International Article

Civic Connections: How UK universities are pivoting to more place-based approaches and the implications for Australia

Natalie Day

Abstract

In 2019, the UK's Civic University Commission examined the economic, social, environmental and cultural role universities play in their towns and cities.

Despite many great examples of civic activity, they rarely saw a strategic approach based on the real needs of the local community. This much needed spotlight reignited discussion and debate about the role of universities in place and their civic obligations. Today there is much momentum around civic agendas in the UK – through the nationally focused Civic University Network (CUN); a number of institution-led Civic University Agreements; and increasing emphasis on place and levelling up via policies, people and partnership. As Australia grapples with its own moment of sector reflection through the Accord, what are the UK lessons and learnings that can help Australian universities to ensure that their geographic role and responsibility is used more effectively as an agent to drive positive societal change?

This paper explores how the civic agenda has gathered steam in recent years in the UK, what it looks like in practice and where it has the most potential to influence positive change for places and people. Drawing on the experience of UK universities, with a particular spotlight on Sheffield Hallam University, the author aims to explore implications and opportunities for Australia, with tangible recommendations for both Australian policy makers and the higher education sector itself as both parts of the system grapple with some big questions about the future of the sector and its obligation to publics and places.

Civic Connections: How UK universities are pivoting to more place-based approaches and the implications for Australia

To say it's been a rocky few years for the United Kingdom is an understatement. The country has lurched from one crisis to the next – from the aftermath of Brexit, to an unprecedented global pandemic, to the more recent cost-of-living crisis and economic collapse, compounded by the war in the Ukraine and an increasingly fragile geopolitical environment. Industrial relations disputes dominate headlines as postal workers, train drivers, nurses, junior doctors, teachers, academics, screenwriters and ambulance drivers have all hit the streets to demand change. Despite government platitudes about 'levelling up', regional inequality remains stubbornly entrenched. From the inside, it can feel like a country where government and publics are increasingly disconnected; from the outside, it is difficult to comprehend

the impacts of the combinations of arguably self-inflicted wounds and external shocks.

Against this background, universities have been undergoing their own period of reflection and soul-searching. As our social fabric has been tested and with our economic grounding unstable, what role do universities play in helping to

> ❝
>
> *"Universities have an irreplaceable and unique role in helping their communities to thrive – and their own success is bound up with the success of the places that give birth to them."*

heal a divided and damaged Britain? And what does a divided Britain actually want from universities? This comes on the back of a decade-long freeze on undergraduate fees, placing significant financial pressure on universities, as well as a climate where government is asking harder and harder questions about the value of higher education with a forensic focus on graduate outcomes and earnings. The civic agenda

opened up another important route to demonstrating that value for money and reference to society.

This paper explores how the civic agenda has gathered steam in recent years in the UK, what it looks like in practice and where it has the most potential to influence positive change for places and people. Drawing on the experience of UK universities, with a particular spotlight on Sheffield Hallam University, the aim is to explore and test implications and opportunities for Australia, both for the higher education sector itself and for policy makers already grappling with some big questions about the future of the sector and its relationship to communities through the University Accord process. This aims to build on related discussions within Transform and beyond, where scholars such as Professor Sharon Bell and others have rightly explored how universities can and should engage in times when we can no longer take for granted our communities' continuing trust, or assume public confidence and unquestioning acceptance of the "university" (Bell, 2019).

Being Civic

'Civic' might be the more modern buzzword in the university context, but it is a concept that has been prevalent in the aims and objectives of higher education institutions for centuries, with many universities founded on the idea of empowering their local communities to thrive and prosper through advanced knowledge and opportunity. Ultimately, 'being civic' is about the moral obligations of a university to society. This applies not just to those that it educates, but arguably more importantly, to the majority of the community who never set foot on a university campus. The term 'civic' might easily (and rightly) be replaced with 'community benefit', but regardless of language, the ethos of civic should be core to a university's mission and approach.

Civic Journeys

Within the UK, 'civic' is a concept that has had growing traction following the 2018/19 Civic University Commission, led by Lord Bob Kerslake, the former head of the UK civil service and supported by the UPP Foundation (UPP Foundation, 2019). Launched in 2018, the Commission found that many institutions were working in their community in an ad hoc way. While there were numerous examples of people and universities being passionate about their civic outreach and engagement, few institutions approached their place in a systemic and strategic way. The Commission's final report, 'Truly Civic' argued that "universities have an irreplaceable and unique role in helping their communities to thrive – and their own success is bound up with the success of the places that give birth to them". They found that while universities were dependent on public funding, they were increasingly disconnected from the public themselves.

The Commission also identified that civic engagement had been largely occurring in an environment of indifference where UK policy had been relatively territorially agnostic for many years – with many of the influential levers and funding mechanisms being nationally designed and place-blind. This then entrenched rather than addressed huge inequalities across the country. Policy levers did not fully leverage the central role that universities can and do play, through research, industry engagement and fundamentally through producing highly skilled graduates, in contributing to national economic and societal objectives. It argued that where universities were civic orientated, this was happening despite, not because, of government incentivisation or pressure and that the UK faced a pivotal moment where government could either enhance or undermine the civic potential of universities to contribute positively to local agendas.

The Commission provided a much-needed spotlight on universities' obligations to their place. It highlighted the opportunities, while also challenging a perceived shift in the sector where universities had increasingly seen themselves as global first, national second and local third – taking their communities for granted. It recommended that universities needed clear strategies, rooted in analysis and co-created with key partners, in the form of Civic University Agreements, which would outline their institutional priorities and clear commitments to their place. It also proposed the establishment of a Civic University Network, to share best practice and understanding and promote the civic potential of the sector to policy makers and beyond.

Civic Contexts

Importantly the Commission's work was happening against a background of national turmoil and tension in the wake of Brexit. In 2016, universities were increasingly out of step with their communities and with the national referendum vote by some margin.

During the referendum campaign, 103 out of 130 university vice-chancellors were signatories to a pro-Remain open letter (Grove, 2016). Yet, in over 54.4 per cent of voting areas which contained one or more university, this university view was in the minority (BBC, 2021). There was, and remains, a pressing need for the sector to reconnect with large parts of the country left out of educational and economic opportunities. At the same time, there was a real risk of universities being removed from critical national conversations on the future economic and social direction of the UK, swept up in what appeared to be an anti-expert, anti-establishment climate. The sector and government were not closely aligned, with politicians at best agnostic, but increasingly hostile to universities, with threats of 'culture wars' fuelling tensions and suspicions.

Civic Networks

One of the central recommendations of the Commission was the establishment of a Civic University Network (Civic University Network, n.d.). With seed funding from the Department for Education, the Carnegie Trust, Arts Council England and the UPP Foundation, the Network was launched in early 2020 as the world grappled with the pandemic, and traditional ways of

working and collaborating were being rapidly reimagined and redefined. My own institution, Sheffield Hallam University – an institution which prides itself on its civic mission – successfully won a competitive tender process to lead the Network, supported by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement and the Institute for Community Studies, with partner universities including Newcastle, Birmingham and Glasgow.

The Network aims to identify and enhance ways to maximise the civic impact of universities in their place, while also working with government and strategic partners to realise and harness the potential of universities to drive positive change. With over 100 members across the UK, the Network has successfully tapped into the huge appetite for connections, sharing of best practice and problem sharing between institutions and with key stakeholders. Membership spans the breadth of missions across the university sector across the four nations, from small specialist institutions to the Russell Group (akin to the Australian Group of 8) to big regional players, who are arguably the most engaged. The pandemic, paradoxically, made these connections easier, as the pivot to online events and forums provided the opportunity to offer a rich array of programmes, events and

workshops in a more accessible and efficient way. There was also a synergy as the pandemic helped shine a light on universities as critical institutions during a crisis – on the one hand leading to development of the vaccine in record times to also repurposing buildings and car parks for NHS staff and pop-up vaccination centres on the other.

Civic Resources and Agreements

Since its establishment, the Network has also produced a steady flow of rich resources in recognition of the growing appetite for institutions to understand how best to 'do' civic engagement. This ranges from an analysis of civic approaches (Civic University. n.d.) and policy mapping tools (Civic University. n.d.) to frameworks and step-by-step guides to help institutions develop and define the focus of their Civic University Agreements (Civic University. n.d.).

The Commission itself identified four principles that should underpin Civic University Agreements (CUAs) which university leaders formally pledged their support for. These included:

1. **Place** – asking institutions to pledge their commitment to attaching a high priority to the economic, social, environmental and cultural life of their local communities;

2. **Public** – ensuring that a university's civic role is informed by evidence-based analysis of the needs of the place, developed and informed by local partners and communities;

3. **Partnerships** – embedding partnerships with other anchor institutions and beyond to overcome challenges; and

4. **Measurement and impact** – imploring institutions to be clear about what they will do, and how they will measure and evidence impact with confidence.

Today, from Newcastle to Nottingham, Aston to Aberystwyth, CUAs are a prominent fixture of broader civic engagement. Over 70 universities have developed CUAs, either as individual institutions or, in places like Lewisham, Greater Manchester, Nottingham and Lincoln, as a collective vision across multiple universities, aspiring to bring together their combined strength for the benefit of their place, people and communities. As with any self-regulated endeavour, some are stronger than others, depending on where institutions are at in their civic journey alongside the unique characteristics and quirks of individual geographies and regions. But as an indication of the appetite and previous absence of appropriate mechanisms to help universities be more strategic in this space, the take-up of CUAs reflects a groundswell of enthusiasm for this agenda.

Civic impact?

Recognising that Agreements can help frame ambitions and provide a focal point for more strategic local activities but are less helpful in capturing targets and metrics to demonstrate impact, the Network also developed a Civic Impact Framework (Civic University Network. n.d.). This is designed to support universities and their partners to measure civic impact across a comprehensive set of themes, encompassing both leadership and strategy, as well as impact in specific social, economic and environmental domains. It is not about imposing new sets of obligations or establishing unwelcome new ranking systems, but about maximising the positive impact universities can have on their communities (Calvert, 2023). This is achieved through a clear process of mapping, partnering and agreeing on key impact areas and outcomes, which are underpinned by clarity on resourcing, evaluation and learning.

The Civic Impact Framework was an important first step in navigating the murky realm of measuring activity and progress. In order to further advance understanding, evidence and approaches to this important question, in 2022, Sheffield Hallam secured £3.7 million from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) to establish a National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) which aims to explore and enhance civic interventions and impact within and across place. Over the next three years, the team will be working to rapidly mobilise intelligence about place-based working; exploring how to unlock leadership potential and capacity building for civic engagement, within and outside the higher education sector; and driving more innovative practice by scaling up effective partnerships and developing shared frameworks for practical action. Drawing from international experience will be critical to this, including from the numerous positive stories from across Australia, the USA, Canada and Europe.

Understanding impact is particularly important as we approach this next phase in the UK's civic journey. The Commission's report is over five years old; many of the CUAs will be reaching the end of their valuable shelf-life. The test going forward will be to see whether or not universities systematically refresh and reinvigorate their CUAs with regularity; and how institutions publicly measure and report the impact and effectiveness of their original CUAs using the frameworks and other metrics

Figure 1 | *Domains of civic activity and progress cycle*
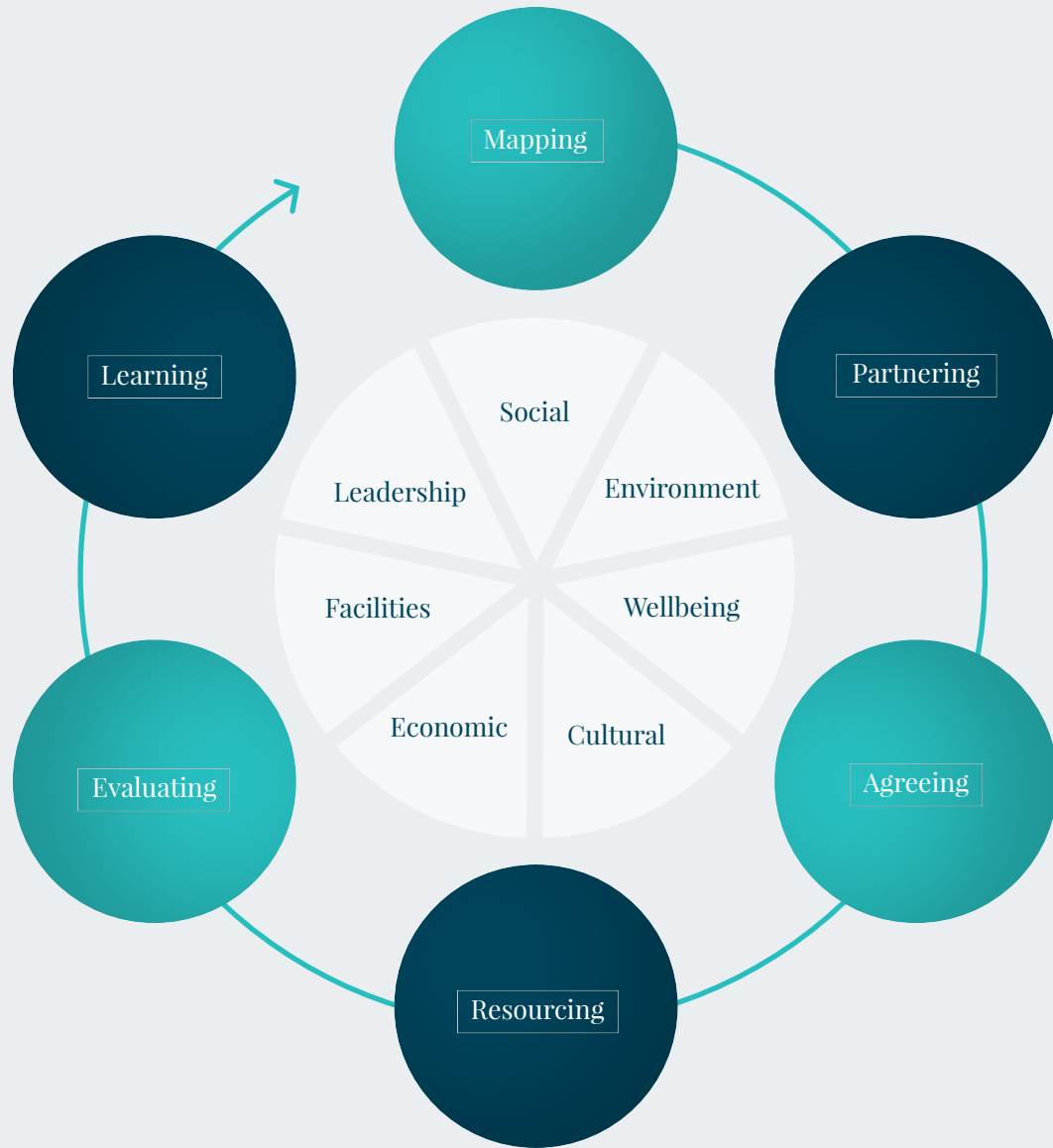
described above. As Jonathan Grant and others have argued, there is always risk of 'civic washing' and a potential gap between the rhetoric of civic engagement and what universities do in practice, particularly in those institutions whose reputations are firmly focused on international standings, rather than local citizens (Grant, 2022). As many UK universities navigate a particularly tight financial operating position, driven by a fixed (and diluted) fee resource, mixed domestic recruitment, and a volatile international market, there is a danger that 'civic' is deprioritised right when the local community needs it the most. This is where the NCIA's evidence base and outreach becomes even more important.

Civic and Policy

Beyond these targeted resources to help universities grapple with their 'civic mission', there are important synergies and connections to broader government priorities where a civic lens can help to re-enforce, re-frame, and re-energise policy development. A key aspect of the work of the Civic University Network has been to help identify key debates where civic perspectives and priorities can mobilise action on critical local and national agendas. This can be challenging because despite 'levelling up' being a dominant policy theme of the Conservative Government,

particularly under the leadership of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, much of government policy and research funding systems remain stubbornly place blind.

Since its establishment in 2020, the Network has worked on agendas ranging from reimagining the relationship between universities and the National Health Service – building on the effective place-based collaborations that happened at scale and at pace during the pandemic (Civic University Network, 2021). Within the climate action agenda, it has also explored how universities are supporting place and communities in a just transition to net zero (Civic University Network, 2021) and how by working collaboratively with partners in a geography can help deliver national leadership.

To look in more detail at one of these policy inventions, and specifically one related to education policy, the Civic University Network, in collaboration with the Independent Commission for the College of the Future, led an extensive piece of work on how Further Education (FE) Colleges (the equivalent to TAFE institutions in the Australian context) and universities could work more effectively together to transform lives and places. This is a long-standing UK policy dilemma, where both parts of

the sector are too often pitted against each other nationally and locally to the detriment of learners, employers, institutions and local geographies. This, my co-authors and I argued, was significantly undermining the capacity of the broader skills system to deliver on pressing societal challenges, rooted in local contexts, such as closing skills gaps, supporting economic recovery, and delivering on net-zero goals.

The report, *Going Further and Higher (Always; Cooper; Day & Morgan, 2022)*, found that unequal investment and a lack of clarity on the role that universities and colleges play has meant a significant waste of potential, leading to years of unnecessary tension. At the same time, the post-16 education and skills system can suffer from being too confusing and difficult to navigate for both students and employers, with competition between institutions exacerbating this.

In a set of recommendations targeted at both sector leaders and government, the report called for universities to agree and embrace the local geography and specialisms that already exist; to work with FE colleges to develop a cohesive education and skilled pathways offer for local people, employers and communities built around lifelong learning and removing inefficient duplication and competition and

delivered through a clear partnership arrangement.

At the same time, it called on governments to set an ambitious 10-year strategy for the entire skills system – something sorely lacking in England, with balanced investment and reinstated maintenance support. Importantly, the report called for government to set out distinct but complementary roles for colleges and universities as equal partners in a more coherent system that works for local people, employers and communities – and empowers these institutions to work more ambitiously and coherently for the local skills ecosystem.

Civic case study – Sheffield Hallam University

Thus far this paper has focused on how civic agendas play out in national debates and networks, but it is instructive to look in more detail at individual institutional experiences, as case studies in how organisations approach their civic journey through a more practical, local lens. As one of the largest and most diverse universities in the UK, Sheffield Hallam, my own institution, is a useful starting point.

A former polytechnic, with origins dating back to 1843, Sheffield Hallam is firmly rooted in the region that it serves.

Sheffield is a former steel capital, the fifth largest city in the UK, significantly shaped by the industrial revolution and struggling to articulate its place and future in the modern economy. Nestled within South Yorkshire, Sheffield is a city with high levels of deprivation, stark economic and social inequality, and poorly served by government investment and infrastructure.

Universities have become the lifeblood of Sheffield. In the 1970s, 70,000 people worked in the steel industry and there were 6,000 students in higher education in Sheffield. Today, those figures are reversed, with 70,000 students across two major universities. Our institution, Sheffield Hallam University attracts over 36,000 students, with 50% from within 40 miles of the institution – the vast majority of them first-in-family to attend university, and with over 78% of students with one or more markers of potential disadvantage. Place therefore matters at Hallam.

An early adopter of the CUA idea, we first set out to ask our key partners and residents to reflect on what we do and what they think we should be doing. In 2019, after much public outreach including at shopping centres and train stations, alongside external polling and targeted conversations with key partners, the results showed that we had work to do in terms of our impact and reach.

While 39% of respondents were either very proud (12%) or fairly proud (27%) of the role played by Sheffield Hallam in their region, a significant (38%) were completely indifferent. The results showed the need for us to improve understanding of our regional impact. There was also overwhelming message from 70% of respondents around which areas of our work they saw as most important. This included:

» **training more nurses, physiotherapists, paramedics and local health workers (79%);**

» **providing extra support for disadvantaged groups to study at university (75%); and,**

» **partnering with local businesses to ensure teaching provides work-ready students with the skills the region needs (70%).**

This public consultation, in addition to the work with key regional partners, directly informed the commitments outlined in our Civic University Agreement, ensuring that our plans were joined-up and support some of the key challenges and priorities identified by our partners and our local community.

In 2021, Sheffield Hallam launched its CUA with the central aspiration to deliver for the people in our local communities and to be a beacon of what's possible (Sheffield Hallam University. n.d.). Proudly a university 'of' place, working closely with regional partners, the CUA reflected how civic is aligned to our core purpose as an institution. It is part of our institutional fabric, our mission and our values – rather than some sort of bolt-on priority that never gets appropriate traction within an organisation.

The CUA set up concrete commitments against each priority area, and have empowered the institution to realign internal infrastructure to prioritise civic, with place perspectives and priorities at the heart of decision making.

Our commitments reflect the breadth and depth of reach and impact that universities can influence – ranging from driving a stronger economy and jobs; to delivering education and skills development; to supporting the health and wellbeing of local people; and engendering a sense of community and regeneration. They aim to be targeted, measurable, and impactful. Some examples include:

» **By 2022, every Hallam undergraduate will have a work experience or placement in every year of study;**

» **By 2024, we'll offer at least 2,500 work-based degree**

apprenticeships;

» **Providing all regional SMEs with easy access to business support and advice;**

» **Doubling the annual intake of students studying healthcare by 2025;**

» **Expanding our research to provide regional healthcare systems with innovations to improve local people's lives;**

» **Delivering campus redevelopment plans that significantly improves and acts as a major gateway to the city and provides new public green spaces; and**

» **Providing free access to facilities for regional and voluntary groups.**

Nearly two years on, we are proud to have delivered against these commitments and we are confident that we are having the desired impact and outreach within our community but there is much more to do. The process is now underway to refresh our CUA, enabling us to again measure our impact and to continuously test our approach, our priorities and our influence with local people and partners as part of an ongoing process. This, naturally, has to be set against the very real range of challenges still facing the city, which are arguably becoming even

more challenging in the face of the cost-of-living crisis, economic instability and a health and social case system on its knees. These challenges impact on every aspect of people's lives. No university can fix these systemic issues on their own – it requires long-term working and partnership for the common good. It speaks again to what being civic is all about – that moral purpose.

Civic structures and systems

Zoning back out from Sheffield Hallam to broader sector trends in the civic space, we are seeing increasing evidence of the civic mission changing the structures and systems within universities. We have already considered the rise of strategic civic infrastructure, in the form of CUAs and other formats which explicitly outline how and where a university will deliver for its region. Another recent trend is the increase in 'civic professionals'. An increasing number of universities are identifying senior leaders, often at Pro-Vice Chancellor or Deputy-Vice Chancellor level, who are the central advocate and champion of place-based agendas. These figures offer a visible symbol of the strategic importance and significance of civic agendas and are often supported by central 'civic teams' who might pull together knowledge exchange and public outreach

specialists, as well as experts on local agendas or characteristics.

Alongside these elements of people and leadership, we see increasing numbers of civic activities and platforms for engagement. Take, for example, the University of Derby's Civic Hub, a 'one-stop shop for all things civic' and the best place to find out about all the locally related projects, research programmes and initiatives that local partners get involved with (University of Derby. n.d.). At London Metropolitan University, the London Met Lab aims to bring together staff, students, partners and academic expertise to co-design solutions to the social challenges within the UK's capital (London Metropolitan University. n.d.). And in Wales, initiatives such as the North Wales Public Service Lab, led by Wrexham Glyndŵr University, is enabling people from across the public and third sector to come together to define problems, co-create solutions and share knowledge for the benefit of their local communities and region (Wrexham Glyndŵr University. n.d.).

Through CUN workshops to understand these approaches, it is striking how the investment is typically pretty modest – and focused on getting a strategic grip on existing activities, essentially to align resources to make the sum bigger than the parts in terms of civic outreach and investment.

These are deliberate investments in people and infrastructure to deliver change. But the gap between strategic intent and significant impact in places and communities remains a challenge, on which all institutions need to be able to honestly acknowledge and think through. At the same time, there is an ongoing challenge to the sector to reimagine and reframe existing levers and activities which are often core to a university, but through a place-based lens.

This is particularly the case because funding streams for place-based activity are diffuse and messy: there is no central funding pot or funding intent which draws these together. For example, universities are required to produce access and widening participation plans as well as knowledge-exchange strategies; as institutions we submit to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Teaching and Student Outcomes Excellence Framework (TEF), but there is no accountability or policy mechanism which brings these together or considers them through a place-based lens.

Figure 2 reflects what it all looks like in reality – a messy tangle of overlapping pots and priorities, with links of varying strengths to local agendas and partners, depending on
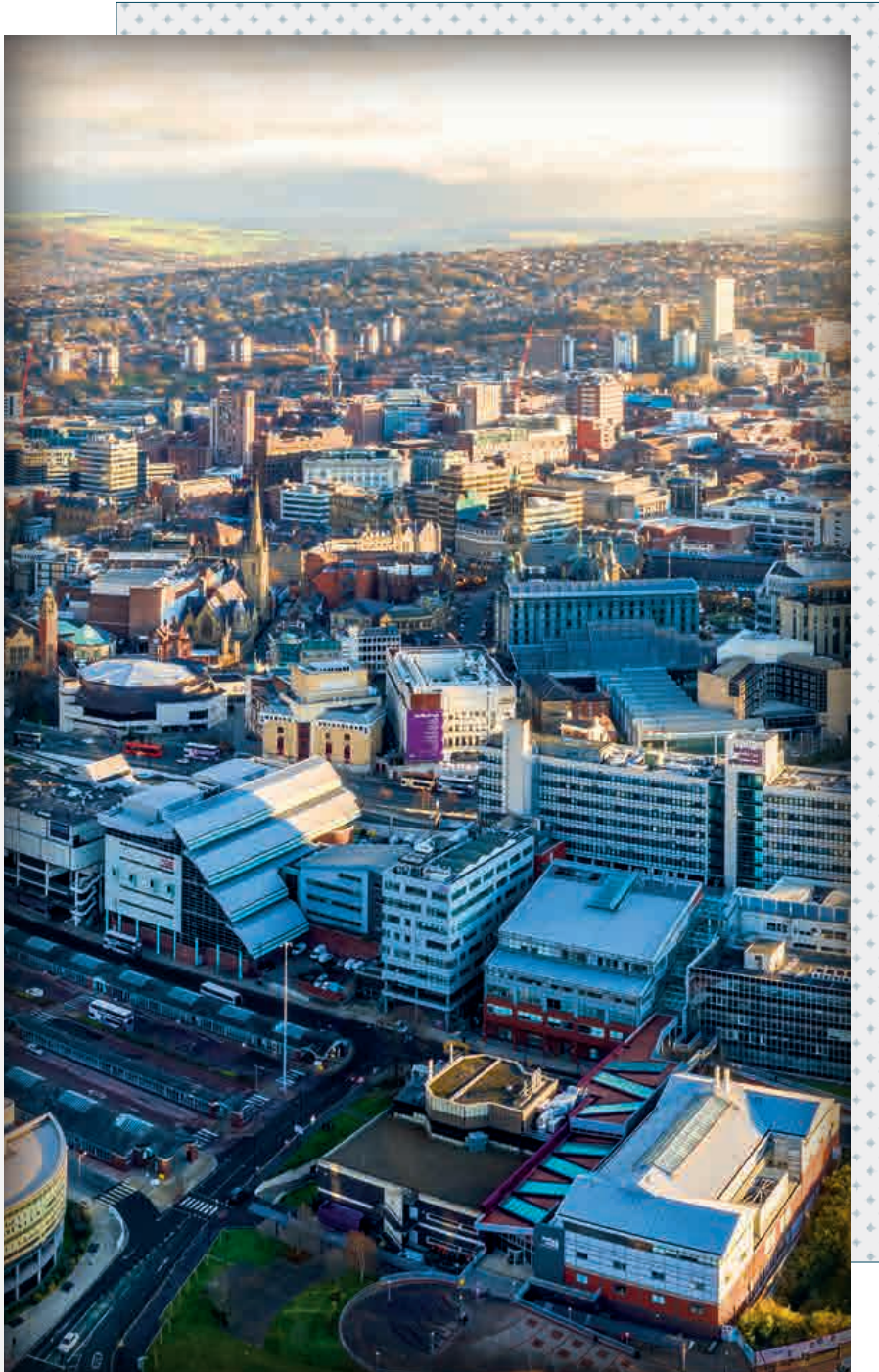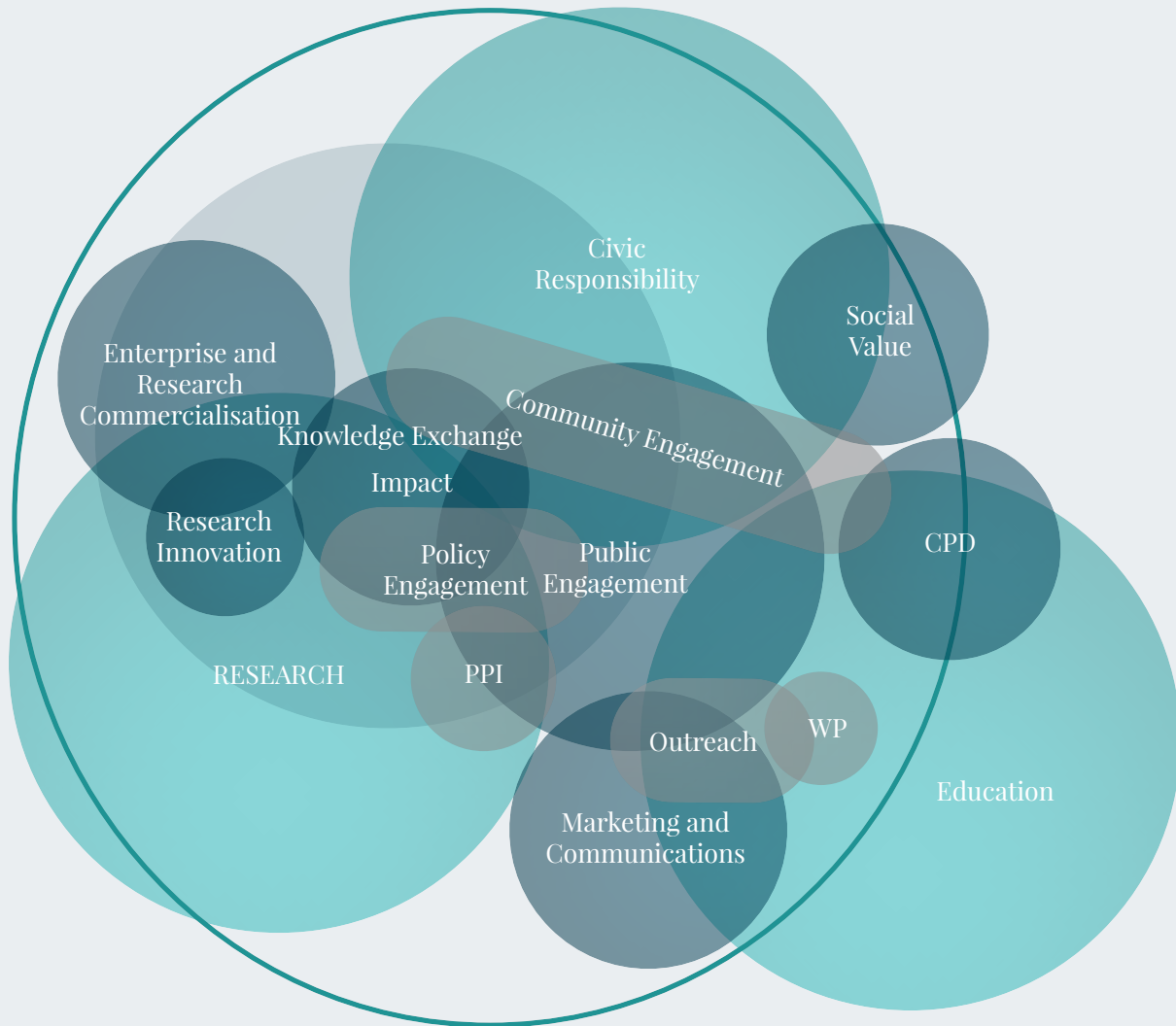
the institution's profile, priorities and geographies (Graphic courtesy of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. 2022). In practice, the multiple sources of funding and different policy imperatives have created in many universities a legacy of overlapping functions which are not necessarily efficiently or proactively aligned. The National Centre for Co-ordination and Public Engagement, our strategic partner in the CUN, has extensive experience working with university leadership teams to attempt to 'untangle' and re-organise their engagement activity to realise better strategic alignment, but this is challenging and slow work.

Civic and the Accord – implications for Australia

Much like the UK experience on the back of the Civic University Commission, Australia is at its own crossroads in terms of reimaging the purpose and potential of the sector to drive positive change and respond to the modern complexities and contradictions of the societies in which they serve. The University Accord ambitiously seeks to reshape the Australian education landscape over a 30-year horizon, with a vast remit ranging from access and accountability to investment, international education

Figure 2 | *Funding civic*

- Civic Responsibility
- Social Value
- Enterprise and Research Commercialisation
- Community Engagement
- Knowledge Exchange
- Impact
- CPD
- Research Innovation
- Policy Engagement
- Public Engagement
- RESEARCH
- PPI
- Outreach
- WP
- Education
- Marketing and Communications

and innovation. The Accord process has a significantly wider scope than the UK equivalent of the Augar Review of Post-16 Education and Funding, which reported in 2019 to much fanfare under the then Prime Minister Theresa May. Now, over four years - and four Prime Ministers, and five different Universities Ministers - later, our sector has only recently received a rather lacklustre official government response to some controversial proposals around student number controls, minimum entry requirements, and fee adjustments to foundation level degrees. This prolonged delay has created a clear tension between government and universities, as a state of uncertainty has eroded our capacity for these more imaginative and creative conversations about the future direction of our sector and our funding position becomes increasingly precarious.

As a jealous observer from afar, the Accord conversation appears more positively framed through a genuine desire to reset the sector on a more proactive footing to ensure that universities are best placed to respond to societal needs for an Australia 30 years hence. Connections to 'community' are central, albeit with a broad interpretation of what community is – ranging from local geographical communities to communities of practice, student communities, cultural communities, business communities and beyond. This may be an implicit reflection of a more inclusive, positive framing of university policy from a new Labour government, or it may be a more permanent reflection of policy direction post pandemic, where community and belonging are more central.

National benchmarking?

There is already growing momentum in Australia for a deeper understanding of the 'civic' or community benefit that universities can provide. Similar to the Civic University movement in the UK, the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification approach has been gaining traction in Australia. This model aspires to help universities to demonstrate their commitment to the communities they serve and to share good practices in the sector. First developed in the USA in 2006, this international outreach pilot programme has sought to support reciprocal partnerships between communities and the higher education sector in Australia, Ireland and Canada since 2016 (Engagement Australia. n.d.).

Amongst the numerous consultation responses to the Accord process, sector bodies such as Engagement Australia have argued for more widespread adoption of the Carnegie Framework to provide a national benchmark from which to build capacity and evidence engaged practice. This seems like a sensible approach as it is through more robust understandings and evidence of impact and outreach that universities can realise their potential to drive change and reach communities around them. There is, however, some benefit from a flexibility in approach – what connects the University of Wollongong to the University of Western Australia might not always be obvious and institutions need to forge the civic path that works best for their geography and their institution. While we encouraged the adoption of the CUA model in UK, it was not exclusive. Institutions could develop their own approach. The key objective was not for a hegemonized approach but for a mindset shift for the sector to embrace more strategic place-based alignment.

Whatever model is used, there is also a clear opportunity to connect more explicitly to existing infrastructure and approaches internationally, such as the NCIA and the Civic University Network in the UK, in order to build expertise and shared experience through international networks and exchange.

Regional University Centres

One of the flagship ideas of the Accord's Interim Report is the creation

of 14 new Regional University Centres, driven by an ambitious policy aim to unlock opportunities for higher education outside the major cities, with the dual purpose of making the entire system more equitable and turbocharging participation rates to deliver a highly skilled workforce.

While the geography and demography are quite different from the UK, Australia has also struggled with persistently low levels of attainment in regional and remote areas – with just under 27 per cent of participation rates in inner regional areas; 21 per cent in outer regional; and just 16.6 per cent in remote and very remote areas. At the same time, big city dwellers are twice as likely to have a higher education qualification than those in regional or remote Australia – entrenching divides of aspiration and attainment. Australian students are also more likely to stay-at-home during study, meaning that if university provision is not available in their immediate geography, they are less likely to move to pursue it.

Policy interventions which create more opportunities and address educational cold spots are therefore critical. But importantly, these regional hubs must be accompanied by the infrastructure and incentives to raise aspiration within disadvantaged groups through effective school outreach and mentoring,

and importantly, through financial support mechanisms and appropriate maintenance subsidies.

Civic can also be a powerful friend here. Smaller campuses in regional or remote areas are uniquely placed to connect with local councils, employers, and public services through Regional Advisory Boards, placement programmes, secondments, locally relevant research and innovation, as well as physical infrastructure, through shared facilities. In a recent visit to La Trobe's Wodonga Campus, one was struck by the local dog walking group sharing the café with students and staff, swapping notes on upcoming activities on and off campus. But most importantly, embedding civic partnerships from the outset, potentially through a regional CUA, provides an opportunity to articulate joint objectives of driving skills in that region, raising aspirations – particularly for younger generations, while also aiming to address inequality and reinvigorate regional centres.

There is, of course, history here. Many communities have felt let down and often ignored by small regional campuses who are beholden to the main campus in the big city and failed to engage locally. Again, the civic mission provides a pathway through this – with benefits for all sides, but

it needs to be genuine, based on partnership, shared objectives and trust. Leadership matters, for example. There needs to be a visual regional leader within the university structure to be the voice, champion and critical friend within and outside the university. Within universities, this is particularly important to ensure that students have parity of esteem, whether they are in Sydney or Shepperton, through a 'one-university' approach to service delivery, quality provision, and appropriate infrastructure.

Civic suggestions

The Accord presents an opportunity for both government and the sector to reset the relationship of universities and their communities. But there are opportunities and obligations on both sides. Policy priorities and funding levers have huge potential to drive positive change and realign objectives to a more civic orientation. At the same time, there is much that universities can and should do, regardless of the broader policy landscape. Below are some starting suggestions for both government and for the sector to consider, drawing on the UK experience and recognising the opportunity presented by the Accord process.

Recommendations for Government:

Accompany ambition with investment to turbocharge participation and progression so all students can reach their full potential wherever their live. The Interim Accord report sets out the scale of the challenge – with more than nine in ten new jobs requiring post-school qualifications, and 50 per cent of new jobs expected to require a bachelor's degree or higher by 2026 (Australian Government. 2022 & 2023). All of which requires 'substantial growth in participation from cohorts currently underrepresented in Australian higher education.' This won't happen overnight, and it won't happen without sustained systematic and structural funding, at all stages of the education system.

Systematise and incentivise participation through compulsory Access and Participation Plans which put a much-valued spotlight on the profile and support mechanisms in place to attract, retain and support students from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Drawing inspiration from the English model, overseen by the Office for Students, these compulsory four-year plans would require all Australian universities to set out how they will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to boost participation, including robust targets and outlines of how institutions will measure and evaluate impact, investment and interventions (The Office for Students. n.d.).

Embrace the role of universities in driving positive change in local regions and address regional inequalities, working in partnership with governments. This means recognising and leveraging the potential of universities to deliver broader social and economic policy objectives, in more creative ways, in policy domains where universities might not be obvious delivery agents.

Be creative through research structures & policy levers which put place at the centre, incentivising universities to focus 'local', with an emphasis on impact as key. The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a helpful reference here, with 'impact' valued at 25% of the institution's overall score. While not without challenges, this has led to an important culture shift within institutional research strategies to value and prioritise the potential of research to generate real-world positive impacts. Impact, as described by REF, is not descriptively focused on local impact – and arguably this could be made more prominent – but it has led to more locally-focused research organically.

Embed a more connected and coherent post-18 system based on partnerships, focused on local skills needs. In a recent policy 'manifesto' authored with Professor Sir Chris Husbands ahead of the UK election next year, we argued for a modest funding pot to drive higher and further education collaboration in areas where advanced training provision is under-developed – particularly in those towns and smaller cities which do not have a university presence. The new Regional University Campuses could be central to this type of collaboration, alongside national strategies, funding and accountability system which address unproductive competition and tension.

Recommendations for Universities:

The UK experience shows that there is much that can be done, particularly in the absence of policy incentives, and that this is important in signalling the commitment of a university to they local region and community. Drawing on this, the following recommendations are offered to Australian universities:

Reorientate towards strategic place-based agenda, recognising their university's power as an anchor institution and - leveraging the enormous depth and reach of universities within their region, beyond teaching and learning.

Agree on local geography and place partnerships at the centre. With multiple campuses or spawling urban boundaries, it is important to identify where an institution wants to have most impact, and with whom they wish to work to drive positive local change. This can be complicated and different campuses may need more nuanced approaches, but a clearer sense of place and purpose is vital.

Identify and champion core priorities for civic impact, based on consultation – 'with' rather than 'to' the communities and partners within your place. This might then be articulated through a public mechanism like the CUA or the Carnegie Framework, but it must be authentic, deliverable and ambitious, with regular review mechanisms and accompanied by a robust evidence-gathering approach to understand if and where impact is happening as a result of these priorities.

Make civic core to your institution mission and structures – not a bolt on. From the Vice-Chancellor down, civic needs to be embedded in your institutional culture and character if it is to be genuine.

Embed impact incentives, measurement and evaluation in structures and systems throughout the institution, to ensure a robust understanding of what's working and what's not. Fortunately, the international evidence base is growing in this emerging field, with the NCIA and the OECD important players in this space. Establishing expectations from the outset is key, particularly in terms of making the case to government and other potential funders down the track.

Get better as a sector at articulating civic missions, sharing best practice, being a good partner, and ensuring join-up. The UK's Civic University Network serves an important purpose in this regard, in terms of providing a central hub and resource for universities, partners and policy-makers to help leverage the power of the sector to drive positive change. A similar network or hub, potentially through Engagement Australia or another established mechanism, would be beneficial to building momentum and cross-institutional collaboration and exchange.

Get beyond participation and progression targets to really make a difference in local communities, recognising that this is a shared and collective endeavour between schools and universities. Addressing the barriers to widening participation holds the key to greater social justice and speaks directly to our moral obligation as anchor institutions in our towns and regions.

And finally, **don't wait** - civic reorientation doesn't need to be government policy for effective action. There is much that can be done with modest resource but powerful positioning, building on the vast array of existing partnerships and place-based impact.

Civic Conclusions

The rise of the civic university agenda within the UK higher education sector has coincided with a critical point in the economic, political and social future of the country. Of the many challenges facing the UK, whether it is equity or inequality, productivity or participation, universities can help find creative solutions to entrenched problems. The challenge is whether the civic agenda, unsupported by policy agendas and undermined by increasing financial pressures on the sector, can continue to deliver the momentum and impacts required to drive change locally. Given the increasing economic and social challenges facing local communities, this civic agenda has arguably never been more important.

For Australia, the Accord process presents a real opportunity and the energy and enthusiasm for resetting relations between the government and the sector is hugely positive. There is a risk that expectations become

unmanageable or unattainable, particularly within constrained fiscal pressures and amongst a set of other important questions for the future of the sector – around research, around funding, and around international students. This is why it's important for both policy makers and sector leaders to have honest conversations about what's needed and what's possible both now and longer-term. Civic can take many forms, but its potential is powerful.

Natalie Day
Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom

Natalie Day is Head of Policy and Strategy at Sheffield Hallam University in the United Kingdom, and has over 20 years of experience in government, think tanks, national academics and universities. An Australian who started her career working as an electoral officer for the Honourable Julia Gilliard and then as a special adviser to the then Victorian Treasurer, John Brumby, Natalie moved to the UK where she first undertook senior policy roles at Demos, the influential think tank, and then at the Royal Society. Natalie has worked at the interface of research, education and policy at the universities of Melbourne, Oxford, Sussex, Sheffield and most recently, Sheffield Hallam. She has written extensively about the role of universities in society, including the influential report, 'Making University Matter: how higher education can help to heal a divided Britain', co-authored with Professor Sir Chris Husbands and the late (and much missed) Lord Bob Kerslake. She was one of the founding members of the UK's Civic University Network, and a passionate supporter of the robust interchange of policy ideas and experience between Australia and the UK. She is a graduate of RMIT and Deakin universities

Reference

Alway, P. Cooper, L; Day, N & Morgan, L. (2022, February) Going Further and higher: how collaboration between colleges and universities can transform lives and places. Civic University Network; Sheffield Hallam University, The College of the Future. https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Going-Further-and-Higher-English.pdf

Australian Government. (2022, November). Review of Australia's Higher Education System – Terms of Reference, https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/terms-reference & Australian Government. (2023, July). Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/accord-interim-report

Bell, S (2019). Re-Imaging the University as Anchor Institution, Transform, No 4, 9-16. https://engagementaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Article-1_TRANSFORM_-No-4-2019_Re-imaging-the-university-as-anchor-institution.pdf

BBC (2021, 8 June). EU referendum: The results in maps and charts. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36616028

Calvert, R. (2023, 10 May). Leading with Impact – how universities can maximise their impact on place. HEPI. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/05/10/leading-with-impact-how-universities-can-maximise-their-impact-on-place/

Civic University Network. (n.d.).https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/

Civic University Network. (n.d.). Case Studies, Reports and Toolkits. https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/case-studies-reports-toolkits/

Civic University Network. (n.d.). Civic Policy Resources. https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/civic-policy-resources/

Civic University Network. (n.d.). Guide to creating a Civic University Agreement. https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/cua-guide/

Civic University Network. (n.d.). The Civic Impact Framework. https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/civic-impact-framework/

Civic University Network, (2021, December) Reimagining the relationship between universities & the NHS. https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Reimagining-the-relationship-between-universities-the-NHS.pdf

Civic University Network. (2021, December) Connecting Climate: How Civic University Agreements can be used to prioritise the climate action agenda. https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Connecting-Climate-CUN-Report.pdf

Civic University Network; National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. (2022, March) Resourcing our Civic Ambition: discussion paper. https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Resourcing-our-Civic-Ambition-Discussion-Paper-March.pdf

Engagement Australia. (n.d.). Carnegie Community Engagement Network. https://engagementaustralia.org.au/carnegie/

Grant, J. (2022, 17 January). Are universities "civic washing"? Wonkhe. https://wonkhe.com/blogs/are-universities-civic-washing/

Grove, J (2016, 22 June). Brexit will 'impoverish' universities, say v-cs. Times Higher Education. https://timeshighereducation.com/cn/news/brexit-will-impoverish-universities-say-v-cs?source=post_page-----7b91c18e317

London Metropolitan University. (n.d.). London Met Lab. https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/about/london-met-lab/

Sheffield Hallam University. (n.d.). Our Civic University Agreement. https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-us/our-role-in-the-region/civic-university-agreement

The Office for Students. (n.d.). Access and Participation Plans. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/

University of Derby. CIVIC HUB. https://www.derby.ac.uk/civic/

UPP Foundation (2019). Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places. https://www.upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf

Wrexham Glyndŵr University. Leadership, Governance and Whole Systems Working. https://wrexham.ac.uk/about/civic-mission/leadership-and-whole-systems-working/