The National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) and Civic University Network in association with Universities UK's Civic & Local Growth Network presents:

High Hopes, Hard Realities: Civic Universities at the Crossroads

An online roundtable discussion: 1pm-3pm, Thursday 6th November 2025

Provocation by Professor John Goddard OBE - Special Advisor to the NCIA

Introduction

The November 2024 letter from the Secretary for State for Education to Vice Chancellors raised high hopes that universities' civic role would be recognised by Government in the support they provide to the sector.

Yet the hard reality is that there is currently no statutory duty on universities to collaborate with their local communities, nor is there funding to support it. Indeed, universities currently face financial precarity, putting pressure on them to look *inward* - to compete for dwindling resources and funding – rather than looking *outward* to build meaningful collaborations with their places.

The recent publication of the HE White Paper sadly did not include any deliverable vision for the geography of university system embracing teaching, research and community engagement, and focussed primarily on skills. It feels therefore that the civic university movement is at the crossroads, facing multiple crises across the world including the rise of populism, as discussed in P. Luksha and F Taddei's *Manifesto for the Planetary Mission of the University*.

Populism - specifically in terms of 'anti-education' or 'anti-elitism' components - has its roots in left behind places, and universities ignore this risk at their peril. Indeed, if they do not step up to the plate and assert their roles as anchor institutions in their places and push back on the narrative of universities being inaccessible 'ivory towers', the very existence of some of our universities may be at stake in the future, in an uncertain political landscape.

Considering this, our roundtable will seek participants' views on the case for, and options for, sustaining and strengthening a civic university movement to support universities working collaboratively in and with their places and regions.

We will explore and envision a way ahead, to ensure universities can contribute meaningfully to the wellbeing of citizens and their places <u>in the round</u>, not just through research (as implied in the HE White Paper).

We will draw on key learning and research from the NCIA programme including <u>analysis</u> and linked <u>podcasts</u>, practical <u>guides</u>, its recent <u>evidence to the Education Select Committee on HE Funding and the threat of insolvency</u>, and feedback from its recent *CiviCon25* <u>conference</u>.

But, as a starter, here are a few personal reflections and radical policy options starting with some history.

<u>'Place' in the restructuring of higher education</u>

The <u>evolution of the UK higher education sector</u> has been largely 'place blind'. Going back to the 19th Century, we saw the emergence of locally endowed proto universities in growing cities like Newcastle, Sheffield and Birmingham. They used engineering science to support mining and manufacturing; medical science to help create a heathy workforce; and to stimulate civic life through public discourse on the future science and of society at large.

In the 20th century, these so-called 'redbrick universities' became less involved with their places as central government become more directly involved, providing funding via the University Grants Committee. The government-driven expansion of the university system in the 1960s through the founding of new universities was anti-big cities, just as these big cities were facing major problems. Expansion in the 1970s - to meet a government 50% target for the participation of young people in higher education - was unplanned in geographical terms. Throughout this period, the governance of the UK became increasingly centralised, and the powers and resources of local government were slowly reduced, as referenced in <u>my blog *Rethinking the Role of Place in UK Higher Education Policy*</u>.

In 2017, the Higher Education and Research Act abolished the quasi-independent Higher Education Funding Council, and unleashed regulated competition and capped fees for home undergraduates. It also permitted a free market for international (largely postgraduate) students. The funding regime included a disciplinary-based Research Assessment system with a focus on academic peer review, which was then used by the media to create global rankings of universities that disregard place.

Insofar as the HE White Paper acknowledges a regional dimension, it is through differentiated research profiles of institutions that underpin differentiated demand and supply for skills. How this will come about, and over what timescale, is unclear. Out of respect for institutional autonomy, the Government is eschewing any steering of the rationalisation of the sector in the face of institutional financial implosions.

While the White Paper references the need for interdepartmental work on the skills agenda, the absence of a reference to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is indicative of the lack of concern with place. But here, there is an opportunity.

<u>Universities and Devolution</u>

The English Devolution White Paper sets out the government's plans "*to widen and deepen devolution across England, providing mayors with unprecedented powers and funding and hardwiring them into the way government works... and reset the relationship between central and local government and give communities stronger tools to shape the future of their local areas, while improving accountability and building capacity across the local government sector.*"

But there is no mention of the role universities could play. I would argue that *all* parts of government need to recognise that universities working with their local communities is not only beneficial to the universities, but also to society at large.

For universities, this requires the right incentives ('sticks and carrots'). For example, universities throughout England could be required to support the Government's plans for devolution.

Further, I would argue that cross-departmental thinking is the only logical way forward to seek innovative solutions and policy incentives. For example, I would suggest that the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Business and Trade could work together in a joined-up way to answer questions such as:

- What structures need to be put in place inside and outside of universities to facilitate joint working between universities and Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs)?
- How should universities be included in upcoming devolution deals?
- How might these differ between MCAs at different stages of development and different levels of prosperity?
- How should universities link their work with business, with the community and the priorities of MCAs for inclusive growth and with the Industrial Strategy White paper?
- How should Combined Authorities work with different universities and colleges in their area to meet skills gaps?
- How can areas without MCAs work with universities to deliver equivalent outcomes?

The diversity of types of institutions and the territorial structures they work within does not mean there are no communalities. Drawing lessons about 'what works where' has been a key role for the Civic University Network, and work of this type needs to continue

as the HE system and governance structure of the country is reset during this Parliament.

<u>Statutory responsibilities and accountabilities of universities</u>

Requiring universities to work with MCAs is a challenge to the cherished autonomy of institutions and the academy. However, a voluntary compact and related contract to deliver certain place outcomes in return for funding may be less problematic. Universities already receive many 'place-blind' streams of funding from across Whitehall, including from:

- the Department of Health and Social Care.
- UKRI-supported individual - but independent - research councils.
- Research England for Quality Research.
- the Department for Science and Technology.

While each of these departments/funding agencies have their own vertical accountability requirements, there is a growing recognition of the importance of local impact and the need for local accountability. But currently there is no obligation on the part of universities to pool their funds and maximise their contribution to the economic, social and environmental development of their local communities *in the round*.

 If there was a statutory duty on universities to work together in a place with local government, business and the community and voluntary sectors in a 'quadruple helix' compact /contract, this could transform the role of universities as key local anchor institutions. This could be matched by MCAs using their powers to create a single funding pot along similar lines to those once held by Regional Development Agencies. In this regard, the British Academy's recognition of the role that universities can play in building [social and cultural infrastructure](#) is significant.

It should be noted, however, that one of the main challenges in delivering a more joined-up approach to place is the aforementioned 2017 Higher Education Act which favours competition over collaboration, and there is no indication that this will be revised in future.

<u>Managing the restructuring of the higher education sector</u>

The logic of marketisation is that there will be winners and losers. And so, we are now faced with potential university closures or mergers with little regard to their civic roles. This process is being overseen on a case-by-case basis by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, supported by international management consultancy practises. In this, there is an opportunity for the Department to support regional associations of universities (re-established in the Northeast, and Yorkshire and Humberside) that can build local collaborative and complementary partnerships of universities, to share costs, minimise negative impacts and maximise local benefits. It

is not just about economic impact. The soft convening power of universities to respectfully bring people and institutions (central and local) together - in short, breaking down the walls between universities and civil society – should also be recognised and valued.

For now, the Office for Students (OfS) has been monitoring the financial health of universities insofar as it might impact on the student experience. Although there is no explicit geographical dimension to OfS responsibilities, mergers and closures will have a dramatic impact on that experience. So OfS must be part of the restructuring process, not least in terms of the links to higher level skills supply needed to support local business and public services, but also more generally regarding the responsibilities of Skills England.

The future of the Civic University movement

There have been several positive actions to support civic university activity in the UK recently, including Universities UK's founding of a dedicated Civic & Local Growth Network, and its recent publication *Universities' civic role: an explainer*.

As previously mentioned, the British Academy's work on social and cultural infrastructure was highly positive, as it discussed and acknowledged how universities can contribute to the improvement and sustainability of society.

The increased discourse around the benefits of joined-up civic university activity has been amplified by the work of the National Civic Impact Accelerator programme, the Civic University Network, and a wealth of thought-pieces and articles in sector news outlets such as Wonkhe and HEPI.

While these are all welcome interventions, I would argue that more action is needed, particularly from Government. I recommend that they urgently establish a panel of experts (with a Chair and administrative support functions) to advise on the restructuring of higher education in a way that contributes to more balanced development and equitable across the country. At the very least, an online forum of policy makers and practitioners from the worlds of higher education, research and territorial development should be championed and sustained.