



CHAPTER 9

University-Civic Engagement in the Time of the Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

The arrival of a global pandemic would seem to require a wide-ranging response from those universities that have committed themselves to making a contribution to society and to their local areas. The nature of the challenge presented by the pandemic has been extensive affecting both the health of citizens and the economy as well as other impacts from the various lockdowns and restrictions. That universities have a relevance to so many aspects of the impact highlights the range of domains in which universities can take an active part in civic society. The problem though was that universities, like many other organisations, were quickly placed under lockdown. How then did universities respond to the crisis and become involved in measures to address the immediate health problems, but also some of the longer-term challenges arising from the effects of the lockdowns? What lessons can be learned from this for university civic engagement in the longer term?

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In the UK, the pandemic arrived at a time when many universities were actively developing civic engagement agreements with their host cities and seeking to present themselves as civic universities in response to a Civic University Commission which reported in 2019 (UPP Foundation CUC, 2019). New civic partnerships were emerging, in some cases involving more than one university in a city with a remit that often encompassed health as well as economic and social development. These partnerships were swiftly repositioned to deal with COVID-19 as cities developed emergency plans to cope with the immediate effects of the pandemic and started to build a response to the economic shutdown. Universities were largely closed down with all teaching and, where possible, research switched to online, although some life science facilities were kept open where they were directly involved in the fight against the disease. Yet the universities were also called upon to participate in a wide range of responses to the crisis.

This chapter will examine the responses made by universities in Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK, working with specific local partners or in civic consortia. It will examine the nature of the relationships developed and the steps taken, particularly in terms of the internal organisational responses that emerged. These are placed within the conceptual framework of the engaged or civic university as a form of “quadruple helix”.

THE ROOTS OF THE CIVIC UNIVERSITY IN THE UK

The arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020 came at a critical time for UK universities which were already pivoting towards the concept of the civic university. Over the preceding couple of decades there had been something of a waxing and waning of university attitudes towards regional engagement. The early 2000s had seen considerable policy support for university-regional engagement under a Labour government (Kagan & Diamond, 2019) with the active involvement of newly established regional development agencies in England, and with the Higher Education Funding Council encouraging the development of higher education (HE) regional associations (Benneworth & Sanderson, 2009). Post 2010, the new Conservative coalition government abolished the English regional development agencies, replacing them with less well-resourced, more localised, bodies and universities fell back into a more localist agenda (Charles et al., 2014), with some universities abandoning a regional focus in favour of an emphasis on global research rankings. In 2019 there was a

resumption of a focus on engagement though, under the civic university banner, as a Commission set up by an HE think-tank delivered a report arguing in favour of greater local action on the part of universities (UPP Foundation CUC, 2019).

“Regional” and “local” in the UK context have very specific meanings, which are to some extent consistent with sub-national divisions in other European countries. England is divided into nine regions, roughly comparable in size to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and these had been the basis for the regional development agencies (RDAs) of the 2000s, and high-level spatial economic planning. Below this are the local authorities, which form a local scale of government. This has been complicated by a Conservative-led government which created a new set of local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) in England, as light-touch economic development agencies which covered several local authorities but were much smaller than the old RDAs (38 compared with 9 regions). Subsequently, a number of city-region combined authorities have also been created in which a mayor and a small team collaborate with a group of local authorities often with a different geography to the LEPs. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as devolved authorities were unaffected by these changes.

Much has been written on university regional engagement in recent years under a variety of conceptual headings, some analytical, some more normative (Uyarra, 2010). In this chapter we take a holistic view and focus on the idea of the engaged or civic university and its role in complex regional partnerships. Much policy on university regional engagement has focused on the role of universities in supporting business or regional economic development, in which the university acts as a source of technological knowledge for industry—a “knowledge factory” (Youtie & Shapira, 2008)—or else plays a key role in the regional innovation system (Cooke, 2005). The “triple helix” concept explores how universities and governments work together with business to commercialise technology, using the metaphor of three strands intertwined (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997). Yet alongside these business relationships universities also play a much broader role in their local communities and it is this which we might term the “engaged university”.

The engaged university concept goes somewhat further than other models in its expectations that the university will play an active role across a wide variety of policy domains in its region, adapting to and seeking to shape the region, playing its part in regional governance and contributing to the social, cultural and economic life of the region (Uyarra, 2010). This

broader role dates back at least to the OECD report on the “University and the Community” (1982) which looked beyond the usual interactions with business to different conceptions of the community and their diverse interests and needs, and how universities could better organise themselves to address community problems (further developed in OECD, 2007).

In the UK, reports by Goddard et al. (1994) and Charles and Benneworth (2001) sought to identify the wider impact of universities on their regions, looking beyond the economic and business impact to culture, social, health, environmental and regeneration effects. Breznitz and Feldman (2012) go beyond the idea of the third mission to propose five fundamental roles. After teaching and research they identify knowledge transfer, policy development and economic initiatives. Proponents of the triple helix extend their concept to the quadruple helix by including the community as an additional partner alongside university, industry and government (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009).

In the US, two emerging concepts have coincided with the idea of the engaged university: stewardship of place and anchor institutions, both of which relate to the responsibilities that universities have to their cities and regions as well as the impact that they have.

Stewardship of place is an idea promoted by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) in a report in 2002 which focused on translating the rhetoric of engagement into actions (AASCU, 2002).

The publicly engaged institution is fully committed to direct, two-way interaction with communities and other external constituencies through the development, exchange, and application of knowledge, information, and expertise for mutual benefit. (AASCU, 2002, 9)

Central to this thinking is the idea that place matters.

AASCU (2005) also speaks about an unwritten contract which

In its simplest form, (...) calls on institutions to provide broad access to educational opportunity and to pursue teaching, research, and service designed to meet public needs. For its part, government would provide adequate support (to keep student costs at an acceptable minimum), appropriate lay governance, and an articulation of those public needs and priorities. (AASCU, 2005, 3)

A related idea that has also emerged from the US is that of anchor institutions. Harkavy and Zuckerman (1999) identified universities and hospitals (eds and meds) as large, fixed assets for cities with particular characteristics beyond the creation of jobs and economic activity. They ‘conduct research and impart technical expertise on their students and workers. In an era increasingly dependent on knowledge-based industries, these institutions contribute to a more experienced and educated workforce, a resource desirable in all cities. Furthermore, their economic activities foster an entrepreneurial spirit and attract additional economic growth’ (Harkavy & Zuckerman, 1999, 2). The term “anchor institution” emerged at around the same time from the work of the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives (Fullbright-Anderson et al., 2001) as a description for such institutions as universities and hospitals, ‘institutions that have a significant infrastructure investment in a specific community and are therefore unlikely to move out of that community’ (Fullbright-Anderson et al., 2001, 2). As these institutions are relatively immobile, their ability to operate successfully, attract and retain staff and students depends on the quality of the surrounding urban environment, and their self-interest requires them to engage with the local community when faced with challenges of urban decline.

Many US universities in the late twentieth century had engaged in urban regeneration projects in partnership with local communities for just this purpose. Communities also provide developmental and research opportunities for staff and students through service-learning programmes. However, communities also saw universities as large faceless organisations that acquired large blocks of land for future developments. Jane Jacobs had earlier identified this tendency and its destructive effect on the vitality of streets in the *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Jacobs, 1961). So, the anchor institution debate focused on how to make use of the potential that universities had to play a more positive role in the development of the places in which they were based.

The four main characteristics of an anchor institution are spatial immobility, corporate status, scale and mission (Taylor & Luter, 2013). Spatial immobility is seen as a key characteristic as it is the rootedness of the organisation in a particular place and its inability to move to a better location that forces the organisation to engage in place management and community development. The ties through sunk capital and some form of spatial mission make relocation unimaginable (Maurrasse, 2007), and

these organisations become a rock for the local economy, maintaining employment when times are hard.

The corporate status of anchor institutions tends to be public and non-profit in nature. Many contributors to this literature argue that private sector organisations cannot be true anchor institutions as their continued presence depends on ongoing profitability, and is thus subject to some form of uncertainty. Thus, whilst anchor institutions may include universities, hospitals, art galleries and other cultural facilities, banks and other private sector bodies are usually excluded even if they have a programme of local philanthropic investment.

Size is also important in that the larger organisations have a greater economic and social impact, and anchor institutions are often some of the largest local employers. There is no size threshold, but there is general agreement that large size is an important factor (Taylor & Luter, 2013). More critical perhaps is the nature of the mission: anchor institutions should have a socially responsible mission. So, moving beyond potential to actual performance of the anchor institution role requires an institution to recognise its social responsibility and take actions as part of its mission through perhaps local partnerships with the community (Maurrasse, 2001).

The idea of the anchor institution fits neatly with the concept of the engaged university in that it recognises the responsibilities of the university as well as the diversity of roles. The anchor university is not just a passive fixed point as the maritime metaphor would suggest, but it takes on its responsibilities to its home location out of a sense of mutual benefit as well as duty or altruism. The engaged university recognises its connections with its surroundings and a need to work with those connections for mutual benefit. Many UK universities enthusiastically adopted the concept of the anchor institution.

A particular challenge for the university has been how to engage with disadvantaged communities, often on the very doorstep of the university, although also at a distance in more rural locations. Often seen by universities in terms of access to education for disadvantaged individuals, there is a moral obligation on universities to support activities that address wider community needs as well (Benneworth, 2013). More specifically, though, there are a variety of drivers for such community engagement: the university as a good citizen; accessing external resources for mutual benefit; addressing important research questions; making links to important recruitment markets; ethical commitment and personal advancement for individual academics (Benneworth et al., 2013). A variety of responses

have emerged as universities, and more often groups of academics, have set up initiatives to support community engagement (Hart et al., 2007).

Such developments have led to the re-emergence and repositioning of the term “civic university” in recent times (Goddard, 2009, 2012). The idea of the civic university is an old concept in the UK, albeit at times contested in meaning. The term “civic university” was initially applied to universities which emerged in the English cities from the late nineteenth century. Also known as “redbricks” after the dominant building material, and later as “big civics” when newer smaller institutions emerged, these universities were differentiated from Oxford and Cambridge as ancient universities in smaller cities, as well as the four ancient universities in Scotland despite the latter including Edinburgh and Glasgow. The civics emerged though in a time when there was strong demand from the big cities for locally embedded higher education which could serve the interests of local industry and society more generally, a demand that was usually demonstrated through financial support from the local business community (Whyte, 2016).

With the “nationalisation” of UK university funding during the twentieth century, the emergence of many other universities with different characters and a growing emphasis on research, the civic universities tended to reposition themselves as national research-intensive universities, latterly as part of the Russell Group universities, whilst some of the 1960s universities never really adopted a regional focus. Regional engagement continued but with a low level of visibility and so it was only since the 1990s that engagement became more prevalent and embodied more explicitly in university mission statements.

The term “civic university” became popularised again in the 2010s through the work of Goddard, with Newcastle University’s then vice-chancellor Chris Brink committing the university to becoming a new kind of civic university. This idea was taken up in a Civic University Commission established by the UPP Foundation, a charitable foundation established by a student housing company, under the chairmanship of Lord Bob Kerslake, retired head of the Home Civil Service, and a former chief executive of Sheffield City Council. The report of the Commission emphasised the importance of the connection of universities and place, recognised that universities made a huge contribution to their communities, but suggested that a true civic university needed to have a strategic focus on a defined place, and proposed they established civic university agreements with their local partners (UPP, 2019).

This new definition of the civic university is not restricted to particular groups of universities. The UPP report acknowledged that many of the Russell Group universities, although global research universities, still had a focus on their local areas linking back to their origins. Yet over the years many other new universities have developed a strong local orientation and a commitment as anchor institutions. Indeed, the report stresses that rather than seeing one university in a city of several taking on the civic university role, it may be better for universities of different types to collaborate together within their community each bringing different strengths to bear.

The political salience of the idea of the civic university in England particularly from 2019 is critical. The decade or so leading up to that point had seen a slipping of the regional agenda in HE in England. The UK government from 2010 had made a number of changes in sub-national governance in England with the abolition of regional development agencies (RDAs) and the weakening of governance at the regional level (Bentley et al., 2010). This has been replaced with more local-level governance institutions, with the local enterprise partnerships at sub-regional or city-regional level, and a variety of devolutionary deals for groups of local councils also at city-regional level (Shutt & Liddle, 2019). These shifts undermined the rationale for the regional associations of universities, which had been set up alongside the RDAs, and all except Yorkshire were abandoned in favour of new more local partnerships in some places, and also more thematic collaborations (see Harrison et al., 2015). Regional or local engagement became more ad hoc and opportunistic, with universities looking to build links where they could see advantages rather than driven by a strong regional partnership. It is important here to note that this was not the case in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where the devolved governments were responsible for HE and economic development, and maintain a strong policy for the territorial engagement of universities.

A second dynamic was the consequence of a massive increase in tuition fees to £9000 per annum which provided the universities with a very favourable financial settlement at a time of general public austerity but reinforced a process of competition for students (domestic and international), with universities seeking to use the additional funding to enhance their competitive position with campus development and investment in staff and research facilities. This changed the dynamic of relationships with local partners as universities focused on physical development, including

new student accommodation, looking to their partners to help facilitate planning permission rather than expecting financial support. Partners also looked at universities somewhat resentfully as their own budgets were cut dramatically whilst universities prospered. There was a general tendency to see universities as becoming more internally focused on student facilities and student attraction, although some of this investment was useful in supporting wider urban regeneration and filling gap sites in cities with student housing. At the same time, the new student housing in city centres tended to slightly reduce some of the conflicts between students and local residents in some inner-city areas where students lived in rented houses.

A third key event was Brexit. Universities, staff and students were strongly in favour of retaining EU membership, as were graduates, and universities were generally appalled at the vote to leave. Universities had typically not played a strong role in the debate over Brexit but were clearly in favour of “remain”: philosophically, with a strong self-interest in free movement, and practically, with a strong engagement in EU programmes such as Horizon 2020 and Erasmus. For many communities who saw themselves as left behind in the push for globalisation, typically those places without universities, there was little sympathy for the university position which was seen as self-serving and detached.

Whilst university towns tended to vote more strongly “remain” than their surroundings, there was a concern that universities had somehow failed these wider communities in not getting across the benefits of EU membership, or indeed not ensuring that the benefits had been more widely shared. There was a sense, prompted by some in the Conservative Party that the country had had enough of experts telling people what to do and ignoring issues of identity and entrenched disadvantage. Populist politicians made use of these arguments for their own benefit, often against the self-interests of their voters, and fuelled by numerous untruths, but the universities came out of this period considerably bruised.

The concept of the civic university was thus an ideal opportunity for universities to re-engage with local communities, re-establish their credibility and develop new relationships. With the announcement of a call for civic university agreements linking universities and local partners, there was a rush by university vice-chancellors to sign up to this, and universities started a dialogue with local stakeholders on what the civic university agreement might contain.

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE CASE STUDY

The core case study is of the city of Newcastle and its two universities and the way in which an emerging civic university framework was adapted into a COVID response group. Additionally, in both universities there were a variety of more local responses at faculty and departmental levels addressing both the immediate health needs and the long-term economic revival of the city. The central question is the extent to which these responses involved a shift in the strategy and capacity for local engagement, beyond the immediate crisis. The Newcastle case is comparable with responses in other UK universities particularly through the civic university movement.

Newcastle upon Tyne is the regional capital of the North East region of England, on the North Sea coast immediately south of Scotland. The core city authority has a population of just over 300,000, but the wider metropolitan region has a population of over 1.5 million. The city has experienced considerable economic challenges due to the transition from traditional industries during the twentieth century and still lags behind the south of England on most economic and social indicators. However, there are two large universities in the centre of the city and there has been dynamic growth around digital technologies in the city itself.

Newcastle University is an old established research university, a member of the Russell Group of civic research universities with a medical school and a full range of disciplines. It has 28,000 students and a budget of over £500 million. Northumbria University is a former polytechnic with roots dating back to the nineteenth century but incorporated as a university in 1992. It has strengths in business, engineering, and health and also has around 28,000 students but with a budget of around £255 million. Both universities have a long history of local engagement and for many years from the mid-1980s were both part of a regional association, latterly known as Universities for the North East (UNE), which coordinated local collaboration and engagement. This association was dissolved around 2012 (Charles et al., 2014). In the wider region there are three other universities, of which two, Durham and Sunderland, are relatively close to, or part of, the metropolitan area. Durham is another leading Russell Group university, whilst Sunderland is very much a locally focused institution.

The case study of Newcastle was compiled from direct personal experience of involvement in the development of the university civic agreement, plus documents, press releases and meeting minutes in the public domain.

The case study of Newcastle can be seen in four main stages: a pre-pandemic move towards greater collaboration and re-engagement at a local level; an immediate response to the emerging health crisis in early 2020; interventions and preparations to address the economic problems arising from the pandemic; and planning for the future with the aim of ‘building back better’ and levelling up.

PRE-PANDEMIC AND THE CIVIC UNIVERSITY AGREEMENT

With the launch of the Civic University Commission report in 2019 there was a call for universities to commit to negotiating a civic university agreement with local partners, usually anticipated as being the host local authority and other key public sector organisations in the locality. The two universities in Newcastle responded positively to the call with both institutions signing up early to an intent to develop such agreements. In the case of Newcastle this was not surprising given that John Goddard as deputy chair of the Civic University Commission was also a former deputy vice-chancellor of Newcastle. Newcastle had recently created a position of Dean of Engagement, now Pro-Vice Chancellor, to pursue its civic mission, and appointed a former local authority chief executive. Northumbria also had a PVC Business and Enterprise who looked after the regeneration portfolio, as well as a PVC for Employability and Partnerships with a focus on regional engagement (subsequently she was also appointed the chair of the Local Enterprise Partnership, after standing down from a six-year term as chair of the board of the regional chamber of commerce). So, both institutions had placed the engagement with regional partners at a senior level in the university executive.

The creation of senior leadership posts relating to engagement in both universities reflects a long-term commitment. The five universities in the wider North East region first came together to form a collaboration in 1986 called Higher Education Support for Industry in the North, later renamed Universities for the North East (UNE) to reflect a breadth of interests that went well beyond industry. The initial aim had been to support the revival of industry in the region after the deindustrialisation of the early 1980s. The association became formalised as a joint company and developed through the 2000s, with a close relationship with the region’s RDA One NorthEast, and developed a number of successful regional programmes (Benneworth & Sanderson, 2009; Charles, 2007). With the abolition of the RDA, however, and the division of the region into two

LEPs, the universities dissolved the regional association and focused their attentions more locally, working more with local authorities (Charles et al., 2014). In Newcastle both institutions still supported a wide range of local initiatives though, ranging from European Regional Development Fund projects on innovation, to Northumbria's law clinic providing free legal advice to the public, and research on various aspects of deprivation and health inequalities. Newcastle University in particular was developing a large innovation district in partnership with the City Council, initiated as part of a Science City strategy a few years earlier (Charles & Wray, 2015). Some regional partnerships continued however around culture and specific European Regional Development Fund projects for linking doctoral candidates with business.

At an early point after the suggestion of civic university agreements both universities recognised that it made sense for a joint agreement with city partners rather than two separate negotiations and contact was made between the two universities to work collaboratively on this. The primary initial connection was with Newcastle City Council, which already had strong links with both universities. In terms of the local geography, the two universities are located immediately adjacent to the City Council offices surrounding that building on three sides. The City Council and Northumbria University had previously been involved in the Urban Futures project run by Newcastle University (Vallance et al., 2020), which had trialled some community and co-creation experiments, although by 2020 this project had come to an end.

Funding was also sought for a joint project to develop a better understanding of the local activities of the two universities, mapping various research engagements in the city and working out how greater synergies could be realised. In discussions with community representatives at this time, it was clear that more could be done to promote genuine collaboration with the community, ensuring the development of long-term partnerships, giving greater voice to the community and with a stronger commitment from the universities to identify policy improvements. The mapping project would have helped to identify key relationships and sites of joint research. Although not funded, the two universities decided that they would undertake the work themselves anyway, building towards an announcement of a civic agreement in the spring of 2020, with an event involving community groups as well as the key institutional partners from the City Council and NHS. A small project group met monthly to develop the joint agenda. This launch event would subsequently be delayed as a result of the pandemic.

RESPONSE TO THE HEALTH CRISIS

During March 2020 measures to address the emerging pandemic were ramped up gradually, leading to a full lockdown by the 21st. Both universities were forced to close their campuses with all staff and students working from home or from student accommodation, teaching being switched quickly to online delivery, with laboratories and other physical facilities including the libraries being closed. This policy was applied nationally, and most universities were relatively quick in shifting to online delivery given existing experience.

There were few exceptions to the lockdown, but universities sought to offer their staff, students and facilities where possible to support the NHS in treating and combatting the virus. This included essential activities such as laboratories involved in research on the virus and possible treatments, and some activities to produce personal protective equipment (PPEs).

Some examples can be provided from Newcastle and Northumbria Universities of the immediate response to COVID.

- **Loan of equipment.** Northumbria loaned local NHS trusts equipment needed to treat COVID patients including ventilators, vital signs monitors, syringe drivers, qPCR machines and hospital beds. This equipment was normally used for training nursing staff. Newcastle loaned seven qPCR machines to the national COVID-19 Screening centre.
- **Testing facilities.** Newcastle adapted research equipment to run coronavirus testing and set aside labs for testing facilities.
- **Students and staff in clinical roles.** Staff with clinical qualifications took up temporary roles in hospitals as part of a national call for additional temporary staff, whilst many final-year medical and nursing students took up early placements in hospitals. A total of 350 nursing students from Northumbria took up extended placements.
- **Clinical training.** Northumbria worked with Health Education England to deliver specialist online training in Critical Care Upskilling, targeted at front-line NHS staff caring for patients with COVID.
- **Students and staff volunteered** in the community, such as delivering food shopping for vulnerable people who were self-isolating, and collecting medication. Newcastle also provided refrigerated and dry food storage for food donated to local charities.

- **PPE production.** An early problem in the pandemic was a shortage of personal protective equipment due to the rapid rate at which stocks were being used. Northumbria's School of Design assembled a team of volunteers working with Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust to use campus-based pattern cutting and sewing machines to assemble hospital gowns. Using an NHS-approved design, the team also digitised the pattern for other potential manufacturers around the country to also get involved in the production. The project also included a local curtain manufacturer who turned over some of their production to making hospital gowns. Newcastle also manufactured PPE and parts for ventilators and donated 1000 pairs of safety goggles to the NHS.
- **Accommodation.** Newcastle provided bedrooms for NHS staff in student accommodation next to the central Newcastle hospital.

Overall then, both universities made use of their capabilities in health research and teaching, their health students and their facilities and equipment to contribute to the national and local efforts to manage the pandemic. This was also the case across the wider UK university system where most universities made similar contributions to the NHS and the campaign against COVID. Most prominent perhaps has been Oxford University's work to develop the vaccine commercialised by AstraZeneca (Gilbert & Green, 2021), and notably it was the university that negotiated a low price for the vaccine to make it more accessible for 58 named poorer countries. Universities nationally recognised not only that they had important facilities and capabilities for fighting the pandemic, but that this was a national and local priority which at times required significant changes in policy such as releasing students into health service work in place of teaching.

Unfortunately, the good work done by universities was also accompanied by more contentious issues around the management of students through the pandemic with public concerns over the quality of education delivered online, refunds for unused student accommodation, students as a potential vector for the spread of COVID, student parties during lockdown and attempts by some universities to restrict students to their accommodation. Whilst most universities did their best to manage these issues, the nature of the problems was unprecedented, and some mistakes were made. As a consequence, the public view of the role of universities during the pandemic seems to be mixed with a recent survey reporting that across

a number of developed countries, including the UK, a significant proportion of the public did not recognise a positive contribution from the universities (Grove, 2022).

PLANNING FOR RECOVERY

The immediate impact of the pandemic was the national lockdown in which only essential services were allowed to operate from working premises and most people were required to stay at home. Whilst many services such as higher education were able to operate on a working from home basis, much of the economy was shut down including much of retail, hospitality and non-essential manufacturing. Government provided support for these firms in the form of furlough payments for staff who were sent home, but clearly this was a major economic shock, and it would be some time before the economy fully opened up again, and that it was likely there would be considerable losses of businesses and employment. These economic challenges added to the health-related consequences of the virus and presented local governments with multiple problems to be dealt with.

Newcastle, in common with other local authorities, was under a statutory requirement to have a Health and Wellbeing Board. These were established under the Health and Social Care Act of 2012 as a forum within which the local health and care system can work together to improve health and wellbeing. In Newcastle's case this was called the Wellbeing for Life Board and was led by the City Council with representation from Council elected members and officials, NHS bodies and hospitals, the ambulance service, the two universities, schools, and the voluntary sector (including Healthwatch an independent body giving voice to the community). From 24 June 2020, the board was tasked with being a COVID recovery board for the city and was also renamed the City Futures Board.

At a regional level a task force was set up, the North East COVID-19 Economic Response Group, incorporating all of the universities in the region, to help with the economic recovery post-pandemic. Both Newcastle universities were seen as absolutely central to the recovery and were built into a variety of projects emerging at a local level, and from national sources. The response group worked through a series of task themes, some of which were owned by the universities, including one on the support for regional entrepreneurship linked to an ongoing exercise led by MIT working with teams from several areas of the UK. MIT was

contracted by the UK government to deliver a version of their Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program (REAP) with teams from six areas, each comprising representatives from the public sector, universities, business, entrepreneurs and risk capital. Although this had to switch to a virtual mode of operation, the North East team met continuously during the lockdown to develop a regional approach to supporting entrepreneurship, feeding into the COVID-19 Response Group and eventually leading to a funding bid in 2021.

The North East COVID-19 Economic Response Group published a “Recovery and Response Deal” in September 2020 as a statement of intent and a bid to central government for funding to help the region recover from the fall in economic activity. Whilst this did not result in a new single pot of funding to address the £2.8 billion request, it did provide a framework for bids against a series of national programmes.

At the national level, another example was the Small Business Leadership Programme (SBLP) a government-funded training programme for SMEs to help them bounce back from the lockdowns. The programme was developed with the Small Business Charter and delivered regionally by a network of chartered business schools including Northumbria. SMEs participated in a government-funded structured programme of online tutorials, delivered free of charge. This was subsequently followed up by the Help to Grow programme, again funded by national government, accredited by the Small Business Charter and delivered by the same network of business schools.

Throughout this recovery planning the universities were seen as key and active resources for the region, supporting employment and economic recovery, and providing a knowledge base for the region. The nascent desire on the part of the universities to rebuild the culture of collaboration which had been lost to some degree after 2010 was encouraged further by the regional response to COVID, and by an expectation from local and regional policymakers that the universities would work together on a number of specific projects.

FUTURE INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Throughout this process the development of formal collaboration between Newcastle and Northumbria Universities continued, building with the City Council and NHS towards a civic university agreement. A series of 16 projects were developed in parallel, themed around the UN Sustainable

Development Goals and the high-level themes of Planet, People and Prosperity. Each of these projects involves the two universities and also a varying set of local partners. Examples include a new learning centre in a deprived area of the city to support more young people aspiring to higher education, a project to engage students more actively in the community, work involving both universities to reduce their own carbon emissions, the redevelopment of a hospital site as a location for demonstrator projects on healthy ageing and a variety of research-based collaborations with local business.

In 2021 these were incorporated into a new city-wide partnership Collaborative Newcastle (<https://www.collaborativenewcastle.org/>) whose vision is ‘to improve the health, wealth and wellbeing of everyone in the City’. This framework includes the Collaborative Newcastle Universities Agreement committing the two universities to supporting the wider partnership and supporting the work of the City Futures Board.

Underpinning this there was a widely felt need for a better system to connect the research base of the two universities to the policy development process through the better use of evidence. This concern had been raised at the outset when the civic universities agreement was first considered and there was a desire to better capture the existing knowledge base, examine areas of synergy and overlap between the two universities, better link research with local communities and support greater co-creation of knowledge and policy proposals. This need for the evidence base was felt to underpin the thematic work on planet, people and prosperity and discussions about a form of policy and evidence hub took place over many months. The two universities and a board comprising local stakeholder organisations developed a proposal, now funded by Research England, for a new joint unit which gathers and organises evidence, stimulates consideration of local needs and new forms of evidence, and connects the research base with policymakers and the community. The project formally commenced in August 2022.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic arrived just as UK universities were beginning to engage with the civic university agenda and take their commitment to their locality more seriously than they had for a decade. The consequence of the lockdown that ensued was disruption of much of the life of the universities, yet they rose to the challenge, not just of maintaining their

teaching commitment online, but pitching in to help both the NHS and local partners respond to the health emergency and the economic crisis that followed. The two Newcastle universities were typical of universities across the UK in responding positively to the needs of their communities.

Overall, the experience of the pandemic reinforced the perceived commitment of the universities to the civic mission: when faced with a national emergency the universities responded. However, the nature of the pandemic also increased the expectations of the local stakeholders. The inter-connection of universities and their cities was made more explicit during the pandemic with the absence of students during the initial lockdown and the impact this had on university cities, and then the prospects of returning students and the possible public health impact when universities reopened. In order to secure a safe return to campus, universities needed to work with the local public health system. Correspondingly, cities wanted the support of universities for their strategies for reopening and recovering from lockdown. In times of crisis, cooperation is made easier by necessity. The civic university campaign therefore was reinforced as seen in Newcastle where the universities were drawn into increased local partnerships.

How then has the pandemic affected the relationships between the universities and the different levels of governance? At a local level there was a strengthening of close collaboration between universities and local authorities which in the case of Newcastle has led to continued close collaboration through the civic university agreement. Similar developments have occurred in other cities. At a national level, though, the relations between universities and central government have been less harmonious as government pursued varied policies with mixed consequences for universities. On the one hand a renewed interest in levelling up policies and expansion of R & D spending placed the universities centrally in the achievement of government objectives. However, there remained continued uncertainty over future levels of student fee that universities will be allowed to charge and “culture wars” over freedom of speech, non-traditional degrees and possible sanctions against universities with lower levels of graduates going into professional jobs. National and local governments also experienced continued tensions as national government sought to roll out a levelling-up agenda and new devolution deals, whilst local government still resented the austerity cuts of the last ten years which new grants do not replace.

The key question is whether the new civic partnerships will endure as the pandemic fades. The consequences of Brexit in terms of reduced

numbers of EU students, coupled with the impact of the pandemic on international flows, are serious for university finances, even if the impact is less than that for Australia as a key competitor in that market. Overall international numbers (excluding the EU) have bounced back healthily though. Effective partnerships with local stakeholders may be important for the collaboration needed to secure an international reputation (Benneworth et al., 2010). The need to show community engagement may remain strong for some time to come and could become more embedded in the mission than it has been previously.

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