

HOW TO GROW THRIVING CIVIC UNIVERSITIES

KEY LEARNING FROM THE NATIONAL CIVIC
IMPACT ACCELERATOR

DECEMBER 2025



National Civic
Impact Accelerator

SUMMARY

This report draws together key learning from the National Civic Impact Accelerator programme for university leaders and policymakers and the higher education sector in England. It distils common themes that have recurred across the programme and have been affirmed through constant engagement with civic practitioners over three years of activity.

Distilling themes from the Civic Field Guide[1], which offers a comprehensive set of resources for practitioners, we identify key conditions for a thriving ecosystem of civic universities. These are necessary if civic work is to succeed, but they are not sufficient in isolation. Putting these conditions in place also requires clear leadership from government and a supportive policy environment.

These conditions are:

- **Strategic leadership and coordination** of civic activity at a senior level within each institution
- **Authenticity**, with civic activity being core to an institution's purpose, values and strategy and embedded across its activities
- **Clear articulation and prioritisation** of civic activity and intentions
- **Long-term, equitable partnerships** to translate intentions into actions
- Sustained support, with a focus on coproduction to generate a shared vision of what civic investment is expected to achieve
- A **deep understanding of local context**, informed by clarity about universities' geographies of interest and sensitive to local governance and relationships
- Awareness of the **potential of universities' own assets and infrastructures** for civic impact
- A stance of **actively identifying and mediating new opportunities** to make a difference
- A culture of **evaluating and continuously learning** from civic activities in practice

To help create these conditions, universities should build capacities within and beyond their institutions. The report details how financial, social, cultural, leadership, emotional, knowledge and physical capacities are all required and can be supported to generate sustained and successful civic practice.

It highlights too the importance of networks and communities in building a culture of civic practice and sharing learning. Peer networks of civic practitioners and the wider civic university movement can support local network-building with partner organisations and communities.

The report warns of the risks posed by current constraints facing the higher education sector and sets out central principles for future work.

[1] Civic University Network, *Civic Field Guide*.
<https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/civic-field-guide/>

About this report

The National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) is an ambitious three-year programme to gather evidence and intelligence of what works, share civic innovations, and provide universities across England with frameworks and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. The programme is funded by Research England, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It aims to drive collaboration and policy and practice innovation, involving universities, local government, business groups, and the community sector to inform place-based transformations. In the three years to December 2025, the programme has produced a wealth of resources, events, reports, podcasts and commentary, which can be accessed via civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk

The Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University (CRESR), which coordinated this report, has been working to synthesise learning from the programme in a rapidly evolving context of higher education policy and governance. The report draws on the interconnected work of all the programme partners: Sheffield Hallam University, the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), the Institute for Community Studies at the Young Foundation, City-REDI (City-Region Economic Development Institute) at the University of Birmingham, Queen Mary University of London, and the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities.

A systemic approach

In a nutshell: this report takes a system-wide approach to universities' civic activities in the UK, based on a concise definition of 'civic' but recognising the wide variety of forms this work will adopt depending on local experience and contexts.

The NCIA's work comes together in the Civic Field Guide[2], a resource to help civic practitioners and their partners explore their civic journeys. The guide was developed by the NCIA team to help practitioners make use of the wealth of material produced over the three years of the programme. This analogy of a journey enables us to think of civic practice as a landscape with seven types of terrain (see Appendix), and 14 'waypoints' or signposts to action to navigate these terrains.

[2] Civic University Network, *Civic Field Guide*.
<https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/civic-field-guide/>

The Civic Field Guide links to a set of resources, case studies, reports and toolkits to support civic practice, based on the evidence and experience accumulated through three years of intensive work. This report complements the Civic Field Guide by looking at the whole system – the landscape within which different terrains are explored – presenting conclusions for sector leaders and their key partners. It views the learning from NCIA via one key question: **under what conditions can the UK create and sustain a thriving ecosystem of civic universities?**

We map the waypoints against conditions that need to be in place (the ecosystem scale) to create thriving civic universities, and capacities that need to be developed within individual institutions (the local scale).

What we mean by civic activity

In the NCIA programme we have found it helpful to offer a working definition^[3] of civic activity as a starting point for discussion and planning. This is not intended to be exclusive, but to provide a platform on which to build shared understandings:

We understand universities' **civic activities** as a set of collaborative and inclusive relationships and practices that happen for the benefit of a place, towards a shared set of outcomes coproduced with local institutions, leaders and populations.

A civic mission is a choice by universities to recognise the value and potential of these relationships and practices and invest in them to agreed outcomes.

Civic engagement is the process of building and continuously improving locally beneficial relationships.

Civic impact describes the outcomes that flow from such relationships.

[3] Dobson, 2024, *Civic University FAQ*

The programme has shown that civic work is not a single initiative or a fixed destination. It is a journey - shaped by purpose, sustained through process, grounded in people, and rooted in place.

Our Action Learning Programme, involving more than 100 individuals from 14 university-led partnerships, brought these dynamics into focus and helped to clarify the intentions and commitments inherent in seeking to be a 'civic' university. The learning summarised here and in other resources is not just the result of an intellectual exercise but is grounded in the lived experience of civic practitioners and their local partners.

Who is this report for and why?

In a nutshell: This report is designed to help decision-makers make strategic choices to grow civic activity in their places and institutions for the long term, distilling the wide range of work from the NCIA programme.

This report provides a summary of key learning for policymakers and university leaders, focusing on how to create thriving civic universities in England. It complements the wealth of resources available from the NCIA programme at <https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/case-studies-reports-toolkits/#reports>

We produced this report because we see the need to recognise and support civic activity at a sectoral and policy level as well as in individual institutions. Our main audience is university leaders and decision-makers, including those responsible for civic engagement and activity; university boards of governors; policymakers and elected representatives; and key partners such as local authorities, chambers of commerce and community networks.

More detailed guidance and comprehensive resources for practitioners can be found in the Civic Field Guide,[4] which has been designed as a starting point for finding the right resource, case study or toolkit for a reader's specific needs.

Our purpose here is to encourage leaders to think systematically, not to introduce a set of new systems. The resources are guides for thinking and practice, to be used and interpreted according to local priorities and circumstances.

[4] Civic University Network, *Civic Field Guide*

How we wrote this report

As members of the NCIA team, staff from CRESR have been embedded throughout the programme, supporting activities ranging from developing a theory of civic change[5] to supporting action learning partnerships[6] and exploring the ‘civic capitals’[7] or resources needed to maintain civic activity in challenging financial circumstances.

As the programme drew to a close, we identified 31 evidence-based reports or resources (detailed in the bibliography) that could help us understand how to create a flourishing civic university ecosystem. These drew on the work of all the partners in the programme. We analysed this material thematically, identifying the conditions, capacities, communities (or networks) and constraints that shape both individual civic universities and the civic orientation of the wider higher education sector.

In addition, we were aware that significant tacit knowledge had been built up across the NCIA team. We therefore used an online survey to explore the learning and insights gained by team members over the course of the project, using these insights to sense-check, confirm or challenge our understanding of the documentary evidence. Further sense-checking took place via a workshop on resourcing civic activities, held at the national CiviCon conference in October 2025, which generated insights from around 35 conference participants. While these broadly supported the emphasis of the documentary analysis, they provided depth and nuance to inform the detail of this report.

The survey was open between July and September 2025 and received ten detailed responses; the documentary analysis took place in September with additional work in October to include more recent material. Eight members of the NCIA team then workshopped draft findings, fine-tuning the approach and suggesting additional material.

The programme also generated a wealth of personal reflections, case studies and interviews. While these provide a rich resource they have been excluded from this analysis as they cannot readily be generalised; they do, however, provide important additional information rooted in practical experience that readers can explore further via the Civic University Network’s website.

[5] Dobson, 2024, *Theory of Civic Change*

[6] Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*

[7] Dobson & Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*

The Civic Field Guide: charting the journey

In a nutshell: The landscape of civic activity can be viewed in terms of seven ‘terrains’ or contexts: purpose, process, people, place, partnership, practice and policy. These enable us to identify 14 sets of behaviours and actions that serve as ‘waypoints’ on the civic journey.

Terrains and waypoints

The Civic Field Guide uses the analogy of a journey to describe the landscape in which civic activity takes place and to show signposts to action. It details seven ‘terrains’ which are explained further in the Appendix. These are purpose; process; people; place; partnership; practice; and policy. The terrains set out the context in which civic work occurs, and the NCIA team identified 14 ‘waypoints’ to help practitioners navigate them, which are detailed below.

In the following sections we show how these map against the **conditions** required for thriving civic universities; the **capacities** that need to be developed; the **communities** through which civic activity happens and the **constraints** civic universities need to negotiate.

The 14 waypoints

To explore these terrains, the NCIA team identified 14 ‘waypoints’ or signposts to action. These signposts are relevant across the civic landscape but may be more relevant in some terrains than others. They are:

1. **Coordinate thematic partnerships for collective impact.** Develop issue-focused collaborations that unite diverse civic partners around shared challenges, amplifying expertise and resources for greater community benefit.
2. **Embed civic engagement as a core university mission.** Chart institutional transformation by weaving civic purpose through strategic leadership, collaborative delivery, and comprehensive accountability systems.
3. **Partner with communities through co-design and lived experience.** Forge collaborative pathways by positioning communities as equal partners, centring lived experience, and creating shared solutions for place.
4. **Measure civic impact through quantitative metrics and qualitative narratives.** Navigate evaluation complexity by integrating numerical data with community stories to capture authentic place-based transformation and meaningful outcomes.

5. **Embed hyperlocal working alongside strengthening strategic regional partnerships.** Balance neighbourhood-scale engagement with broader collaborative networks, creating connections across overlapping geographies and diverse community contexts.
6. **Universities can boost impact by sharing infrastructure – physical, social and cultural.** Open institutional assets to maximise community benefit through shared access to facilities, networks, and cultural resources for collective flourishing.
7. **Cultivate belonging and active citizenship through civic experiences.** Guide students and communities towards democratic participation by creating meaningful civic experiences that build skills, confidence, and community connection.
8. **Build authentic equitable place-based partnerships.** Cultivate collaborative relationships that honour diverse expertise, share power generously, and create sustained mutual benefit across different community contexts.
9. **Place-based working complements and enhances global and national impact.** Discover synergies between local engagement and international activities, recognising that deep community roots strengthen rather than limit broader influence.
10. **Embed civic responsibility across university practice, reflecting real local needs.** Align institutional operations with community priorities, ensuring university practices authentically model the positive changes promoted in wider society.
11. **Map and coordinate across a full range of civic themes and activities.** Develop comprehensive institutional awareness of civic engagement breadth to coordinate resources effectively and maximise collective community impact.
12. **Learn systematically from evidence and experience.** Create feedback systems that capture insights from both successes and challenges, enabling continuous improvement and more effective civic strategies.
13. **Navigate multi-level policy landscapes strategically.** Master complex policy terrain by understanding incentives across national, regional and local levels while positioning civic work for sustainable impact.
14. **Contribute evidence to policy development.** Transform research insights into policy influence by supporting evidence-based solutions that serve community priorities and enhance democratic governance.

The 14 waypoints map onto a set of conditions that need to be in place to create thriving universities, and capacities that need to be developed. Building on our previous work,[8] we have identified seven types of capacity that contribute to thriving civic universities. These are:

- Financial - covering universities' economic investments and impacts
- Social - covering network and community building
- Cultural – institutional capacity and resources
- Leadership – the prioritisation of civic work, creating legitimacy and buy-in among staff and partners
- Emotional – empathy, relational skills and passion
- Knowledge – intelligence and metrics
- Physical – the provision and shared use of assets and infrastructures

Table 1 below shows how the waypoints, conditions and capacities align.

[8] Dobson & Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*

Table 1: Aligning conditions, actions and capacities in civic universities

Conditions for thriving civic universities (if these are in place, civic activity is likely to thrive)	Waypoints (signposts to actions associated with the conditions for thriving)	Associated capacities that civic universities should build
Strategic leadership and coordination	Coordinate thematic partnerships for collective impact Navigate multi-level policy landscapes strategically	Leadership, cultural capacity
Authenticity	Cultivate belonging and active citizenship through civic experiences Build authentic equitable place-based partnerships Embed civic responsibility across university practice, reflecting local needs	Leadership, emotional capacity
Clear articulation and prioritisation	Place-based working complements and enhances global and national impact Map and coordinate across a full range of civic themes and activities	Leadership, cultural, financial
Long-term, equitable partnership	Partner with communities through co-design and lived experience Build authentic equitable place-based partnerships	Social, emotional
Sustained commitment	Embed civic engagement as a core university mission	Leadership, financial, social

Table 1: Aligning conditions, actions and capacities in civic universities (cont.)

Conditions for thriving civic universities (if these are in place, civic activity is likely to thrive)	Waypoints (signposts to actions associated with the conditions for thriving)	Associated capacities that civic universities should build
A deep understanding of local context	Embed hyperlocal working alongside strengthening strategic regional partnerships	Knowledge, social
Awareness of the potential of universities' assets	Universities can boost impact by sharing infrastructure – physical, social and cultural	Physical, financial
Actively identifying opportunities	Map and coordinate across a full range of civic themes and activities	Leadership, emotional capacity, knowledge
A culture of evaluating and continuously learning	Measure civic impact through quantitative metrics and qualitative narratives Learn systematically from evidence and experience Contribute evidence to policy development	Leadership, knowledge

We explore these **conditions and capabilities** further in the next two sections. In the remainder of the report we consider the **communities** through whom civic work takes place, and some of the **constraints** institutions need to navigate. We finish with a call for universities to adhere to **four key principles** for their future work as the civic university movement in the UK moves into its next phase.

Conditions for thriving

In a nutshell: Civic universities will thrive if they grow within a beneficial ecosystem. This consists both of a helpful policy and governance context and a set of conditions that universities themselves can generate. These are strategic leadership and coordination; authenticity; clear prioritisation; equitable partnerships; sustained support; a deep understanding of local context; sharing their assets; identifying new opportunities; and continuous learning.

Here we view the learning from the NCIA programme through the lens of one key question: **under what conditions can the UK create and sustain a thriving ecosystem of civic universities?**

By focusing on conditions, we direct attention not simply to what is happening but to how it can happen more consistently and to a higher standard for the long term. These are questions for the higher education sector as a whole and for policymakers and government, not just for individual institutions.

We also considered whether the conditions identified are **necessary** for civic universities to thrive, and whether they are **sufficient**. Reading across our reports and resources, our understanding is that the conditions work together – it's not enough to have just one of them. Different civic contexts will require different mixtures of the nine conditions. As to whether they are sufficient, this is also context-dependent because universities and places are complex and constantly changing. We have conducted international comparative research to understand the conditions for thriving civic work.[9][10] What we can say with confidence is that if all the conditions we identify are in place then civic work stands a strong chance of long-term success and impact.

The nine conditions are strategic leadership and coordination; authenticity; clear prioritisation; equitable partnerships; sustained support; a deep understanding of local context; sharing their assets; identifying new opportunities; and continuous learning. Taken together, they should be thought of as the climate needed for civic universities to prosper, enabling each institution to develop and flourish in

[9] Hassan et al., 2025, *Civic Universities in Action*

[10] OECD, 2024, *Geography of Higher Education*

response to local needs and circumstances. The credibility of documents such as Civic University Agreements rests on the assurance of partners and the public that the signatories will do what they promise.

The policy and governance climate

The role of government and policy goes much further than providing an appropriate public funding context, important though this is for higher education. The NCIA's work highlights the need for:

- Clear expectations of universities' civic responsibilities in relation to their geographies of interest (whether hyperlocal or regional in scale). In the Education and Skills White Paper[11] published on 20 October 2025, the government states (p.64) that 'we encourage higher education providers to develop civic plans that align with their strengths and priorities'. While this nudges institutions in a civic direction, it leaves a high degree of local discretion over how civic activity is interpreted and resourced. Higher education providers 'should have flexibility to define their civic contribution in ways that reflect their unique institutional role in partnership with stakeholders', the white paper argues. The momentum, energy and support for civic activity must therefore be generated from **within the sector** in response to the government's recognition of its importance, and be **place-responsive** – rooted in the characteristics, opportunities, assets and needs of each place.[12]
- Alongside this expectation there needs to be clear communication of the public benefits that can be expected to arise from civic engagement and action, and their relevance to local communities (especially those that are currently least connected to higher education institutions). This is important in countering narratives of elitism that in an international context have been used to justify increasing political control of academic institutions. Some NCIA reports illustrate that effective approaches to civic work are locally grounded and responsive to specific societal needs.[13] This highlights the importance of demonstrating civic value in ways that are contextually relevant to local communities.
- Hence, there is a need for a supportive policy environment, detailing more precisely how the sector's funding mechanisms will support inclusive civic visions shared by government, institutions and local partners, with clarity about how the higher education regulatory and quality frameworks can reinforce civic objectives.

[11] HM Government, 2025, *Post-16 Education and Skills*

[12] This aligns with the government's Pride in Place Strategy:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pride-in-place-strategy>

[13] Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*; and Hassan et al., 2025, *Civic Universities in Action*

- Both vision and policy need to be underpinned by an evidence base that can be aggregated nationally as well as being applied locally, using common quantitative and qualitative metrics to show the difference universities are making in their places.

Among the NCIA resources and reports of interest at a policy level, we would highlight the Civic Impact Framework and Theory of Civic Change; the briefings produced by NCIA's policy team; the *Civic Capitals at Risk* report; the final report of the NCIA's Action Learning Programme; the *Purpose through Data* report; and the *Civic Universities in Action* report.[14]

The institutional climate

Across the NCIA's work and distilling key points from the Civic Field Guide (see table 1), we have identified nine conditions that together are needed for thriving civic universities. These are required within any institution that takes its civic role and mission seriously. While individual institutions' approaches will vary, the absence of any of these conditions is likely to significantly limit a university's civic work.

First, there must be **strategic leadership and coordination** at a senior level within each institution. This demands hands-on engagement and relationship-building as well as appropriate rhetoric and messaging, which can be dismissed as 'civic-washing' if not accompanied by visible and sustained action. Universities' partners need to be assured that an institution's civic commitments will not be jettisoned by a new vice-chancellor or chair of governors if they are no longer flavour of the month. Senior leaders must be articulate and confident in 'telling and selling the story' of their organisation's civic mission and impacts.[15]

Second, civic activity must be **authentic**. Authenticity can be difficult to evidence and can appear subjective, but its opposite can be painfully obvious – activities that are transactional, that do not arise from genuine engagement with local people or a university's own staff, and where publicity for the institution appears more important than long-term impact. Authentic civic activity is core to an institution's purpose, values and strategy and embedded across its activities, supported by trusting relationships with key partners.[16]

Civic activity and intentions must also be **clearly articulated and prioritised**. Universities cannot be all things to all people; they need to agree priorities and

[14] Dobson, 2021, *A Framework for Civic Impact*; Dobson, 2024, *Theory of Civic Change*; Dobson & Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*; Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*; Briefings produced by NCIA policy team; Mathers and Andlay, 2025, *Purpose Through Data*; and Hassan et al., 2025, *Civic Universities in Action*
[15,16] Owolade et al., 2024, *Becoming Civic*; Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*; and Dobson & Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*

communicate them appropriately in language that partners and the public can understand. This involves not only saying what they are doing, but why they are doing it and their reasons for choosing their focus and balance of activities. The Civic Impact Framework, *Theory of Civic Change* and emerging Civic Outcomes Framework can help university leaders decide how they are most able to support and benefit their communities.[17]

Long-term, equitable partnerships are necessary to translate civic intentions into actions. Much of NCIA's work has highlighted the need for equitable partnerships and how these can be supported and sustained, indicating that this is an area where many institutions have much to learn. Commitment over years rather than months, transparency and honesty, and relationship-building both bilaterally and through networks are signs of progress in this area.[18]

Sustained support, unsurprisingly, is an essential condition for success. But this is not the same as simply identifying a funding pot or key project. The conditions outlined above are also conditions for effective investment. Institutions must pay attention not just to what they invest – the money, time and staff to do the job – but also to how they do it.[19] This demands a focus on coproduction of civic activity to generate a shared vision of what the investment is expected to achieve, and commitment to long-term support and learning. To do this, permanent roles and skilled teams are required. Cardiff University's Community Gateway project in Grangetown, for example, has involved a ten-year partnership between the university and local communities.[20] Seed funding and pilot projects have an important role to play in jump-starting civic activities, but such initiatives need to be followed up to embed learning and develop skills.

The sixth condition is a **deep understanding of the local context**. This often exists in a fragmentary and disconnected form, with limited coordination of local knowledge or application of this knowledge to local initiatives. Universities need to be clear about their geographies of interest, sensitive to local governance infrastructures and relationships and committed to inclusivity among local

[17] Dobson & Ferrari, 2021, *A Framework for Civic Impact*; Dobson, 2024, *Theory of Civic Change*; Adams, forthcoming, *Civic Outcomes Framework*

[18] Owolade et al., 2024, *Becoming Civic*; Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*; Dobson & Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*; Gifford et al., 2025, *Equitable Partnerships Toolkit*; and Institute for Community Studies, n.d., *Key Challenges for Partnerships*

[19] Owolade et al., 2024, *Becoming Civic*; Dobson & Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*

[20] Cardiff University Community Gateway
<https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/community/our-local-community-projects/community-gateway>

partners and stakeholders, aligning their work with partners' agendas.[21] Tools such as the Place Navigator can help universities to check whether important partners have been included in shaping their civic objectives and practice, while the '12 pillars of economic impact' framework[22] can be used to check the relevance of a university's learning and teaching to local markets and skills requirements.

As well as understanding their locality, universities need to know the **potential of their own assets and infrastructures** for civic impact – their buildings, green spaces and facilities such as libraries; the skills and knowledge of their staff across academic faculties and professional services; and the time, passion and concerns of their students. NCIA has produced evidence summaries on several examples, including the health and wellbeing benefits of green spaces and the potential of student engagement.[23]

In addition to taking a strategic approach, universities should actively **identify and mediate new opportunities**. Universities and localities exist in a dynamic environment in which global and national challenges manifest themselves in different and constantly changing ways. It can often be difficult for a large organisation to be both strategic and responsive. A culture of low control and high accountability can help to empower staff and ensure that local partners do not get bogged down in institutional systems and bureaucracies. This requires action from institutional leaders to legitimise and recognise the value of civic action and an assurance among partners that universities' initiatives will be relevant to local needs and concerns.[24]

Finally, universities need to **evaluate and continuously learn** from their civic activities. There is limited evidence at present that this happens. A study of universities' economic impact assessments found that most were commissioned mainly for promotional purposes and the work was outsourced to a familiar cluster of private consultants.[25] To maintain credibility with partners, universities must be willing to report honestly on their achievements and challenges and learn from apparent failures as well as successes. They need to be responsive and adaptable during projects, learning as they go, as evidenced through NCIA's Innovation Funding initiative.[26] They could adopt transferable learning, for example, from what has already been achieved on race and gender

[21] Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*; Adams et al., 2025, *Summary of Key Findings across Six Innovative Civic Projects*; NCCPE, n.d., *The Place Navigator*

[22] Pugh et al., 2024, *Demonstrating the Economic Impacts of Civic Universities*

[23] Carregha et al., n.d., *Healthy Universities, People and Places*; and Owens-Crossman, 2025, *Civic Universities and Their Neighbours*

[24] Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*; Dobson & Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*; Carregha and Themini-mulle, 2025, *Civic Universities and Climate Education*

[25] Pugh et al., 2024, *Demonstrating the Economic Impacts of Civic Universities*

[26] Adams et al., 2025, *Summary of Key Findings across Six Innovative Civic Projects*

equality and where such initiatives have fallen short of aspirations.[27] Such learning demands the use of appropriate and relevant metrics and the ability to synthesise and interpret quantitative and qualitative data that may be messy or inconsistent.[28]

Civic capacities

In a nutshell: Universities can take more effective civic action with their partners if they support and build relevant capacities within their organisations and people. These capacities involve financial, social, cultural, leadership, emotional, and knowledge skills and capabilities, as well as the ability to use physical assets and infrastructures for public benefits.

As well as being dependent on the climate they inhabit, civic universities can draw on various capacities that enable them to fulfil their civic objectives. In our previous report, *Civic Capitals at Risk*, [29] we referred to these as ‘civic capitals’.

Universities can develop and draw on these resources in different ways. While they may only be able to influence the sectoral and policy context indirectly, their ability to grow and deploy civic capacities is driven by and reflects the scale and scope of each institution’s civic vision and action. A thriving civic university will develop and build on these, continuously increasing its ability to co-produce local change. Our review of the NCIA programme highlighted the importance of seven kinds of capacity, which we outline below.[30] These are all complementary: each supports and is likely to overlap with some or most of the others. These are all complementary: each supports and is likely to overlap with some or most of the others.

Financial capacity

Financial capacity refers to the monetary resources that underpin civic activity such as grants and budgets. But it also covers the economic effects that universities have within their places and communities. The capacity within universities, providing the resources for teams and roles, can contribute to wealth-building within communities.

[27] Owolade, 2023, *Developing the Civic University Mission*

[28] Dobson, 2021, *A Framework for Civic Impact*; Owolade, 2023, *Developing the Civic University Mission*; Pugh et al., 2024, *Demonstrating the Economic Impacts of Civic Universities*; Mathers and Andlay, 2025, *Purpose Through Data*; and OECD, 2024, *Geography of Higher Education*

[29] Dobson & Owolade, 2025; *Civic Capitals at Risk*

[30] We have changed some of the terms used in *Civic Capitals at Risk* to align with the wider overview presented here.

Examples of financial capacity highlighted through the NCIA programme include economic partnerships with local stakeholders; scientific and technical innovation; and the economic impacts of universities' direct and indirect spending, both through procurement and through the recirculation of staff salaries within local economies.[31] They also include direct investments in place-based regeneration,[32] entrepreneurial education,[33] financial support for community partners[34] and research opportunities such as those funded through UK Research and Innovation.

The economic impacts of universities are not just limited to their financial capacity. The seven civic capacities all underpin each other. While social, cultural, leadership, emotional, knowledge and physical capacities are harder to quantify and monetise, they all enable civic work. Building the financial capacity of a civic university cannot be done effectively without building the other capacities.

Social capacity

Social capacity describes the collective and personal agency that arises from belonging to groups and networks. Universities build social capacity both within their organisations through shared purposes and activities, and externally by supporting partnerships and relationship-building.

Students are particularly important in building social networks and linkages, taking part in voluntary activities that help local networks and agencies. Both home and international students contribute to this civic meshwork.[35] More widely, the voluntary work of staff and students, their support for community organising initiatives, and their collaborations and partnerships build relationships that generate social capacity at a local level. Research projects, too, can develop lasting partnerships.[36] The NCIA's Action Learning Programme underlined the importance of relational and equitable practices, the development of collaborative skills, and universities' ability to convene partners around funding opportunities. [37] Both the Action Learning Programme and the distribution of innovation funding demonstrated the importance of peer learning, developing social capacity between university-led partnerships as well as within individual institutions.[38]

[31] Hassan et al., 2024, *Civic Universities and Economic Impact*; and Pugh et al., 2024, *Demonstrating the Economic Impacts of Civic Universities*

[32] Redmond & Coburn, n.d., *Universities and Economic Placemaking*

[33] OECD, 2024, *Geography of Higher Education*

[34] Institute for Community Studies, n.d., *Key Challenges for Community-University Partnerships*

[35] Owolade et al., 2024, *Becoming Civic*; Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*; Owens-Crossman, 2025, *Civic Universities and Their Neighbours*; and City-REDI, n.d., *International Students Literature Review*

[36] Owens-Crossman, 2025, *Civic Universities and Their Neighbours*

[37] Owolade et al., 2024, *Becoming Civic*; and Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*

[38] Adams et al., 2025, *Summary of Key Findings across Six Innovative Civic Projects*

Cultural capacity

Cultural capacity refers to the resources embodied within institutions or networks that support the culture of an organisation. Within a university, it includes the system of qualifications and academic recognition, curricula and processes, governance mechanisms and awards. Within the field of universities' civic activities, it can include Civic University Agreements or other protocols involving external partners; statements of intent (for example, on a university website), or the existence of civic or public engagement teams. More broadly, policies on widening participation or initiatives to engage with local communities (for example, opening university libraries to members of the public) and recognised forms of knowledge exchange build cultural capacity.

The resources generated through the Civic University Network and NCIA can seed cultural capacity. So too do histories and experiences of partnership and engagement – the embedded institutional understandings of how things can be done and who needs to be at the table. Engaged scholarship, the widening participation agenda, and conceptual frameworks such as Donella Meadows' leverage points on system change generate cultural capacity.[39] However, it is also important to ask who is not included in such systems and resources and not simply to build uncritically on existing work.[40]

Infrastructures within universities, such as estates and professional services teams, can also generate cultural capacity, especially if accompanied by recognition and reward systems that value and support civic engagement. More broadly, leadership and governance structures and experience of using creative arts in engagement build the cultural capacity of an institution.

Leadership

Leadership is often intangible, referring to behaviours and attitudes as much as positions and responsibilities. It covers issues such as legitimacy and access to power and the idea of 'buy-in' as well as formal leadership roles and structures. It may mean having the support of the vice-chancellor or be shown in the seniority of the posts responsible for civic engagement. It can be generated when decision-makers back their rhetoric on civic engagement with action, following up their promises in Civic University Agreements and holding themselves to account.

Universities can build leadership capacity if they dedicate senior staff to partnership-building and if university executives show up to meetings with their counterparts in local government or other anchor institutions; less visibly, they do so if they create a culture in which academics are encouraged in their engaged scholarship and if the staff involved in civic teams are given permanent employment contracts. At a local level, universities can demonstrate leadership

[39] Owolade, 2023, *Developing the Civic University Mission*

[40] Gifford et al., 2025, *Equitable Partnerships Toolkit*

by acting as independent experts and trusted brokers without the baggage of political alignment. National and local government can build leadership through supportive policy frameworks and connections.

Across the NCIA's work, the importance of case studies and storytelling in building legitimacy and buy-in was frequently emphasised.[41] So too was the importance of time (both in terms of individual time allocations and in terms of the persistence of a university's commitment to its civic goals). Investing in people, with named civic roles and clear civic objectives, was seen as an indication that universities were taking the civic agenda seriously.[42] Reciprocal listening and learning, and the recognition of the distinctive work of 'connectors' who build bridges with local partners, all generate and reinforce leadership capacity. The Innovation Funding programme demonstrated the importance of internal advocacy in building support for civic projects.[43]

Emotional capacity

Civic work is highly dependent on the personal commitment and passion of its practitioners, as well as their relational skills.[44] These individuals do not take up their jobs because they are part of a professional career structure or because they have high status; in some cases, roles have been created to recognise the pre-existing commitment and labour of the postholders. Such 'connectors' often occupy hybrid roles that do not easily fit within existing professional or academic reward structures. Such positions can place high demands on those who occupy them, in that there are few limits to the amount of work that can be done; they also demand highly-tuned negotiation skills, listening and empathy. Civic practitioners often have to manage collaborations between individuals and organisations that do not share the same values of cooperation and coproduction, as well as competing personal and departmental agendas within their own universities.

These are personal resources or capacities that practitioners bring to their work, and while they can be enhanced through training and professional development they are primarily to do with individuals' qualities and motivation. However, undertaking this work can also build emotional capacity through the positive feedback of commitment and engagement from others, both within higher education institutions and externally. There are currently few ways of recognising the value this emotional labour presents; often it is only noticed when it stops (for example, through burnout or exhaustion).

[41] Owolade et al., 2024, *Becoming Civic*; Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*

[42] Dobson and Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*

[43] Adams et al., 2025, *Summary of Key Findings across Six Innovative Civic Projects*

[44] Dobson and Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*; Mathers and Andlay, 2025, *Purpose Through Data*

Emotional capacity is often expressed through a strong ethical commitment to civic engagement and in patient, reflective, relational and equitable practices.[45] It can be seen in demonstrations of empathy, solidarity and peer support – highlighted especially in the work of the Action Learning Programme – and in the ways in which practitioners tell stories of their work that are grounded in lived experience as well as theory. Enthusiasm and engagement, whether from university staff or their partners, reveal emotional capacity at work.

The Civic Capability Framework developed by NCCPE provides an important step toward recognising and supporting emotional capacity.[46] Highlighting the central role of ‘connectors’, the framework informs training and professional development for these civic practitioners, helping them bridge boundaries, overcome project silos, and form collaborative partnerships that deliver civic outcomes.

Knowledge capacity

The skills and learning embedded within an institution contribute not only to economic impacts, but to the whole gamut of a university’s impacts within its local society (as framed, for example, in the Civic Impact Framework).[47] This knowledge capacity can include understanding how to use appropriate and accurate metrics and analysis to underpin decision-making and assess impacts.[48] It can include the learning encapsulated in REF, TEF and KEF returns, but also awareness of the significance and impacts of global developments and the application of this knowledge to processes such as climate change mitigation, adaptation and transition[49] or responses to health and wellbeing challenges.[50] At regional and local levels, it includes knowledge of labour markets and skills needs, and the tools and frameworks that can help decision-makers respond to them.[51] Evaluation processes and data sharing protocols build the capacity to use knowledge to support civic work. So do the forms of knowledge and understanding that are embedded in local communities but do not always have the sanction of recognition in policy or academic practice. The value of community knowledge was highlighted in several strands of the NCIA’s work, including the Action Learning Programme and the equitable partnerships toolkit.[52]

[45] Owolade et al., 2024, *Becoming Civic*; Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*; and Gifford et al., 2025, *Equitable Partnerships Toolkit*

[46] Adams et al., 2025, *Civic Capability Framework*

[47] Dobson & Ferrari, 2021, *A framework for civic impact*

[48] Mathers and Andlay, 2025, *Purpose Through Data*; NCIA, n.d., *Business Case: Financial and Managerial Cases*, and NCIA, n.d., *Business Case: Strategic and Economic Cases*

[49] Carregha & Coburn, n.d., *Shaping Sustainable Universities*

[50] Carregha et al., n.d., *Healthy Universities, People and Places*

[51] Pugh et al., 2024, *Demonstrating the Economic Impacts of Civic Universities*

[52] Owolade et al., 2024, *Becoming Civic*; Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*; and Gifford et al., 2025, *Equitable Partnerships Toolkit*;

Physical capacity

Physical capacity refers to the use of a university's material assets: buildings, meeting spaces, libraries, cultural assets such as museums or galleries, workspaces, and the digital infrastructure that supports them. It also covers open space owned, designed or managed by universities, including quasi-public spaces, greens, botanical gardens and outdoor performance spaces, where significant potential for community benefits could be unlocked.[53]

Physical capacity is usually pre-existing and does not normally have to be acquired or built to serve civic purposes (although there are examples of universities taking over redundant local assets to support place-based regeneration, such as the University of Gloucestershire's £75m purchase of a former city centre Debenhams store to create a new campus and a joint health and wellbeing facility with the local NHS[54]). Usually the issue is one of mobilising existing assets for community benefit. This requires staff with the skills and imagination to see the potential of the university's facilities, and a willingness to flex existing ways of working to maximise public benefits. NCIA's study on the wellbeing potential of university-owned green spaces provides a good example of how this could be done.[55]

Civic Communities

In a nutshell: Civic practice is social, not just institutional or individual. It works through networks and communities, from the wider civic university movement to local partnerships, and depends on behaviours that are equitable and mutually supportive.

The idea of civic capacities does not capture the whole story. It can foreground the individual or the institution, rather than the potential generated when people get together to share and innovate. **Civic practitioners require peer networks and reflective learning environments to navigate complexities, sustain momentum and strengthen the strategic contribution of their work.**[56] Successful civic universities depend not only on individuals but also on dynamic communities and networks of people, both inside and outside the institution.

Crucially, these networks are sustained when each individual within them is able and empowered to work to the best of their abilities. The success of networks has both bottom-up and top-down elements: they depend on the energy and capacity of their individual members, but also on the legitimacy and support offered by the organisations and groups within which those individuals operate -

[53] Layton and Mathers, 2025, *Civic Universities and Green Spaces*

[54] See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gl702dxkxo>

[55] Layton and Mathers, 2025, *Civic Universities and Green Spaces*

[56] Adams et al., 2025, *Establishing Civic*

universities, other anchor institutions such as healthcare organisations and local authorities, businesses or community networks.

Within a locality, partnerships need to be multi-dimensional to reflect the complexity and variety of local life, and equitable to respond to the varying capacities and unequal opportunities experienced by different groups.[57] Network building needs to generate social capital within a university as well as externally, supporting multi-talented civic teams and building future civic leaders. This takes time and requires a focus on connections and interdependences rather than vertically segmented working within departments or academic faculties.

The principles outlined in NCIA's Equitable Partnerships Toolkit[58] are important here, establishing ground rules for reflexive and mutually supportive action and learning both among peer networks and within formal partnerships. These are:

1. take time
2. share motivations and expectations
3. recognise power imbalances
4. decide clear aims, outcomes and outputs
5. share resource needs
6. be honest and transparent
7. agree whether and how participants are recompensed
8. agree ways of communicating
9. respect each other's contributions and time
10. recognise when things don't go to plan and take action

Where relationships between members of a network are unequal, particular attention should be paid to creating spaces for less-heard voices. The Community Advisory Panel set up to inform the CiviCon25 conference recommended 'contracts of care' – 'ring-fenced pledges that establish clear expectations and consequences for university-community partnerships, ensuring sustainable and equitable collaboration from the outset'.[59]

Our review of NCIA's work found the following types of communities are important in maintaining and growing thriving civic universities:

[57] Gifford et al., 2025, *Equitable Partnerships Toolkit*

[58] Gifford et al., 2025, *Equitable Partnerships Toolkit*

[59] Institute for Community Studies and National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (n.d.), *Recommendations from Community Advisory Panel* (unpublished)

- **peer groups of civic practitioners** or ‘connected connectors’ across institutions who can bridge different types of organisations and contexts and across academic and professional services, as demonstrated through the Action Learning Programme and CiviCon conference; engaged academics and professional staff, and academic networks (for example, the Royal Geographical Society hosted a ‘civic geographies’ strand at its 2025 annual conference and the Regional Studies Association has a track record of engagement with universities’ civic mission)
- the national and international **civic university movement**, building networks of civic leaders in universities within and across different jurisdictions. Within the UK, the continuity of the Civic University Network is likely to be significant in embedding the learning generated through NCIA and the 2019 Civic University Commission
- other **anchor institutions** including local government and further education; devolution of power from central to local government creates significant opportunities for universities to reaffirm and develop their civic roles
- **community networks** (councils for voluntary service or other voluntary and community sector umbrella groups, community organising bodies such as Citizens UK) and place-based regeneration or community development networks
- **professional and practitioner networks** outside higher education, such as the Health Anchors Learning Network, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, and similar forums
- **business networks** such as Chambers of Commerce and small business associations, as well as more informal sector or interest-based business networks (such as digital technology meetups)
- **policy networks** at local and government level
- **students and student unions**, especially those with strong engagement with international students and migrant communities
- **schools and further education colleges** and other educational networks
- **international organisations** promoting civic engagement that can share learning from global contexts

Constraints

In a nutshell: Current financial difficulties in higher education pose significant risks to the future of civic work. To play their civic roles effectively, universities need to navigate challenges of financial management, leadership, long-term planning, staff turnover, fragmented data, assumptions about local capacity and the need for vision and imagination.

While many of the constraints affecting civic universities are now well known, it would be a mistake not to acknowledge them here. Civic universities operate within financial and political realities at both a national and a sectoral scale, often with direct and detrimental effects on their ability to serve their place-based communities.

Evidence presented by the NCIA team to the House of Commons Education Select Committee in October 2025 highlighted the impact of universities' current financial challenges. Universities now lose £1.7bn annually on teaching UK students and £6.2bn on research activities;^[60] and 72% of institutions are projected to be in deficit by 2025-26.^[61] The loss of university civic capacity threatens community partnerships, local economic development, and social infrastructure.

Civic Capitals at Risk identified four key risks to the future of civic activity:

- the loss of focus and coordination, generating uncertainty among local stakeholders about the reliability of universities as partners
- a loss of institutional memory, leading to the need to repeatedly reconstruct local relationships
- the loss of trust and reduced credibility of universities as civic partners
- a loss of relevance to local communities and strategic partners

In our analysis of NCIA outputs, supported by the reflections of team members, we identified the following constraints as significant factors:

Finance is obviously central, both at a national level in terms of resourcing for the higher education sector, but also at an institutional level because of increased competition for home and international students and the knock-on costs of capital investments. The financial challenges have been compounded by successive government policies which have framed universities' civic role mainly in terms of economic growth; failed to create sustainable funding streams for civic engagement; and prioritised competition between universities over collaboration.

The lack of **strategic ambition**, leadership and planning at an institutional level has been a significant brake on civic activity. In some cases this has been amplified by the lack of consensus even within an institution on what the civic mission entails; some universities remain stuck in a 'paralysis of definition'.^[62]

[60] Office for Students (2024), Annual TRAC 2023-24.

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/zntnyj2n/annual-trac-2023-24.pdf>

[61] Office for Students (2024), Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England: November 2024 update, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/financial-sustainability-of-higher-education-providers-in-england-november-2024-update/>

[62] Owolade et al., 2024, *Becoming Civic*

The **lack of long-term planning** and failure to ensure the sustainability and legacy of local partnerships has been identified throughout the NCIA programme as a particular frustration for universities' local partners. Our work on civic capitals, the theory of civic change, the experiences of participants in the Action Learning Programme and our work on equitable partnerships have all reinforced the need to make long-term commitments and for universities to be seen to deliver on their promises in Civic University Agreements and comparable documents.

Staff turnover, the use of short-term contracts for staff with civic roles, and the consequent churn of knowledge and connections have been noted on many occasions as challenges both to the efficacy and to the credibility of universities' civic work. Despite growing awareness of the value of universities' links with their communities, this problem is increasing as universities' financial difficulties mount. In recent years some universities have cut whole teams of staff dedicated to civic engagement, while others have demanded that civic activity becomes self-funded. In other cases repeated restructuring exercises have blurred lines of accountability and distracted staff from their civic roles.[63]

Fragmented, siloed or inappropriate data remains a significant barrier to showing the value and impact of civic activities.[64] Civic practitioners may be asked to demonstrate financial return rather than evidence of relationship-building. Universities are often reluctant to value the power of stories and qualitative data alongside monetary measures of impact.

Universities remain prone to making **assumptions** about local communities' capacity and willingness to engage, failing to adopt an asset-based approach that values the contributions and knowledge of local people[65] or to understand the full range of students' motivations for learning beyond the metrics of postgraduate employment.[66] Such disconnects can reinforce narratives of elitism and irrelevance.

Finally, in troubled financial times universities are often also constrained by a **lack of vision and imagination**. Rather than expanding local partnerships and seeking to address local and global challenges together, they can retreat into business as usual, becoming isolated from local communities and resorting to 'civic-washing' rather than relationship building.

These constraints are not insurmountable, but need to be recognised as issues that most, if not all, universities are likely to face in one form or another. However, higher education is far from being the first sector to face financial

[63] Dobson and Owolade, 2025, *Civic Capitals at Risk*

[64] Mathers and Andlay, 2025, *Purpose Through Data*

[65] Owens-Crossman, 2025, *Civic Universities and Their Neighbours*

[66] Redmond & Themiminulle, 2025, *Civic Universities and Regional Skills Gaps*

challenges. Local government, the voluntary sector and the NHS have all had to cope with equally testing circumstances over many years. As civic universities prepare for a future that is likely to be more uncertain and demanding, they can look to some of their local partners for learning on how to handle challenging times. Such humility may move them further along the road to genuine coproduction with local communities.

Conclusion

While the collected outputs from NCIA contain a host of recommendations for specific aspects of universities' civic activities and engagement, the evidence submitted to the education select committee contained four simple principles to be followed if civic activity is to thrive. These are:

- Universities working **with** communities, not **for** them
- Co-designed approaches that centre lived experience
- Long-term relationship building, not short-term project delivery
- Recognition that universities are important actors in place, but not necessarily the most important.

The Community Advisory Panel guiding the CiviCon conference highlighted the need for long-term shifts in the relationships between universities and their partners. These included ring-fenced pledges or 'contracts of care' to establish clear expectations for university-community partnerships; a shift in funding models to enable community organisations to act as lead partners on collaborations; resourcing community partners to continue civic work after the conclusion of individual projects; and increased transparency and opportunity to foreground community voices.

These recommendations speak to the need for a long-term reinvigoration of universities' civic mission, rather than just a continuation of existing practice. The continuity of the Civic University Network through a new consortium from 2026 offers an opportunity to keep the resources and learning of recent years at the forefront of policymakers' and university leaders' decisions.

As the NCIA programme concludes, the scale of both the risks and the potential rewards for society are clear, backed by a solid evidence base and the experiential learning of the people most closely engaged in civic practice. This evidence shows the contribution that universities do and can make within their local places, at a time when the pressure for higher education to demonstrate its value to all communities and sections of society – not just the highly educated – is constantly increasing. A failure to build those connections puts universities themselves at risk, as has already been demonstrated in international contexts.

University leaders' and policymakers' choices over the next few years will determine the future of civic universities, and they now have a wealth of resources to draw on to make choices that are both informed and attentive to local needs.

Appendix: the seven terrains of the Civic Field Guide

Purpose

Purpose defines the destination - what kind of institution you want to be.

Civic universities are motivated by a commitment to public good, but this is not easy work. Purpose must be clearly articulated, embedded in strategy, and aligned with institutional values. It must be felt and lived as a shared ethos that legitimises civic work and guides decision-making.

Transformational civic universities position civic engagement as a fundamental, permanent mission that permeates all institutional activities rather than treating it as optional. This comprehensive embedding requires strategic leadership that systematically weaves civic purpose throughout teaching, research, knowledge exchange, professional services, and estates management. Universities achieve greater overall impact by recognising that intensive place-based community engagement naturally complements and enhances their global and national activities.

Process

Process outlines the route, and the systems and strategies needed to follow it.

Civic work often emerges in fragmented ways, driven by passionate individuals rather than embedded systems. To be sustainable, it must be organised intentionally — woven into the governance, planning, and operational fabric of the institution. This means aligning evaluation, investment, and infrastructure with civic goals.

Universities develop effective civic coordination by systematically mapping and understanding the complete range of civic themes and activities occurring across their institution, enabling strategic coordination of resources and efforts for maximum collective community impact. This comprehensive approach involves documenting civic engagement spanning all domains — from health and wellbeing through to economic development, environmental sustainability, arts and culture and more[67] — ensuring no important civic work remains isolated or under-supported, identifying synergies and avoiding duplication.

[67] Dobson & Ferrari, 2021, *A Framework for Civic Impact*

Continuous civic improvement requires universities to establish systematic learning approaches that capture valuable insights from direct experiences alongside broader external evidence, enabling ongoing refinement and enhancement of civic strategies and community impact.

People

Civic work is people-centred and relational, shaped and sustained by those who share the civic journey.

Civic work relies on care, compassion, and commitment to relationships — not just at the strategic level, but in everyday acts of kindness, listening, and solidarity. Civic professionals, students, and community partners bring emotional labour, lived experience, and deep local knowledge. Their contributions are often undervalued, precariously supported, or invisible in formal structures.

Building trust takes time, and maintaining it requires consistency, humility, and care. Civic success depends on people — and people need to be recognised, supported, and valued if the journey is to continue. Universities forge authentic civic impact by positioning communities as equal partners throughout the entire process of identifying needs, designing solutions, and implementing sustainable change. This people-centred approach explicitly recognises lived experience as genuine expertise, acknowledging that individuals who navigate challenges daily possess invaluable insights essential for developing effective, contextually appropriate responses.

Place

Place is the physical context in which universities work.

Civic universities recognise that their identity is shaped by their location. Place is a dynamic context that demands attention, responsiveness, and care. Authentic civic engagement begins with committed, place-responsive work that addresses the real needs and assets of local communities where universities are embedded.

Successful place-based working requires universities to develop comprehensive local intelligence, using tools and frameworks that help navigate complex local infrastructure while building sustained partnerships with key civic organisations. Civic universities are not confined by place — they connect local needs to national and global knowledge networks, and they bring reflective insight to local challenges. But they are accountable to the places that host them.

Partnership

Civic work needs to be founded on mutual agreements on shared priorities.

Universities maximise their civic impact by actively developing and participating in thematic partnerships that unite diverse civic actors around specific shared

challenges such as climate change, public health, economic development, or social justice. Universities contribute their distinctive research capabilities while learning from the practical knowledge of civic partners.

Authentic partnership requires collaborative relationships built on genuine recognition of diverse forms of expertise, power-sharing, and sustained commitment to mutual benefit. This approach transcends traditional institutional hierarchies by positioning universities as important but not dominant players within local collaborative ecosystems, respecting and amplifying community leadership through partnership structures that share decision-making power equitably.

Practice

Practical civic action leads to impact.

Universities demonstrate civic credibility by systematically aligning institutional operations with community priorities, ensuring university practices model the positive changes they wish to see in wider society. This comprehensive alignment requires examining all university operations – including procurement policies, employment practices, student services, campus sustainability initiatives, and estates management – to ensure coherence with community priorities and social values.

Comprehensive civic practice requires sophisticated measurement frameworks that integrate quantitative metrics with qualitative narratives. This dual approach acknowledges that meaningful civic transformation manifests through numerical progress and rich narratives that illustrate how civic initiatives affect real people's lives.

Policy

This terrain covers the policy and funding mechanisms that provide incentives or disincentives for civic action.

Strategic civic engagement requires universities to navigate complex multi-level policy landscapes, understanding how policy frameworks at different scales create opportunities and constraints for effective civic action. Universities demonstrate authentic civic leadership by actively contributing to evidence-based policy development, systematically translating their research capabilities and institutional knowledge into practical policy insights that serve community priorities and enhance democratic governance.

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