plans and policies.

Clearly each university has to find its own way of responding to a crisis which is affecting the education of individuals at all levels, the local economy, health and wellbeing, aggravating inequality and the leading to potential collapse of key local sectors (e.g. culture and leisure). Some universities

are working together at the local level but there is scope for wider co-operation at local level and across the sector which could result in less competition and more collaboration with other Higher Education Institutions, including colleges and also with schools. This could lead eventually to an altogether more nuanced national steering of the whole education system. Ideally, universities would each learn from what they and others have done during the crisis and, through sharing experiences and expertise, plan what they might do in future based on deeper values that have emerged in the crisis.

A 'new normal' based on values rather than performance metrics could emerge. A values approach would embed a university more strongly within local and regional governance structures where it could benefit from political support and have better access to geographically tailored policy thinking and systems of deliberation. Through improved connections and collaboration, universities can shape their contribution to the common good and have it recognised and utilised not just by governments and agencies but also by other civic partners, including businesses of all sizes and from all places, local and national. It is possible that demand for socially relevant research will rise as a result of the Covid crisis and philanthropic donations linked to demonstrable community benefits might increase in place of more traditional gifts.

To realise their full potential as key civic institutions, some universities will need to build internal and external awareness of a changed priorities and it may well take time for the fuller benefits of greater engagement with civil society to feed through. However, the crisis provides an opportunity for universities to demonstrate their value and contribution to the recovery and renewal processes. If the civic university movement sees more institutions aligning themselves to longer-term societal outcomes this may demonstrate to sceptical Ministers (and Vice Chancellors) the limitations of the narrow focus on research and teaching outputs that the current market driven system in the UK requires university managers to prioritise. The challenges of mobilising in response to the crisis by building partnerships and forms of collaboration that enable universities to contribute more effectively and of shifting the policy debate on what the role of higher education should be are interconnected. Success in the former will make progress in the latter more likely – and standing aside while the full effects of the pandemic unfold should not be an option.