



A theory of civic change: how universities can work for the good of their places

Author:

Julian Dobson

Senior Research Fellow

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University

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About the Author

Julian Dobson is a Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. While he is the main contact point on this report, we would like to acknowledge the contributions of colleagues across the NCIA team at City-REDI, the Institute for Community Studies, the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, and Sheffield Hallam University, without whose input it would not have been possible.

About NCIA

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 with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. The programme, partly funded by Research England, will create collaboration and policy and practice innovation involving universities, local government and business groups, and the community sector to drive place-based transformations.

About CRESR

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) is one of the UK's leading policy research centres. It seeks to understand the impact of social and economic disadvantage on places and people.

Contact details

Address: Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR), Sheffield Hallam University, Olympic Legacy Park, 2 Old Hall Road, Sheffield, S9 3TU.

Phone: 0114 225 3073. E-mail: cresr@shu.ac.uk. X: [@CRESR_SHU](https://twitter.com/CRESR_SHU)





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Summary

This is a paper about the work of universities in the places where they are based.¹ There are many understandings of the word 'civic', and many contexts in which it is used, and this document does not try to cover them all. It is specifically about the idea of the 'civic university' and what it means in practice. It has been produced by the team working on the National Civic Impact Accelerator, a programme funded by Research England to encourage universities in their civic activities.

The idea of the civic university has been around for a long time. Most recently, it has been given new life through the work of Civic University Commission.² But there has been no agreed definition of what is really meant by the civic university. And if we don't have a shared understanding of a term, it's hard to know whether the action it relates to is really happening or not.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the terms we are using and to show why we believe 'civic' activities by universities can lead to better outcomes for the places where universities are located. While there are many partners and groups who could and should be involved in shaping this civic work, our focus here is on the work of the university. So the main audience we are addressing is the people who lead universities and work within them. We also want to encourage those who work in partnership with universities to engage with them on equitable terms, so we are trying to use clear and accessible language to explain what we mean.

¹ This paper has been prepared by Dr Julian Dobson on behalf of the National Civic Impact Accelerator project.

² For more detailed information, see the [final report of the Civic University Commission](#)



1. Some civic FAQs

What do we mean by 'civic'?

We are aware that 'civic' needs defining. 'Civic' is a term that can be articulated and understood in different ways, depending on who is using it and in which context. For the purposes of National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) programme we are focused on the difference universities can make in their localities while recognising that universities are not the only, or the most important, organisations in any place.

Universities need to be encouraged and equipped to work more closely with their communities and local partners. Recent work by the Civic University Commission and the Civic University Network shows how this can happen in a wide range of ways.

There are many ways of thinking about universities' civic activities and mission. We have developed the following definitions to describe civic work:

- 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.

Where does civic work happen?

Each university has its own geography, and many have global as well as local networks. We see civic activities as mainly taking place in the locations where a university is physically based, but this will look different in different places.





Isn't every university civic?

No. 'Civic' universities are those that actively seek to benefit their local places and populations and see this as central to their role and mission. University leaders need to make this a priority across their organisations, and not just use individual employees' activities as evidence of their civic work.



2. How can we assess universities' civic impacts?

There isn't a simple metric that sums it up. Instead we've developed a [Civic Impact Framework](#) that encourages universities and their partners to examine seven areas of activity:

- Leadership and strategy.
- Social impacts.
- Environment and biodiversity.
- Health and wellbeing.
- Arts and culture.
- Economic impacts.
- Facilities and placemaking.

The framework invites universities and their partners to map what they do; form partnerships; agree priorities; make sure the partnerships have the resources they need; check whether they are making a difference; and learn from their activities so they constantly improve. This process is a continuous learning cycle, not a one-off project.

The diagram (figure 1) shows how the Civic Impact Framework holds together. The seven areas of activity have been chosen because they relate to the impacts of universities within their places and can be mapped against what is happening generally within those places. So, for example, leadership and strategy within a university can be compared with the leadership and strategy (or governance) frameworks that exist locally in the shape of local government, health services, business, and the voluntary and community sector. A university's work on climate and biodiversity can be linked to the work that happens more broadly on environmental issues within the locality. So in each area of activity we can look from the perspective of the university or from the perspective of the community and

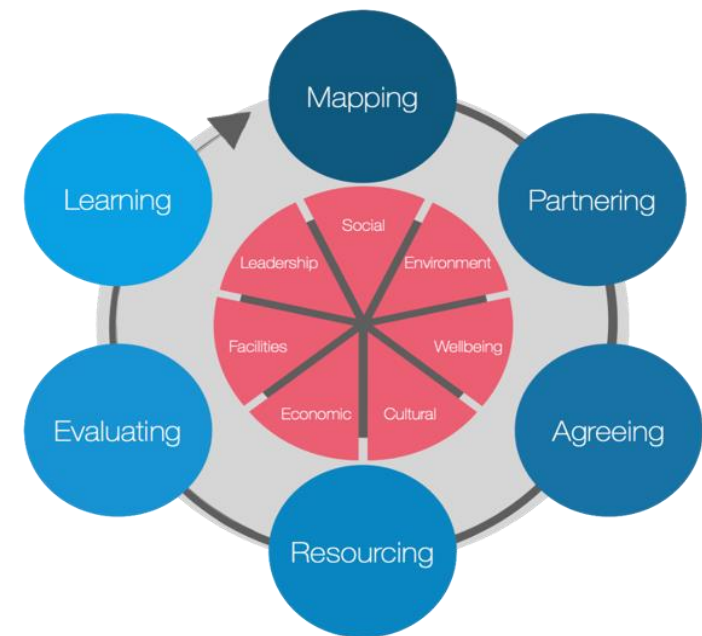


Figure 1: The civic impact framework





consider whether the university is having the impacts it wants or claims to be having. Some universities are already using this framework to guide their own local approaches to assessing their civic impact.

The areas of activity also relate to relationships that already exist between universities and their localities. These relationships are social, economic and cultural. They are also historic – some universities have been linked with their places for centuries – and symbolic, in the sense that they can create a sense of meaning and local pride within the community. These relationships are constantly developing. It is important that universities understand them, and work to make sure they evolve in ways that help both the university and the community.

We understand civic work as the process of developing these relationships in partnership with the other institutions, leaders and populations in the places where universities are based. Because this process is unique to each place and continually evolving, we don't offer simple metrics that purport to tell you whether a university has achieved 'civiness'. Instead we offer a framework for thinking about what it means to be civic, which universities and their partners can use to structure their conversations and check their progress.

3. A theory of civic change

A theory of change is a kind of map that shows us how to get from where we are to where we want to be. Unlike a traditional map, it's one you fill in as you go along: you constantly revise it in the light of the evidence you see around you. It's there to provide a sense of direction and shared goals, and as a reality check on the journey. It enables us to ask, 'Are we doing what we said we would do? And is it having the results we thought it would?'

If we're talking about change, we need to be clear about what kind of changes we want and how we think they will happen. The Civic Impact Framework gives us a tool to start describing those desired changes – we can consider our hopes and goals against each of the areas of activity. For example, if we want to improve job opportunities and skill levels in our community, what can the university do to help that to happen? Or if we want to reverse ecological damage, what resources and skills does the university have and who does it need to work with? By asking questions like this we can take the first steps towards a local theory of civic change. We should also consider whether universities have negative effects in their communities (for example, in relation to local housing markets) and how these can be addressed.



The table below sketches out the bones of a theory of civic change for universities in the UK. By building better relationships between universities and their partners, higher education institutions can help to **create the conditions** that encourage improvements in each of the areas covered by the Civic Impact Framework. A theory of change needs to be ‘plausible, doable, testable and meaningful’³ – in other words it needs to make sense, be achievable with the resources given to it, and we need to be able to check whether it’s doing what was intended. The actions need to matter to people: there’s no point in having a theory of change for something people don’t think is important. In drafting the table below, we have kept these tests in mind. It’s important to note that the journey is not to a single civic destination, but towards deeper local relationships and engagements that will not look identical. This table is a shorter version of one that was developed for internal use by the National Civic Impact Accelerator team and is intended as a discussion-starter among universities and their partners, not as a template that they must follow.

We invite universities and their partners to use this theory of change as a stepping stone towards their local activities and Civic University Agreements. Here are a few examples of how they could do so:

- University leaders and their local partners could use the table as an agenda for discussions about draft Civic University Agreements.
- Individual departments or faculties could use it to check whether their activities and priorities meet their civic ambitions.
- It can be used to develop specific local projects (for example, the University of Kent has used the Civic Impact Framework in developing its [Right to Food](#) initiative).

³ Connell, J., & Klem, A. (2000). You can get there from here: Using a theory of change approach to plan urban education reform. *Journal of educational and psychological consultation*, 11(1), pp. 93-120.



4. A draft overarching theory of civic change


A theory of change sets out why we think a set of actions will lead to the results we want. The table below sets this out in terms of the situation the Theory of Civic Change is addressing, its overall aim, and the different elements that relate to what we are doing and the effects we hope this will have. Below we explain some of the key terms.

- **Inputs:** What human, financial and organisational resources are needed to achieve your desired outcomes?
- **Activities:** What interventions do you believe will bring about your desired change? Activities mobilise your inputs to produce outputs.
- **Outputs:** What are the results/ deliverables of the activity relevant to the achievement of your outcomes?
- **Outcomes:** Measurable or observable changes. Short and intermediate-term outcomes which must be in place for your activities to work and for your long-term goals to be achieved. What is the long-term goal which relates to the 'problem'? What will result from your work to address the problem?
- **Impact:** The broader effect of change.

Situation	Universities are encouraged to focus on the benefits they help to bring to their localities through different pressures within the system (e.g. the need to deliver public value for public money); their own organisations (e.g. competition for students and funding) and the public (e.g. the need to show relevance and deliver public benefits). ⁴
Aim	Universities want to set up collaborative and inclusive relationships and practices to benefit their places, working towards shared goals with local partners . 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 improving locally beneficial relationships, and civic impact describes the outcomes of such relationships.

⁴ For more detailed discussion of the situation giving rise to recent civic university initiatives in the UK, see the [final report of the Civic University Commission](#).



Process			Impact		Outcomes
Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Early relationship	Maturing relationship	Relational outcomes*
Time and energy of leaders within universities and their partners; dedicated staff; money and knowledge; jobs and employment opportunities; locally focused teaching and research; students' time, passions and energy; and the time, knowledge, passion and energy of local partners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence gathering: work to map civic activities and relationships and understand their effects. Peer learning: sharing knowledge, building networks. Communication: reaching out to partners, highlighting good practice, rewarding and recognising civic work (such as volunteering by staff and students or involvement in community events). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact assessments to map effects and extent of existing activities. Setting out and prioritising shared goals. Partnership agreements or Civic University Agreements with local institutions, leaders and populations. Dedicated civic impact teams. Projects and initiatives that put civic ambitions into action. 	Universities understand their local relationships and share learning with local partners; agree priorities for action; resource agreed actions; and evaluate the effects of their actions with local partners.	Universities work with local partners and people to find shared long-term goals; pool resources and skills to achieve those goals; and embed locally agreed priorities across their activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Universities set up sustainable, equitable, responsive partnerships. Universities build trust with other organisations through their relationships with partners. Universities build increased, relevant local capacity, partnerships and resources to address local challenges. Universities open up data and knowledge that informs evidence-based local actions and policies. Universities act as long-term anchors to sustain relationships, policies and actions to benefit their localities (for example, by contracting with local employers and opening up facilities for the wider community).
				<p>Examples of societal outcomes (these will look different in each place)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Universities' resources and skills are better applied to respond to local challenges. University leaders support local decision-making, vision, strategy development and delivery. 	



			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universities' knowledge and research is increasingly applied to address local challenges. • Universities support local problem-solving networks that address problems and opportunities. • Relevant, ethical and meaningful local community participation in universities' activities (as learners, staff, suppliers and partners). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social: addressing social inequalities; improving life chances for children and young people; improved social care and community support for vulnerable groups. • Civil society: supporting local volunteering; partnering with voluntary and community organisations; advocating for the community. • Environmental: supporting the local transition to net zero and reducing carbon emissions; working to redress biodiversity loss and nurture the natural environment. • Health and wellbeing: supporting thriving, healthy communities; addressing inequalities in physical and mental health and wellbeing; improving local services and health systems and health workforces.
Rationale, assumptions and limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rationale: by investing time and resources in building and sustaining local relationships and partnerships, universities will be better placed to develop shared goals with their local populations. In turn this will lead to outcomes that benefit all partners; activities that reflect local priorities; and shared capacity to address local challenges. • Assumptions: local partners understand the value of building relationships with universities; universities are prepared to work alongside partners rather than dominate local agendas; university leaders and their partners are prepared to think long-term rather than in terms of their own immediate priorities. • Limitations: risks of unhelpful national policies; reduced local institutional capacity (austerity, cost of living etc); unpredicted national or global events (e.g. Covid-19) 		<p>*Relational and societal outcomes</p> <p>The diversity of civic approaches and activities will mean that different outcomes will be prioritised and achieved in different places. Relational and societal outcomes can be met independently but meeting them together will create a virtuous cycle between them.</p>	

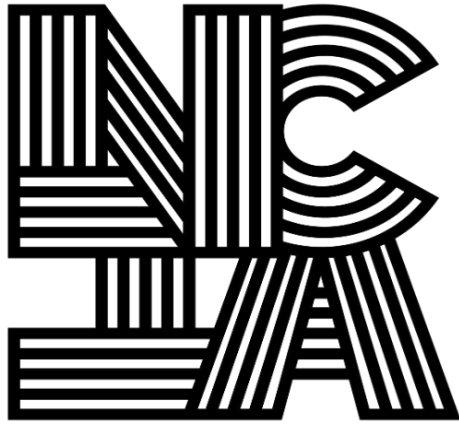


Appendix 1: The 'Seven Ps' of civic activity

Once we've begun to think about a particular area of civic activity (say social impact, or the university's buildings and facilities) we can start to analyse this in more depth. We've developed a framework for analysis which we call the 'Seven Ps' which can help people think about universities' civic activity more deeply:

- **PLACE. Civic as physical location:** How do universities choose to describe their civic boundaries and how do their notions of place create different possibilities and challenges for action?
- **PEOPLE. Civic as people-centred and relational behaviour:** Universities and their staff and students are actors in society. What are their collaborations, partnerships and relationships, and how can these be optimised?
- **PARTNERSHIP. Civic involves mutual agreements on shared priorities:** How does relational behaviour translate into place-based partnership with other 'anchors' of the community?
- **PURPOSE. Civic as a pathway to public benefit:** How do universities negotiate, describe, activate and evaluate the value they create through their civic activity, and frame their purposes for civic work?
- **PRACTICE. Civic as practical action:** What are the practical ways in which universities can embed civic practices and behaviours into their academic activity (for example, in the work of academic staff who have developed relationships with community organisations or have mentoring or facilitating roles outside the university) and how can they use their 'anchor' role (procurement, employment practices, facilities etc) to benefit people and place?
- **PROCESS. Civic as organisational culture:** What does being a 'civic university' mean for the ways that universities organise and govern themselves?
- **POLICY. Incentives or disincentives for civic action:** What are the policy and funding mechanisms which enable or hold back civic activity?





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