Leadership insights

CIVIC LEADERSHIP AND HIGHER EDUCATION – WHERE ARE WE NOW?

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Overview

There is renewed interest in the civic role of universities and ways to develop strong local and regional partnerships to promote growth as well as social capital. This thought leadership piece published in our Leadership Insights series takes a long view – it reflects on the findings of an earlier scoping study of the views of senior leaders in a range of sectors about partnership working and the opportunity for shaping development for civic leadership; secondly it provides critical commentary on the policy context and offers explanations for why this kind of development never got off the ground at the time. Finally it offers an overview of current challenges and possible solutions for place based leadership for higher education today.

Newcastle and Northumbria universities, supported by the Leadership Foundation, were awarded a Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) grant in 2008 to explore the case for and scope a higher and civic leadership development programme. The proposed programme 'Leading Cities and Places' was 'co-designed' to support those managers from universities and their civic partners responsible for building bridges between universities and their local communities. The aim was to bring university and place based leaders together to develop their partnership working skills through addressing, in real time, place based challenges – thus developing simultaneously the locality and its leaders in a way that other leadership programmes did not.

In 2010, the Leadership Foundation published a report outlining the findings of this scoping exercise. The proposed programme was never launched, because it coincided with the coalition government and austerity. However, six years later the policy context has moved on and there is a renewed readiness for higher education and civic partnerships. This Leadership Insight provides a summary of the key points contained in the original report, the environment within which the case for the programme was originally set out, the subsequent developments of the policy context in which it is now being revisited and the challenges facing university leaders reimagining new civic relationships for the promotion of social and economic capital.

Professor John Goddard OBE
Emeritus Professor of Regional Development Studies,
Formerly Deputy Vice-Chancellor,
Newcastle University

Context

Universities can play a vital and dynamic role in their local areas. Recognition of the importance of that relationship has developed over time. For example some institutions, founded in the 19th century to meet the needs of rapidly industrialising cities like Newcastle and Sheffield, have more recently re-discovered their roots as civic institutions, while many post-1992 institutions have grown from municipal foundations and retain a strong mission to serve their localities.[1] In the noughties further impetus for civic engagement was provided by Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) that increasingly looked to universities to play a role in local economic development.[2] In particular RDAs encouraged collaboration across the old binary divide in recognition of the complementarity between different institutions in relation to local needs.

HEIs began to draw down substantial funding from the nine RDAs which were up and running by 2000. Vice-chancellors took up roles on RDA boards and the expectation grew that universities would work with the regions and the cities in them. Added to this was the Treasury's designation of six 'science cities' where academics, business leaders, RDAs and local authorities were tasked with working together to translate research into innovation.

As links developed, it became clear that many of those involved in these partnerships from outside the sector had a limited understanding of higher education or its drivers. Equally many in universities had little appreciation of the dynamics of city development. Local government did not have a remit to support higher education and the development of particular places was not a responsibility of the Higher Education Funding Council: England. National science and innovation policy was equally indifferent to geography and had a strong focus on the global commercialisation of science via university spin outs and licensing deals.

This was not a uniquely British phenomena. Work carried out for the OECD found that generally, universities and cities/regions were effectively bypassing each other like ships in the night.[3] Further work for the European Commission to better connect universities to regional growth highlighted the multi-faceted functions of the university as an educational and cultural institution not just a knowledge producer.[4] More specifically, in connection with the implementation of a new round of the European regional structural funds, the Commission made the development of 'smart specialisation strategies' a condition of the transfer of these funds to member states and highlighted the key role of universities in the design and implementation of these strategies. For example the Commission proposed that *'In assessing the role of HEIs in the region it is useful to identify the steps needed to create a 'connected region' in which the institutions are key players. Through this connection process institutions become key partners for regional authorities in formulating and implementing their smart specialisation strategies. They can contribute to a region's assessment of its knowledge assets, capabilities and competencies, including those embedded in the institution's own departments as well as local businesses, with a view to identifying the most promising areas of specialisation for the region, but also the weaknesses that hamper innovation.'*[5]

This connection *could* potentially involve universities joining up direct commodification of knowledge via spin outs etc. with enhancing skills in the urban labour market and building social capital in the form of trust and co-operative norms in local economic governance networks. So as well as generating new knowledge universities *could* play a developmental role influencing the city based political, institutional structures that can shape innovation processes beyond input of knowledge capital. But the Commission's analysis recognised that realising this potential needed amongst other things more people with 'boundary spanning' skills able to work between universities and city and regional partners.[6]

Such insights prompted Hefce and the Leadership Foundation to work together to research and scope a Higher Education and Civic Leadership Development Programme, which was published in 2010. The following provides a brief summary of the key points, which we believe have resonance and relevance today.

The twelve month project undertaken by Newcastle and Northumbria involved consultations in three cities selected from the network of English Core Cities (Bristol, Newcastle and Sheffield). The research primarily consisted of in-depth interviews with vice-chancellors and pro vice-chancellors from both the Pre-and post-1992 universities located in these cities, the chief executives of the three city councils, and chief executives or directors of other key health, economic and cultural organisations or partnerships.

The interviews had two parts. The first consisted of more general questions about university partnerships and civic leadership, the second asked more specific questions about the leadership development and their views on the proposed programme. The interviews were semi-structured, roughly following a question sequence sent to the interviewees beforehand, but also including scope to ask follow-up questions and explore certain issues in more detail.

The research findings were used to design a proposal for a national Leading Cities and Places programme. The subsequent programme was then tested out with the original interviewees and their feedback used to finalise the programme which is presented later in the report.

The project team was supported by a steering group including members from Newcastle and Northumbria Universities, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Newcastle City Council, and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. The co- authors were Professor John Goddard and Dr Paul Vallance from the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), Newcastle University; Lynne Howlett, from the Newcastle University Staff Development Unit and Dr Tom Kennie from the Leadership Foundation.

Key findings at-a-glance

- Formal and informal relations exist between universities and civic partners but many of the latter believe universities have the capacity to do considerably more to benefit their cities (p2)
- Barriers identified by vice-chancellors which prevent universities taking on a greater civic role included: stretched resources; 'civic partnership' not part of core business; difficulties in identifying the most important players; universities operating outside the local political sphere and so not having an influence; local political instability; external sectors' lack of understanding and poor perception of universities; and lack of evidence about the effectiveness of civic engagement activities (p8)
- Obstacles identified by civic leaders included: vice-chancellor level agreements not followed-up further down the command chain; civic partners not knowing who to work with or understand the language and jargon of higher education; universities working slowly in comparison to business and areas like health; lack of urgency in responding to opportunities or following up on agreements; and incentives and targets in universities meaning academics do not have time to devote to civic partnerships (p8)
- Interviewees believed that good leadership of organisations and partnerships is a vital factor in enabling universities to fulfil a greater civic engagement role. It was felt that vice-chancellors, chief executives and other equivalent organisational leaders have a vital role in clearly setting out and promoting the civic agenda within their organisation. However, a civic leadership programme would be more appropriate at Pro vice-chancellor/Dean/Director level than vice-chancellor/ chief executive level (p2, p14)
- While creating new positions to aid public or civic engagement can be successful, the effect is limited because it is based on the skills of the individual rather than on a wider cultural or systemic change within institutions (p10)
- Good civic leadership, whether from the city council or other possible spheres, requires being able to effectively articulate the future direction of the city's development. The most important skills and behaviours identified were: commitment to the city; delivery of vision; communication skills, personal qualities and relationship management (p11)

- Almost all the interviewees felt that an appropriately pitched programme with a collaborative; problem-focused approach; an emphasis on city challenges and real problems; and tangible outcomes; would be of great value to the next generation of strategic city leaders. Delivering the programme to people who filled boundary spanning roles in universities and their city partners would add great value (p2)
- The key difference between this leadership programme and many others is it was intended that the Leading Cities and Places programme would be tailored for each location with the input of its most senior leaders and a major beneficiary of the programme will be the city/place itself (p17)
- One of the main benefits of such a programme would be the creation of a network of skilled leaders who develop closer relationships and who use their collective intelligence to address how the location can become even more effective at responding to social, economic, skills and developmental challenges (p18)
- Universities have an opportunity to build local and regional networks which will offer a greater understanding of major place-based challenges, and the opportunity to use and leverage the broad expertise from higher education to contribute to the resolution of the challenges (p18)

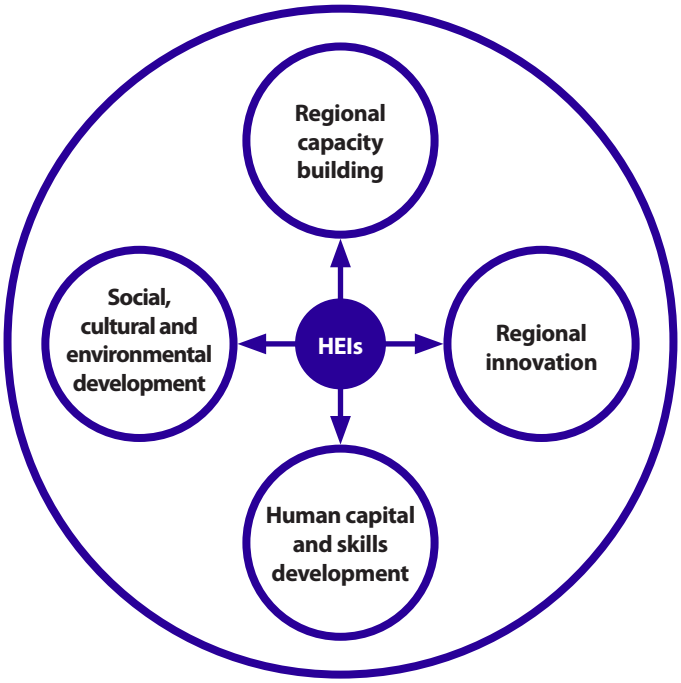
Other key points

- Post-1992 universities felt that the ability to collaborate with local partners was naturally embedded in many of their institution's structures because of their core business of vocational or professional training, applied research and consultancy required them to be externally engaged (p7)
- Pre-1992 university leaders were more likely to talk about civic engagement in terms of their own strategic activities, and placed more emphasis on the institutional challenges they face in integrating these concerns with their core research and teaching activities (p7)
- In cities with two universities, there was collaboration and examples of working together to the common good of the city (p7)
- One non-university interviewee said that universities could be oriented towards offering free expert advice to other local public bodies, acting as "...think-tanks for the city" (p7)
- It was suggested that civic partnerships should be relatively independent of the transactional relationships that exist between organisations, (for instance between city councils and universities on estate matters), so that tensions or disagreements that can arise on these fronts do not negatively affect their overall relationship and be detrimental to the city as a whole (p10)
- With reference to formal city partnerships (eg Local Strategic Partnerships) some interviewees highlighted the process of agreeing and clearly setting out this vision in strategic plan documents, so that all stakeholders are aligned behind the partnership, can see their role, and will be committed to delivering on what is required (p11)
- Effective city leaders are committed to continuous open communication and a willingness to 'put their cards on the table'. They strive to use a common language rather than the organisation's jargon which can confuse and alienate city partners (p12)
- Interviewees highlighted networking skills and a willingness and stamina to engage in numerous civic engagements, as was an ability to put the right teams together, share successes and keep others informed and motivated (p12)

- The most effective city leaders were described as patient, tenacious and unafraid of failure. They develop and use extensive networks and have a 'pick up the phone' style. They have the strength to lead and be unpopular at times but demonstrate diplomacy and humility at the same time. They commit to not letting conflict stall progress at any level (p12)
- The least effective city leaders were seen as glory seeking, dominating empire builders who are only interested in their own future and that of their organisation. They are often aloof, arrogant and can be seen as insular. They tend not to empower others and rarely create cultures where leading outside their organisations is as important as leading within them (p12)
- Higher education and city partners had gained their current leadership skills through a range of formal and informal processes. Programmes cited included the Leadership Foundation's Top Management Programme and the Common Purpose programmes. Others mentioned 360-degree feedback and executive coaching as well as experience, secondments, political roles, informal mentors, action learning, previous roles, and 'the deep end' (p13)
- Interviewees were clear that any emergent programme/process should be linked to the city, stressing that a way to market such a programme would be to talk about developing the city almost as much if not more than developing its leaders (p13)
- Complete immersion in each other's organisational cultures was mentioned frequently, suggesting that a secondment, visit or 'strategic exchange' would be a valuable and powerful component of a Leading Cities and Places Programme (p14)
- Whole group development was seen by some as essential. Sufficient numbers of senior city level leaders needed to be involved in a Leading Cities Programme rather than one or two people whose message would be diluted when they returned to their organisations (p14)
- Vice-chancellors and chief executives are seen to have a role in promoting the programme and getting involved in a small way but a development programme for the next level and wider had more support (p14)
- The programme might be a way of involving more women and BMEs in city leadership. Only three interviewees out of 19 were female and only one of those was at the vice-chancellor/chief executive level. None of the interviewees came from a BME background (p14)
- Lessons from civic successes overseas eg Boston, Malmo, could be learned through a case study/international study visit (p14)

Key graphic

Figure 1: National and regional contexts



Why the programme was not launched

The report by the Leadership Foundation was published in 2010, which coincided in the UK with the election of the coalition government. The new government abolished RDAs, who had been key drivers in the growing relationship between civic partners and universities, and a period of uncertainty followed. Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) were established with limited resources. Cities were experiencing the impact of the 2008 financial crisis and universities had to now come to terms with a more competitive environment linked to the introduction of higher fees. In this turbulent environment few cities and universities felt that investment in long term leadership capacity building was a priority.

Subsequent developments

However, the priority attached by the government to local engagement did not completely disappear. The Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned Sir Andrew Witty to undertake a review with the title 'Universities and their Communities: Enabling Economic Growth'.[7] At the same time the devolution agenda, with its Northern Powerhouse dimension, was strengthened. But this also coincided with a period of austerity in public finance, particularly in local government. While HEIs have been growing their businesses and expanding the sector, the funding squeeze in local government has reduced its ability to undertake its non-statutory function of economic development.

By way of contrast, with the introduction of higher tuition fees and the opening up of the global market for higher education the HE sector has been relatively buoyant. The cranes rising above the skylines of many British cities are often employed on university projects, such as campus improvements or student residences. So local authorities and LEPs are increasingly recognising that universities could be key actors in the economic regeneration stakes.

In this regard universities can be characterised as urban 'anchor institutions'. These may be defined as 'large locally embedded institutions, typically non-governmental public sector, cultural or other civic institutions that are of significant importance to the economy and the wider community life of the cities in which they are based. They generate positive externalities and relationships that can support or 'anchor' wider economic activity in the locality. They do not have a democratic mandate and their primary missions do not involve regeneration or local economic development. Nonetheless their scale, local rootedness and community links are such that they can play a key role in local development and economic growth representing the 'sticky capital' around which economic growth strategies can be built'[8]. Anchor institutions are therefore of the city not just *in* the city.

At the same time, national science and innovation policy has introduced an implicit territorial element. For example Jo Johnson's first speech as higher education minister in the new Conservative government was on 'one nation science'. He announced that: "The first part of One Nation science is to take a more thoughtful approach to place. I have asked officials to work with local areas to develop 'audits' mapping local research and innovation strengths and infrastructure. These deep dives will provide a new way to identify and build on areas of greatest potential in every region". The subsequent budget statement invited universities, LEPs, businesses and cities to work with central government to map strengths and identify potential areas of strategic focus for different regions.'[9] The government also supported one of the key recommendations of the Witty review, namely the establishment of an Advisory Hub to help LEPs and universities shape and implement smart specialisation strategies. This hub is now based in the National Centre for Universities and Business.

Within higher education the research elements of the higher education White Paper and Bill build on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact agenda. Many of the case studies in the 2008 REF impact work had a strong local dimension[10]. The Stern Review of the REF has given added weight to impact with recommendations that continue and strengthen the importance of tackling societal challenges such as sustainability and aging, challenges that are not only global but also local. This will require closer working between universities and their civic partners.

Institutional performance in the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) may also be boosted by strong local links. One way to improving the student experience and employability is work-based learning, tie-ins with local companies and organisations and student volunteering in the community. Being more engaged locally can bring important benefits to students and the institutions to which they belong.

The EU referendum has further highlighted the importance of civic engagement. The strongest support for Brexit came from the disadvantaged and the disengaged. As a leader in the Times Higher Education noted, too much of universities' lobbying before the vote was interpreted as narrow, self-interested concern, and there is danger in not learning from that bruising experience. Universities have to be relevant to and valued by more than just graduates. It noted that universities have the great advantage of being spread across the country – they're almost unique as institutions of national significance that are not creatures of London alone. "Perhaps it's this local role that needs attention now. It doesn't have the glamour of leading national debates, the appeal of re-affirming commitment to Europe or the big-picture narrative of globalisation. But universities are ideally placed to step up the 'elites' human contact with what Brexiteers would call "real people", and it's in the interests of all that they do'. Likewise the director of the Royal Society of Arts, Matthew Taylor, has observed that 'universities are "islands of Remain in deserts of Leave" … an alarm bell about the paucity of proper university-town engagement … but an alarm bell that has gone off after the fire.'

Higher education may indeed be negatively affected by Brexit and its capacity to act constrained by the loss of European research grants and European regional funding, but it can be argued that universities have a public duty to work with local authorities and other agents to heal the divides in society that the referendum has both revealed and possibly exacerbated. To do this effectively university and civic leaders need to understand each other's drivers and to recognise the importance of joint action.

Place-based leadership post-Brexit is more important than ever. The danger is that in the current turbulent environment, rather than working together, drawbridges are raised.

The way ahead

Many of the intra- and inter-institutional leadership challenges revealed in the original scoping study still apply, notwithstanding the changed circumstances. There is considerable evidence to suggest that all universities can benefit from a well-articulated and proactively managed relationship with the places where they are located. Local engagement can enhance the quality and global significance of teaching and research. Equally, there is considerable pressure from local and the UK government and from society at large for universities to actively engage with their local communities. Being anchored in a particular location does however raise questions for the university about the extent to which some aspects of its academic practice should be relevant to the place in which academics live and work as citizens.

This leads to specific demands on universities to be seen as active contributors to place making, business innovation and economic and social development in the round. With society increasingly facing complex challenges (for example ageing, climate change, terrorism) the role of universities in solving these problems come to the fore, not least in the communities where they are located.

As well as these new demands, universities are being expected to work in new ways. Concepts such as the 'quadruple helix', social innovation, open innovation and living laboratories are just some emerging tools for the new forms of multi-disciplinary and trans-partner working that will be needed to address these challenges going forward.

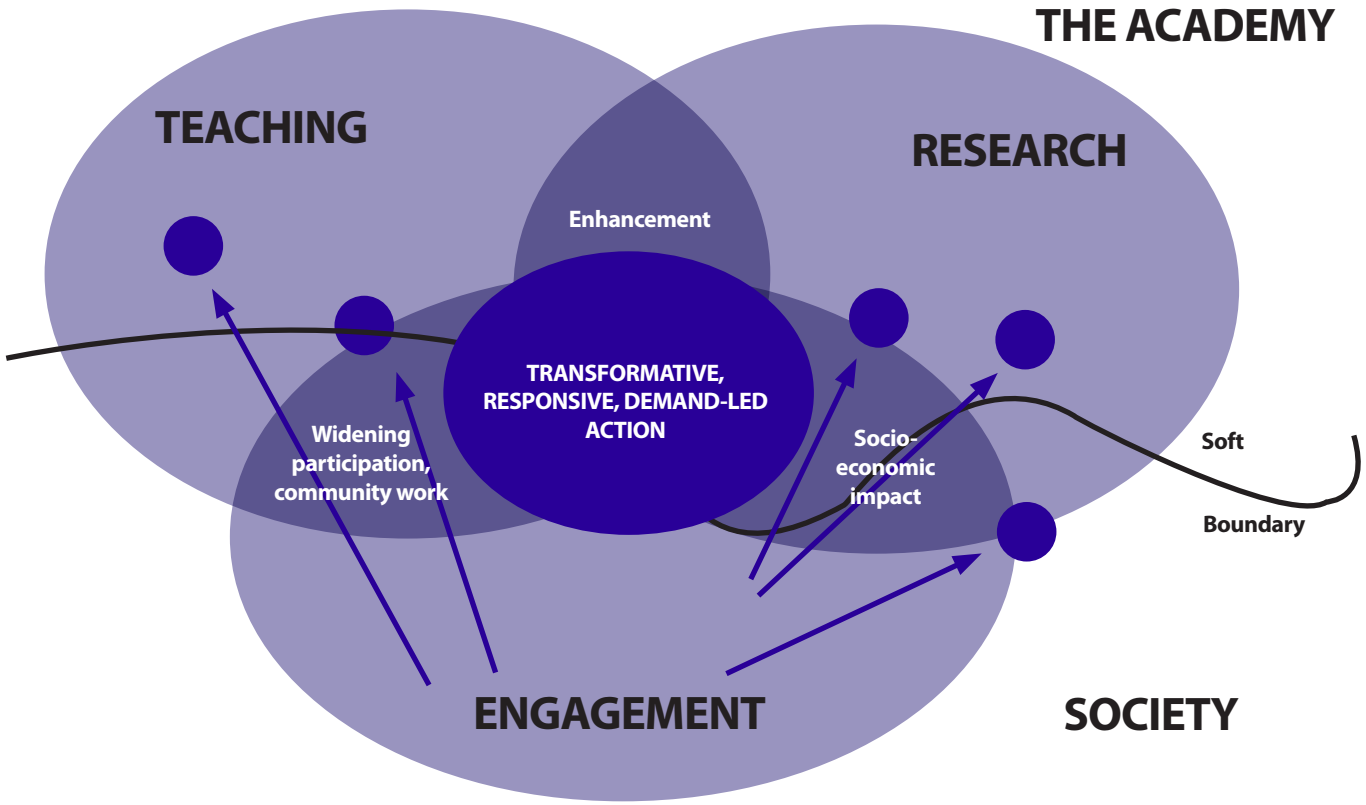
Developing a quadruple helix approach to science, research and innovation that embraces the university, business, government and civil society within the city will not be without both challenges and opportunities. These specific tensions will be underpinned by those between the external civic role of the university and its internal processes, processes which are heavily influenced by the higher education policy environment within which it operates.

Addressing societal challenges can necessitate a response from a wide range of disciplines and this may require active institutional leadership. This in turn raises questions around business models of the university. Indeed a new model to capture how the university is organised may be needed. The 'civic' university is one such model.

The civic university can be characterised by its ability to integrate its teaching, research and engagement with the outside world in such a way that each enhances the other without diminishing their quality. Research may need to have socio-economic impact designed in from the start and teaching may need a strong community involvement with the long term objective of widening participation in higher education and producing well-rounded citizens as graduates. In terms of institutional structure there is a soft, flexible boundary between the university and society.[11]

Key Graphic

Figure 2: Integrating research, teaching and engagement



This integration between research, teaching and engagement needs to be achieved while maintaining the vitality of the university as a 'loosely coupled' institution. Whilst a strength this loose coupling can also be a barrier in terms of the willingness and capacity of individual academics to contribute pro-actively to solving local problems not least when this may require working across disciplinary boundaries in response to local needs.

English universities also have to address these issues in turbulent higher education and territorial development policy environments. Radical changes in the way in which higher education is funded and regulated, the localism agenda, decentralisation and devolution are all being introduced with relatively limited consideration of the implications for universities as anchor institutions in local communities.

Deep rooted civic engagement will therefore require a renewed sense of purpose and a connection between global and local roles. It may require institutional change to integrate teaching, research and engagement at every level. It will certainly have to go beyond joining the global PR war of flaunting the societal relevance of its activities. Finally, it will require a messy process of negotiations with external stakeholders locally and nationally.

Realising the potential of the civic university to 'reach out' to the community will not only depend on what the university does but also on the capacity of its often resource constrained local and regional partners to work together and 'reach into' the university. The present Leading Places initiative is about developing ways of pooling intellectual, managerial, and political and community leadership in ways that facilitate bringing together thought and actions relevant to shaping the long term future for the area[12].

Notes

1 John Goddard (2009) Re-inventing the Civic University, NESTA

2 John Goddard and Paul Vallance (2013) The University and the City, Routledge

3 OECD (2007) Higher Education and Regions: Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged, OECD, Paris, 2007

4 European Commission (2011) Connecting Universities to Regional Growth, European Commission, Brussels, 2011

5 European Commission (2011 Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for modernisation of Europe's higher education system (COM (2011) (567)

6 See for example http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/hess

7 John Goddard (2013) "Keep universities anchored' Research Fortnight, 30th October 2013

8 John Goddard et.al. (2014) 'Universities as anchor institutions in cities in a turbulent funding environment: vulnerable institutions and vulnerable places in England' Cambridge Journal of Regions Economy and Society, 7,(2), p 307-326

9 John Goddard (2015) ' One Nation science , universities and the Northern Powerhouse' Research Fortnight, 30th September, 2015

10 King's College London and Digital Science (2015) The Nature, Scale, and Beneficiaries of Research Impact: An Initial Analysis of REF (2014) Impact Case Studies, London: HEFCE.

11 John Goddard, Ellen Hazelkorn, Louise Kempton and Paul Vallance (2016) The Civic University: the Policy and Management Challenges. London: Edward Elgar (in press)

12 http://www.ncl.ac.uk/socialrenewal/research/civicuniversity/#civicuniversity

The Leadership Foundation says:

In the aftermath of Brexit, we are pleased to publish this thought piece on civic engagement. The drift towards a 'post factual' politics, played out in the EU referendum debate, where the 'expert' was derided, underlines the importance of universities developing civic engagement strategies and re-building public trust and confidence. This paper in our Leadership Insights series learns lessons from a 'co-produced' civic engagement initiative that never got off the ground at the time, as its publication coincided with a change in the focus of national and local politics. However, the issues of silo working, competing pressures and priorities, lack of understanding between and across sector partnerships are just as relevant today.

We hope this paper will be useful for leaders motivated to shape new civic and regional relationships with partners from local government, industry, health and universities. This publication coincides with our current Leading Places project, which is focused on collaborative working around civic leadership. This is funded and supported by the LGA, Hefce and Universities UK, and facilitated by the Leadership Foundation. We hope this will generate new questions for research to assess what civic leadership works best, in what contexts, and in real-time.

Professor Fiona Ross
Director of Research
Leadership Foundation

Authors

Researching and Scoping a Higher Education and Civic Leadership Development Programme (March 2010)

Professor John Goddard, CURDS, Newcastle University; Lynne Howlett, Staff

Development Unit; Newcastle University; Dr Paul Vallance, CURDS, Newcastle

University; and Dr Tom Kennie, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

The original scoping study was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council: England's Leadership, Governance and Management Fund. The full report Researching and Scoping a Higher Education and Civic Leadership Development Programme can be found at: www.lfhe.ac.uk/GoddardOT03

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