

# Universities' civic role: an explainer

## The civic university: why it matters to communities

The civic role of universities within their communities and beyond is a cornerstone for delivering local economic growth, developing key skills, creating vibrant and attractive places, and serving local community needs. But what do we mean by 'civic'?

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Put simply, civic refers to the actions a university takes to support, serve and work with its local communities.

Most universities across the UK are large, complex organisations serving a range of communities, from local to global, all of whom might have different or multiple needs. To ensure the civic role mobilises the whole university to meet needs in and across their regions, we need to unpack what it means in more detail so that it can support the development of an effective strategy.

## Unpacking what civic means

To understand what it means to be civic, the [Civic University Commission](#) is a good place to start. It defined a civic university as one that is:

- **Public-centred:** not only do local leaders and people recognise and value the contribution of the university, but they are also involved in each other's decision making.
- **Truly local:** mobilising all of its strengths to prioritise the needs of local people, identified in partnership with local people.
- **Strategic:** for the university to have clear structure, leadership and ambition to meet local needs.

The commission led to the establishment of the Civic Universities Network and the National Civic Impact Accelerator in England to bring universities together with partners to enhance their civic role. They have helped create a detailed framework for collaboration between universities and communities through Civic University Agreements and through mapping the twelve pillars of the economic impact of civic universities. So far, 50 universities across the UK have signed Civic University Agreements.

## **Are there specific civic universities?**

The roots of civic universities run deep. In the 19th century, many universities were specifically set up in cities as civic institutions with the strong support of local leaders and people to help drive local economic growth, deliver skills training and recognise the growing importance of their cities; a symbol of local achievement and pride. These include the universities often referred to as ‘red brick’ universities because of their distinctive architecture, such as Birmingham, Bristol, Exeter, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Reading and Sheffield.

Other universities which do not belong to this group also have a strong connection to place in their origins, such as the former polytechnics. The widespread adoption of Civic University Agreements also demonstrates that ‘civic’ is not a minority activity. Indeed, there are civic universities across the world actively taking responsibility for having a positive impact on their local communities.

## **Is the civic role of universities an optional add-on?**

Whilst calling yourself a ‘civic university’ or establishing a Civic University Agreement are optional, all universities will have an economic impact in their place simply through the income and activity they attract and generate.

## **What is the economic impact of universities in communities?**

Because universities are physically located and operate in a community, they inevitably will impact their locality, through their campuses and buildings, as well as

through the demand from students, staff and visitors for transport, restaurants, shops and housing.

We call universities anchor institutions because they are often large, stable organisations that are deeply rooted in their local communities. Their decisions impact their environment – many universities, like Newcastle, made early commitments to being Real Living Wage employers and now focus on procuring locally, to support local economies.

The spending of universities (including their staff, students and visitors) will have a direct, positive, economic impact on where they are. Across the whole of the UK, the total economic impact of universities is more than £265 billion, including £70 billion from university expenditure. For individual places, this translates to £366 million annually in Northampton and over 5,000 jobs supported, £212 million annually in Salford and almost 8,000 jobs supported and £563 million annually in Exeter and almost 12,000 jobs supported. This activity means local rental income, local spending to sustain high streets and contracts for local businesses.

## **How do universities create wider impact?**

The impact of direct spending only presents a partial picture of the economic impact of universities. Their core activities – conducting research to address key challenges, driving innovation to develop improvements, and building the key skills of students and adult learners in the workforce – all generate significant economic contributions. For research and knowledge exchange, the process of sharing knowledge, expertise, and resources between universities and external partners to create social, cultural, and economic benefits, there is an economic impact of £63 billion. For teaching and learning, there is an impact of £95 billion. Students also contribute to the economy by boosting productivity, regions with more graduates in the workplace are more productive. Research shows that people with postgraduate and first degrees make up almost 35% of the UK workforce between 2014 and 2019, increasing from 22% between 2011 and 2007.

The boost to the local economy, infrastructure and environment is clearly important but what is critical is the way universities intentionally ensure their activities support the needs of their communities, working closely with them. However big and impressive, figures for the whole sector don't tell the story of the many university activities that impact the day-to-day lives of their communities and neighbourhoods. Here are some examples:

## The breadth of university impact – business, enterprise and innovation

Connecting research and innovation to the companies and organisations that can benefit is a full-time job for universities. Teams reach out on a daily basis to businesses of all types, building strategic alliances with large businesses such as BAE while also working with SMEs to help find immediate solutions to challenges. The ultimate goal is boosting productivity, opportunity and creating the potential for growth. Universities also generate businesses of their own, encouraging spin-outs, start-ups and student enterprise – including social enterprises. They also provide physical space in the form of accelerators and incubators to enable businesses to grow.

How universities support business, enterprise and innovation:

- Create the space for innovation, collaboration, connection and community.
- Provide tailored ideas, advice and guidance.
- Provide skills development, specific courses and talented people to help businesses grow and opportunities for local people to get these jobs.
- Support staff and students to generate their own businesses.
- Shape innovation strategy in their wider communities by participating in local innovation boards.

'Future Space has provided us with a great space to launch our business and be amongst a community of entrepreneurs. It gives great access to support services and workshops, plus links with the **University of the West of England** to foster collaboration and accelerate R&D. We would not have achieved as much as we have without the support of Future Space.'

- Jenny Bailey Cooper, CEO & Founder at FerryX

## The breadth of university impact – health and wellbeing

University health research is world leading, yet this knowledge doesn't remain distant from the public. Embedded within university health research is the commitment to ensuring developments benefit the public as quickly as possible through close collaboration with the NHS, life science companies and charities. Universities also

train health professionals, enhancing their impact on health and wellbeing by connecting research, innovation and partnerships with the skilled staff who deliver these improvements.

How universities support health and wellbeing:

- Develop strategic partnerships with hospitals and the life sciences sector to support the health and welfare of local communities. There are 15 Health Innovation Networks across England which connect universities, local authorities, charities and the private sector, to improve patient outcomes.
- Provide the facilities, skills and knowledge that attracts investment and creates clusters of local health companies.
- Train and develop the health workforce to help meet national and local health needs
- Provide community health services often at low cost or free, including clinics, open to the public, in areas like dentistry, physiotherapy and podiatry.

Large, multi-partner developments are transforming how research, NHS clinics and community wellbeing come together to support both health and economic growth.

Pentre Awel in Llanelli demonstrates this approach, bringing together Cardiff University, Swansea University, the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and local health boards. The project is set to generate over 1,800 jobs and deliver £467 million GVA, while embedding community healthcare services, business, R&D, assisted living, sport and leisure facilities. Pentre Awel demonstrates how collaborative innovation can deliver wide-ranging benefits for people and place alike.

## **The breadth of university impact – culture**

We shouldn't underestimate the importance of culture and the creative sector to local economies but also to community identity, pride and spirit. The creative sector is one of the key growth sectors identified in the government's Industrial Strategy.

Cultural activities can also make places attractive to businesses, foreign investors, relocating government departments and the people and jobs that come with them.

How universities support culture:

- Run over 170 museums and collections across the UK. More than 100 of these are open to the public.
- Focus on museum outreach to schools.
- Support the creation of creative clusters that drive local regeneration.
- Connect these clusters with local people to create opportunities.
- Support festivals and city-wide cultural programmes that attract visitors and make the community a place people want to move to, and businesses want to invest in.

Led by the award-winning StoryFutures team at **Royal Holloway, University of London**, the **CoSTAR National Lab** is the central hub of the CoSTAR Network, a £75.6m investment by the UKRI Infrastructure fund, delivered by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The National Lab collaborates, innovates and experiments across the UK's screen and performance sectors, supporting UK creative companies to innovate and grow ethically, sustainably, and inclusively.

## **The breadth of university impact – environment**

This is a key societal and global challenge that has a direct impact on communities and people. Universities are at the forefront of finding solutions to environmental challenges and sustainability for communities, neighbourhoods and businesses – leading by example with their campuses and buildings.

How universities support the environment:

- Train the new workforce and upskill the existing workforce to transition to net zero.
- Use research and innovation to support SMEs and larger businesses to cut emissions and costs.
- Run Living labs and real-world demonstrators.
- Develop the infrastructure to support community energy, low carbon heating infrastructure and flood resilience.

The **University of Nottingham's Creative Energy Homes** serve as 'live labs' for future energy solutions, developed in partnership with housebuilders and industry suppliers. These pioneering homes enable real-world trials of smart-grid systems and energy storage technologies, generating insights that can lower household bills while supporting the transition to cleaner, more efficient energy use.

## **The breadth of university impact – social and community engagement**

Many university activities focus on enhancing the lives of local people and supporting local communities. Universities also support communities directly, through the time and activities of staff and students, the use of their physical environment in their local area, and the resources and spending they contribute. The National Union of Students (NUS) and other volunteering bodies estimate that around 750,000 students in the UK volunteer, contributing around 3 million hours of service to local causes.

How universities support social and community engagement:

- Support and encourage their staff and students to volunteer.
- Embed community support in what they do, for example the provision of Law clinics. In 2020 at least 64% of all UK law schools offered free advice across topics such as employment, family and housing law.
- Work with local leaders to help rejuvenate high streets.
- Use their spending to support local people and businesses.
- Bring vibrancy and diversity through international staff and students and support community cohesion.

**Northumbria University's Student Law Office** is a long-standing legal clinic that reflects the university's deep civic mission. Between September 2024 and July 2025 alone, it provided over £308,000 worth of free legal advice to the community, offering vital support to individuals and organisations while giving students invaluable real-world learning experience.

## **The breadth of university impact – supporting local government**

Universities play an important role in the government's local growth and English devolution agendas. At the local level, they are increasingly rising to the challenge of supporting their authorities to achieve growth. The growing number of university senior-leadership roles that have a regional economic development focus is testament to this. They show that the sector understands that it has a role to play in supporting local growth planning and implementation.

How universities support local government:

- Support local government with policy development, connecting academic research to public policy making.
- Offering their expertise through consultancy.
- Help local government evaluate the impact of their efforts to support local people.
- Bring people, communities and leaders together.
- Support the development of Local Growth Plans, skills and innovation strategies.
- Offer expertise at a senior level by sitting on local innovation, economic and trade boards.

## **What it means to be an active civic university**

Outlined above are a few of the many examples of how universities support their communities and neighbourhoods, but there is constant work to be done for universities to continue their civic role in communities.

The needs of communities are constantly changing as are the challenges the country faces. Just as university research and innovation activities are constantly evolving and developing to address new problems and develop new solutions, the civic role of universities needs to do the same. We need to build on these great examples to enhance and improve the value universities can provide for communities, neighbourhoods and individuals.

## Next steps for universities' civic role

**Active leadership and strategy:** this requires active, committed leadership from universities supported by a strategic approach – the Civic University Agreements provide a good model, but this may not be best suited to all local areas and universities will need to adopt strategies that best suit local needs.

**Close partnership and collaboration:** working closely with local leaders and communities is an essential part of an effective civic approach. Universities can be seen as large, complex and distant organisations. Finding ways of opening up the organisation to local people requires continual effort and innovation. Not only that, it also requires giving local leaders and communities a say in how the university meets their needs, a stake in what the university is doing.

**Embedding across the university:** this explainer identifies the many ways that universities can engage with and support their communities. Universities will want to encourage experimentation, innovation and responsiveness across the university to meet local needs. However, they will also need to ensure that activities are joined up, complement each other and offer a coherent 'package' to partners. Skills development and opportunities is one area where connecting with innovation initiatives, business support efforts, further education colleges and other education providers in a community could enhance impact.

Through integrating teaching and research with other activities that drive societal impact, universities will also be able to more easily address real-world challenges and drive sustainable, regional development.

This is not just for the benefit of external partners. Universities who support a joined up approach within their own institutions will find that civic activity enhances their research impact and the learning experiences of students. More widely, the higher education sector also benefits from having a voice in local and national policy decisions.

**Recognition and embedding across government:** what national government does will have a significant impact on local areas. As well as bottom-up engagement and support, it is important government policy embeds, supports and promotes the role that universities can play in supporting local communities and businesses. Universities are critical to the successful delivery of the Industrial Strategy as well as to the devolution agenda in England. Many universities are actively shaping Local Growth plans and skills strategies in their localities. Recognising the role universities can and

do play across industrial, devolution and skills policies will contribute to their success and help translate them into local impact and benefit.

**Sustaining universities:** universities make a vital and varied contribution to local economies and communities, including through their civic role, however, civic activities typically do not generate revenue for universities, and they are often cross-subsidised from other parts of university income. Financial sustainability issues within the higher education sector therefore risk eroding this contribution. The 2025 UUK survey shows that 9% of institutions reported reduced knowledge exchange activity with businesses, and that 11% had reduced civic and local growth activity. Looking ahead, 61% were either planning to, or considering reducing knowledge exchange with businesses in the future. More widely, the loss of a university could have a devastating impact on the local environment, high street and jobs. Finding policy solutions and ensuring a sustainable funding model for universities will avoid local economic shocks and ensure the civic activities of universities can flourish and grow.

**Measure success:** success can come in many forms with the wide variety of university activities and different measures will be needed for different local priorities. However, measures are a useful contribution to supporting the achievement of goals and delivering value. Universities and partners will need to consider how the existing measures of university activity and frameworks including the Higher Education Business and Community Interaction Survey, the Edge Tool or, in England, the Knowledge Exchange Framework and the new Civic Impact Dashboard meet their needs for measuring activities and effectiveness.