Civic University Network

Leading the development & delivery of a civic agreement

Helen Featherstone, Head of Public Engagement at the University of Bath explains the university's approach to developing their civic agreement, and describes how her role has evolved to take on leadership of this work

Why is the University of Bath developing a Civic University Agreement?

In January 2020, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ian White, made a public commitment that the University was going to develop a Civic University Agreement (CUA). This is because:

1. Strong local relationships are fundamental to our ability to deliver our strategic ambitions.
2. As an anchor institution, we have a duty to use our assets to make positive contributions to our region.

Ian's commitment to working locally was mirrored by staff and students across the University who expressed their support through an internal consultation conducted in the autumn of 2019.

We looked at several options before settling on creating a CUA. The Truly Civic report and the concept of a Civic University Agreement served as a timely, sector-wide intervention because it reflected our desire to have a statement which is: forward looking, supported with resource and action, and informed by local needs.

How are we developing our Civic University Agreement?

We are taking a project-based approach with a team of people working to manage the development and delivery of the agreement. Alongside the project team we have an Advisory Group, chaired by our Deputy Vice-Chancellor, with representatives from all parts of the University, and Working Group leads who are delivering pieces of work that act as case studies to inform our understanding of what it means to be civic.

We are using an action research approach to run the project, whereby we use live examples of civic work to develop our understanding, to identify mobilisers and barriers, and expose gaps in practice. The Working Group leads bring their live examples to the project to inform our work, and to explore any issues or challenges with the Advisory Group. Where we see gaps or opportunities, the project team are initiating pilot interventions to mobilise and learn from new civic work. Not surprisingly, when Covid struck, the University responded immediately to local needs. It was seeing this large-scale and rapid response that provided us with the concept of using an action-based approach to our CUA work.

Before the project went live, there was a period of several months where a series of papers went to the University Executive Board as we developed our understanding of how to deliver Ian's vision for the University to be a positive contributor to the region. These papers presented key pieces of work that informed our thinking (for example the results of a listening exercise we conducted in the summer of 2019), a draft Local Engagement Strategy, and through this process we continuously sought permission from the University Executive Board to keep progressing towards the development of a CUA. We continue to report to the University Executive Board.

The formal CUA project has started with some internal work – identifying our strengths in the context of our regional needs, identifying which organisations we would like partner with for the CUA, mapping existing work, and revealing gaps in current activity. The CUA team are working at the interface between internal work and external work. Internally, we are facilitating the conversation, understanding what is happening, raising issues, piloting new work; externally, we are continuing to work with partners, to listen and to bring the regional context into the internal discussions.

Who is involved and what do they bring to the work?

As we've outlined above, a lot of people are involved! We can't create change within the University without large-scale involvement. The project team could be located within in many parts of the University but for quite pragmatic reasons, our CUA Project Team are in the Marketing Department which includes the Community Engagement and Public Engagement teams.

A lot of how we are approaching this work is based on our previous culture change work where we created a positive culture of public engagement with research. That work showed that certain conditions were likely to help us move purposefully in the right direction.

- The need for leadership from the top combined with staff and student appetite and existing work
- A project structure with senior sponsorship and input from all stakeholder groups across the University
- Taking a reflective approach, based on activities, to learn with and through our colleagues
- Being responsive as new ideas emerge but ensuring the core idea doesn't get lost
- Telling clear, compelling, and honest accounts of our work
- Allowing the final result to emerge from the work, rather having a tightly defined end point

The core CUA project team have a combination of skills that they bring to the work. Having been through a change process previously, we are drawing on that experience and the skills we needed and developed then. For example:

- Leadership – This is the team holding the agenda for the University, informing themselves of excellence happening across the sector, and providing information to help the Advisory Group and others to make well-informed decisions.
- Facilitation - there are a lot of stakeholders in this work, and we facilitate interactions to ensure that everyone has their say, their contribution is heard and recognised, and that conclusions are drawn which are acceptable to everyone. We make connections across the university and beyond, inviting people to contribute.
- Creating conditions – it is impossible to predict exactly what a civic university will look like. The CUA team create the conditions for civic activity to thrive. By analysing current activity, and introducing pilot work, we can see what the enablers and barriers are. In doing this we can encourage more of the enablers whilst reducing the barriers.

- Communication – we celebrate great examples of civic activity. Raising the profile in this way allows others to see what is meant by civic activity so they can follow suit. We also tell the stories about what we are doing and why. We are open about this being an emergent process where definitions and ideas will change. We encourage people to come with us on the journey. We use blogs, case studies, and formal documentation to ensure people are up to date.

The relationship between Civic Engagement and Public Engagement with Research

We have found it important to maintain a clear distinction between Civic Engagement and Public Engagement with Research. I am acutely aware of this as my role at the university was established to lead on Public Engagement with Research. In 2019 I was invited to also lead the civic engagement strategy development.

I explain the difference as follows:
- Public Engagement with Research is about involving non-academic people, groups, and communities in the processes of research. There is mutual benefit for all involved. It enhances and enriches research. Public Engagement with Research is done by researchers.
- Civic Engagement is about the University's behaviour as an organisation rooted in its place. It is also process of mutual benefit. It can be done by all staff and students.

There will clearly be overlap: some PER will be locally relevant so could count as Civic Engagement; some Civic Engagement will be about research. But they have clear and distinct drivers.

It is important to have these distinctions for clarity of communication, so that we understand the boundaries, overlaps, and gaps, and so we can accurately monitor and report on the work. However, it fair to say that at their heart, both forms of engagement are about ensuring the University has relevance to broader society.

What have we learned so far?

Having gone through culture change work previously, the work is progressing as we would expect:

- It takes time
- It doesn't progress in a straight line
- There are lots of competing issues to navigate
- Having an existing appetite at all levels across the University is a significant mobiliser

The biggest difference between our previous change work and this current project is the need for us to work in partnership with other institutions and to understand their priorities and needs. The arrival of the new Vice-Chancellor created an opportunity for new conversations with existing and potential partners to really understand the region's needs and strengths which is allowing us to see where we can best align our activities.

Want to find out more about what we do?

We are writing about our experiences on our blog.