

Can universities help transform the cities and communities they inhabit?

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The introduction by the United Nations of the global Sustainable Development Goals for all people makes it clear that universities have to improve their impact on society on a planetary scale, but also within their local regions and cities. In response, the civic university mission is a growing concern for institutions around the world. Martin Ince hears from Professor John Goddard about his pioneering experiences in this field at Newcastle University.

“Everything happens somewhere.” That is the logic of the civic university movement, a growing global enthusiasm for reinventing and strengthening the links between universities and the places they inhabit. The concept is believed to have begun in the UK, and is championed with articulate energy by Professor John Goddard, formerly deputy vice chancellor of Newcastle University.

For Goddard and other civic university enthusiasts, the idea is about far more than the traditional pattern of university-industry links, typified by the ‘spin-out’ company. And it is increasingly oriented towards supplementing the mission of world-class universities that work on world problems, not only those which already have a strong local mission. This new emphasis has given rise to the concept of the “World-Class Civic University”. The idea is a powerful one for institutions on the lookout for strategic gains. It can involve new connections to employers, thus chiming with the growing emphasis on graduate employability. Or an increased civic mission might open up new funding channels, or lead to new research collaborations.

However, there are also reasons why universities might be cautious about the civic mission, which not all of them have chosen to stress – even in the UK. One is that civic engagement is hard work. Adding a new commitment on top of existing demands for research and teaching is tough for academics. Another is that since the 2008 financial crisis, the UK’s public spending has been in the grip of financial austerity. While the pressure is now being eased a little, local government has been the principal victim. Universities fear that growing their civic mission might mean providing people and resources to replace underfunded public services.

But Goddard said in a recent interview that the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are intended to create world agreement on future human and ecological development, will promote universities as bigger players in wider society. “The SDGs are helpful because they

encourage both local and global action. They call on us to mobilise top science to help with big challenges, for example ageing. They also imply that the solutions we come up with have to be place-relevant. This makes the point again that excellence and civic engagement are not mutually exclusive,” he says.

Goddard has long been engaged in a blistering round of international speaking and consultancy on the civic university, involving audiences and clients from Asia to Wales. His academic base, the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, has recently hosted visitors from China and elsewhere with a focus on the civic mission. But the place-related way in which it happens means that it is often difficult to compare the civic success of universities in different locations, or to build it into global university rankings. High quality civic engagement in Scotland may be a very different thing from good practice in Ghana.

Despite the difficulty of explaining just what it is, the civic mission is in tune with current thinking about the role of universities in society. Universities have long debated what they are for, but the civic mission concentrates more on what they are good for. This means that any debate on the public good that universities provide is going to consider the civic mission at an early stage. Sociologist, Professor Craig Calhoun, former director of the London School of Economics, is one expert observer who says that universities have shown too little regard for the broader needs of society in their planning and thinking.

The pressure for civic involvement is particularly intense in what Goddard terms “left behind” regions, and even rich nations have those. As he sees it, universities have a distinctive role in developing these disadvantaged locations. They can help ensure that innovation gets everywhere in society, for example through improved transport systems or housing, and does not just benefit the elite. To do this, it is essential to involve citizens in innovation. Obesity is an example that is now of global importance. Because obesity is about a complex range of issues, and connects to wider problems including those of deprivation, universities have to get involved in the community if they are to have a role in tackling it.

Citizen science

Concern with the university civic mission also links to another current fashion in the intellectual world: the closer involvement of non-academics in research. There have always been amateur scientists in fields such as astronomy, but a growing trend involves them in designing and developing experiments and reporting on them, not just working as unpaid datagatherers. Newcastle University is a global centre for ageing research and uses a broad regional support group of 6,000 older people, Voice North, to help drive and guide its work, as well as a specialist external group concerned with dementia.

The insight driving this practice, says Goddard, is that universities and society both have something to gain from developing “research-savvy citizens who are not patients.” Their influence means that the region itself becomes a ‘living laboratory’ in which ideas can be tried out. So an intervention in housing or transport that might affect obesity can be tested and assessed in a setting where people value research and are aware of its possible benefits.

At the same time, the civic mission chimes with the trend towards universities helping their students to become more employable. A Careers Office with some leaflets is no longer fit for purpose: recruiters want to know that universities are producing graduates who can interact with others successfully. At Newcastle and elsewhere, there are hundreds of student projects that have grown out of the civic role. Many meet needs that the city itself has known about for years, but has not had the resources to tackle. Student volunteering also has a civic aspect and helps to develop the social capital of the student and of the community.

At the same time, many excellent UK universities are in cities with poor records for social welfare and economic success. Civic projects, whether voluntary or for academic credit, deepen student understanding of these cities and the issues they pose, and may well enhance the likelihood of today's students staying on in the city as graduates.



It seems too that civic thinking has now reached the point of being automatically built into broad areas of policy planning. An example is the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act of 2015. This pioneering piece of legislation is intended to guarantee that the population of Wales gets the care it needs, irrespective of the silos such as health or culture in which government services are often confined. It is intended to get all parts of Welsh local government working together on important issues. Goddard says that rather than coming from academe, it was the Welsh Government's idea to involve universities in this ambitious project. The Welsh approach is also likely to bring non-degree-level Further Education into the mix, and there are moves for this approach to also be considered in English cities.

Listening skills

While it can be tough for a university and its hard-pressed academics to take on the civic mission, it is not easy either for cities and the people in them to get closer to their local university. This should be simple enough. Universities are usually among the biggest employers in any city or region, and the spending power of their staff and students represents a major economic force. They occupy a large and growing percentage of many city centres, and often have some of the most impressive building projects on the go. There is no point wishing that the university had better links to the outside world – it is already part of it.

But it remains true that academics and university managers can often seem to live in a world of their own. They run to a different timescale from business executives, and they can sometimes seem like members of a privileged race to community activists or local government employees. In Goddard's view, universities have to take a lead in improving the way they carry out dialogue with these and other stakeholders.

He says that when it works, all parties can reach a point where they can create "place-based policy" with strong academic input. In the field of ageing, this is now emerging in Newcastle via a hub that was originally set up by the National Health Service and the University, but which now draws in a wide range of other interests, including the private sector.

Goddard points out finally that while cities need their universities, in the era of populism, universities themselves need their external links to be stronger. Almost nothing, after all, is more elitist-looking than a research university in a depressed city. As he sees it, universities are part of the problem. But they can become part of the solution by showing the value of everything they contribute to the community of which they form part, on every scale from the city and the region to the world.

John Goddard, Emeritus Professor of Regional Development Studies at Newcastle University, is special advisor to the vice chancellor and president. He founded and led the University's Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) from 1977 to 1998. During this period it was designated as a centre of excellence by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. He was then deputy vice chancellor until his retirement in 2008, with responsibility for the University's city and regional engagement. He has been a NESTA Fellow and had held a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship to enable him to co-author a book on The University and the City with Dr Paul Vallance.

