

Benefits and challenges in teaching civic leadership

Lloyd Jenkins (School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences / Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences) and Julian Pänke (College of Social Sciences / Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences)

Contact: l.jenkins@bham.ac.uk

Abstract

As universities reappraise their civic responsibilities in the 21st century, the role and value of education in addressing global challenges is a central and under-explored part of this debate. This paper examines the development of a taught Year in Civic Leadership to reflect upon benefits and challenges for educators, stakeholders, and students. We argue that, unlike conventional internships, devoting time and resource to combine placements with reflective and empathetic practice produces students who become effective changemakers. Moreover, civic learning opportunities have longer-term institutional benefits in building resilient and impactful networks with stakeholders, increasing the university's civic impact.

Introduction

At the start of the 20th century, many universities – including the University of Birmingham (UoB) – were established as civic institutions to serve the educational needs of the areas where they were based. However, since their inception, and adapting to the challenges of the post-war educational landscape, many of these institutions have seen their civic rationale diminish as they negotiated the challenges of rising student numbers and the pressures of new research agendas. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 21st century, and pressured by significant shifts in work patterns and student expectations, universities have been revisiting their role as civic entities, beginning a much-needed reappraisal of the role educational institutions play in creating mutual benefits for the academy and wider society (Grant 2021, Goddard 2009, Scott 2019). This paper argues that universities need to fully embrace the benefits of a civic-facing education, making it a central component of the curriculum, to offer their students the education they need to flourish in new labour markets.

In 2009 Goddard published a provocation for NESTA – the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts – highlighting a number of challenges to universities, arguing that, “all publicly-funded universities in the UK have a civic duty to engage with wider society on the local, national and global scales, and to do so in a manner which links the social to the economic spheres” (*Reinventing the Civic University*, p. 4). Crucially, he argued that we need an institutional response: beyond individual academic staff and projects, embracing teaching and research alike, and involving everyone in higher education – students, academic staff, and support staff. His provocation urged universities to develop their strategies to effectively work with stakeholders and the wider society to address the needs of all parts of the UK. To achieve this, he argues that civic engagement should become a guiding principle for the organisation and practice of research and teaching, with appropriate resourcing to do so.

There are also pressures to adapt to changing demands in the job market. Butcher (2015) points out that 70 per cent of graduate employment opportunities are now subject-blind; universities therefore need to be more aware of the expectations of the job market by building competencies and skills into the curriculum. To borrow Scott’s (2019) formulation, we need to develop graduates who are ready not just for work today, but for future forms of employment. We need *work ready plus* graduates “being not only competent (able to use set professional skills and knowledge correctly under set conditions), but also being capable (having high levels of personal, interpersonal and cognitive intelligence)” (2019, p. 2). In Liberal Arts and Natural Sciences (LANS) at UoB, a radically interdisciplinary degree programme, we have reflected on these challenges. By building on our experiences in developing innovative problem-based learning experiences in our core modules (e.g. Year 1 “From Research to Policy”) we introduced a credit-bearing placement Year in Civic Leadership (YiCL) for our Year 3 students.

In the last two decades, the HE sector has recognised this need to (re)embrace social responsibility as part of a wider civic university agenda to engage with surrounding communities and demonstrate socio-cultural value to their locality as well as responding to new work patterns (Grant 2021, Guiffré & Ratto 2014, Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña 2017,

Ostrander 2004). It has become a priority for universities to enhance the student learning experience by creating, for example, civic engagement (hereafter CE) learning opportunities which utilise practice- and problem-based approaches to education. These approaches aim to develop enterprising and professional skills that are transferable, while at the same time making classrooms more inclusive and accessible to students from less privileged backgrounds.

While questions of employability and inclusion are often addressed separately, with different teams and people (careers specialist, outreach and student engagement teams, or academic staff for example) working on them, they are two sides of the same coin. They can complement and strengthen each other to create a meaningful, impactful civic education. A key competency to push forward both objectives is the development of change-making capacities: becoming self-reliant, an effective communicator (and listener), capable of operating in different team configurations, while remaining critical, open, flexible and risk-embracing. To become leaders, students need to develop their ability to understand the communities, institutional contexts, and systems they 'operate' in, how to introduce new voices, identify power dynamics at play, and their own and others' position in these systems (Elmuti *et al.* 2005). Leadership here, means "accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty" (Ganz 2010).

The publication in 2019 of a report by the University Partnerships Programme (UPP), recommended that greater efforts be made to strengthen the connection between universities and their location. It warned that, without a clear and measured civic strategy, universities risk being civically engaged without truly being civic institutions, and as such fail to recognise what their 'local' impact is. More recently, Grant (2021) built upon these interventions, providing a challenge to the current foci of 21st-century universities. He argues in *The New Power University* that we are at a point in time where institutions need to move away from the demands of research and teaching excellence which form the core of many metrics that institutions are held up against. Instead, universities should place social responsibility at the core of their everyday practice to frame their civic agenda. To achieve this, universities should move beyond older civic models of 'anchor institutions' with their material loci in a set geographical location, to one where the university draws upon its wider

networks and partnerships to articulate its civic impact at both the local and the global level. This requires new approaches to both education and research that facilitate open innovation, citizen science, a focus on service learning that embraces community, two-way learning, and networked entrepreneurship. Academic staff should consider their impact beyond the academy and, more importantly, not just in economic terms. Crucially, we should celebrate the qualitative impact that external scholarship can have on the communities we are part of (Goddard 2009). We believe that placing civic leadership at the centre of a pedagogy which encourages changemaking is one of the ways in which meaningful engagement with communities beyond the academy can be achieved.

Post-pandemic opportunities

Many UK HE institutions are reaffirming their commitment to civic engagement through formal Civic Agreements, and via re-conceived statements of civic ambition. For example, Queen Mary, University of London's *Our Civic Agreement: Opening the Doors of Opportunity to East London and Beyond* (2016) has reframed its approach to civic engagement to embrace wellbeing, placemaking and life-long learning amongst other pledges. Likewise, the University of Birmingham (UoB) has recast its commitment,

“As a civic university, grounded in the communities around us, we will be central both to shaping and responding to these changes. We will provide a model of how a global university can create meaningful change in the world.” (UoB 2030 Strategy)

The COVID-19 pandemic set back the CE agenda in many institutions, but also heightened an awareness of the role that higher education more widely plays, and should play, in both local and global communities. We argue that it is now the right time to reimagine HE's leadership role in relationship to its CE. As impactful institutions, universities should be using their knowledge, skills, motivation, and values to make a difference to the civic life of our communities (Ehrlich 2000). The pandemic has forced universities to reconsider and embrace a skills agenda that was already emerging before lockdown. There is an opportunity for universities to address the challenges of 21st-century education that brings an emphasis on identifying and learning to embrace 'wicked' problems, move confidently

across disciplinary boundaries, and broaden student and staff agency beyond the academy.

How do you develop students as changemakers? How do you bring in external stakeholders in an impactful way? This is a recent development and educators still feel quite overwhelmed in getting CE learning opportunities off the ground. This is particularly the case given CE's focus on open learning processes, without fixed outcomes. CE provides challenges to all three groups involved – students, educators and stakeholders. Students need to shift their personal perspective – from a more instrumental individual approach to being more community-driven and collaborative. For educators it is a question of resources (time and staffing, professional support) given that CE can be time intensive, requiring continuous scaffolding efforts and communication. Stakeholders, meanwhile, are often unfamiliar working with university timescales, expectations, and different professional terminology. These challenges are not always sufficiently acknowledged by universities (Annette 2010).

To enable students to be changemakers we need to create a placement model that moves beyond the typical internship, which simply gives experience of a role and its involved tasks, to one embracing continual reflection, empathy and capacity building. This requires an appreciation of the challenges in developing sustainable networks with community partners. This demands institutional courage, embracing the bottom-up nature of connecting with multiple external stakeholders, where the benefits of these partnerships may not become tangible until later. Alongside this we highlight the need for adequate resourcing (both in teaching time and stakeholder liaison) to build partnerships with long-lasting benefits for students, stakeholders, and educators alike. In the following section, we will show how combining placements with the teaching of leadership and changemaking provides one way of addressing this agenda.

Year in Civic Leadership: a case study

The introduction of a Year in Civic Leadership (YiCL) has created a way in which we can develop our students as effective changemakers. This is an optional year of study which blends a year-long placement with a community stakeholder – be that a responsible

business, non-governmental organisation, charity, or any other partner in the third sector – alongside specialist teaching in leadership and changemaking. This is supported by continual authentic assessment as well as reflective practice.

Students develop leadership skills while co-creating projects with local stakeholders that have civic impact in their respective communities. Projects have included leadership weekends to empower women suffering from domestic abuse (with *WAITS*) or young girls from less privileged areas in East London (with *Skaped*), strategies to diversify theatre and arts audiences (with *BE Festival*), evaluation tools to measure the success of eating disorder programmes (with *TasteLife*), online teaching resources (with *Play Action International*), and biodiversity measurement tools (with *BlueSkies*). By engaging with real world problems, students produce tangible outcomes for both themselves, and their partners. In doing so, students are able to develop leadership and entrepreneurial mindsets in an authentic and applied situation, while at the same time recognising themselves as members of a larger social fabric and considering social problems to be partly their own (Ehrlich 2000).

Therefore, the year enables students to pick up professional skills (self-reliance, agile project management, effective communication, team working) essential to succeed in any workspace, whilst they also develop their moral compass as they reflect on the importance of values during the placement experience. They become socially responsible and active citizens.

The YiCL embraces self-regulated, experiential, and problem-based learning as “competencies that cannot be taught, but have to be developed by the learners themselves. They are acquired during action, on the basis of experience and reflection” (UNESCO 2017, p. 10). Encapsulating the full 120 credits needed for a year of study, with the weighting equally divided between taught and project components, the learning process is split into three stages, following Bandura’s (1994) model of ‘forethought’, ‘performance’, and ‘self-reflection’. Students develop their project during stage 1 (Civic Engagement/ ‘forethought phase’). During Stage 2 students acquire the skills and value recognition needed to implement their project (Civic Leadership/ ‘performance phase’). Stage 3 gives more room for reflection and the creation of a public narrative, making project outcomes accessible to a wider audience (Civic Impact/ ‘self-reflection phase’) (Bandura 1994). Each stage is

complemented by workshops and learning activities in collaboration with the Birmingham Leadership Institute and Careers Network. In an ongoing formative process, students produce a project proposal, report, and communicate main takeaways in a policy brief and presentation at a public impact event at the end of their placement. Through the development of a public narrative, students make project outcomes accessible to a wider audience of community stakeholders, therefore actively contributing to place-shaping by sharing best practice of their co-created project.

The students' ability to organise their placement work time (c.18 hours/week) allows them to do some other part-time work or undertake caring responsibilities. Moreover, the programme appears to be an attractive opportunity for students from diverse backgrounds whose lived experiences often relate to the values and objectives of many of these community organisations, such as *WAITS* in Birmingham or *Skaped* in East London. Within the first two cohorts (2021-23), 4 out of 10 students and 5 out of 12 applicants had a non-white heritage.

Student feedback has been very positive to date. The benefits of "proper work-life experience" were emphasised by all the students' feedback questionnaires, working on authentic and meaningful challenges as well as having a positive impact on the communities their organisations are engaging with. One student commented: "I have enjoyed the opportunity to work in a local organisation; it's been really valuable to have the placement and see how they take action locally". By conducting research into a social issue and the surrounding policy environment, students often engaged with various quantitative and qualitative methods of primary data collection, thereby gaining valuable experience in preparation of their final year independent research projects and making them more confident to move beyond the (often) desk-based dissertations.

Stakeholders have benefitted as well; focused student projects allowed them to explore new areas of their community engagement work. Arts charity *BE Festival* was able to conduct research on how to diversify its audience; Ethical Produce Company *Blue Skies* gained a biodiversity tool to use with its partners in Ghana to improve its sustainability; and a local Women's charity, *WAITS*, was able to develop a leadership weekend to help

empower its staff and clients, to name but three examples. A *Blue Skies* representative commented: “we have benefited from having a talented, enthusiastic and committed individual who has been able to dedicate time to research and develop a new tool for us that we would otherwise not have had the resource to do ourselves.” We like to believe that the YiCL left a lasting impact on our external partners, and local communities, with a positive, tangible benefit from the students’ work.

Finally, it has also been a very rewarding experience for educators and facilitators. The YiCL allowed us to see our students grow into their role and develop a community project in which both they and their placement organisations took immense pride. The necessary scaffolding to ease the uncertainty of such a placement experience and alleviate any anxieties amongst the students meant that staff saw the students on a regular basis; connecting them to students in a way they had not experienced before. Of course, this level of care is time-intensive and involves giving up a familiar level of control seen in regular timetabled sessions in our normal teaching delivery, as students and partners co-create their projects in an organic fashion. This type of educational activity requires a willingness and ability to respond (quickly) to the unexpected – unforeseeable challenges to both students and local stakeholders – and adapting to their time frames and horizons.

What have we learnt?

The key question addressed here is how we enable students to have a social resonance beyond the academy, thus meeting the aspirations of a civically-engaged university. In LANS, this placement year has created a way in which we can develop students to be effective changemakers; blending placement with a local stakeholder alongside specialist teaching in leadership (provided by LANS and UoB’s Birmingham Leadership Institute), and continual authentic assessment resulting in a project report and policy brief. In assessing the YiCL, we can identify tangible impacts that the programme has had on students, stakeholders and educators alike. It has highlighted ways in which civic values can be developed and fostered through teaching and learning, which help empower students as effective civic actors. Key to this is the role of experiential learning and co-creation in a structured, reflective context, allowing students to engage with and address the real-world problems faced by stakeholders and their clients.

For students embarking on this learning journey for the first time, placements can be a daunting prospect; requiring time for them to develop their own voice and confidence in taking responsibility. To do so, students need to be guided in developing an open mindset to leadership, to be able to operate in an authentic and applied situation. This is something that takes time to develop as the students build their own capacity and confidence in changemaking and using it in effective ways. By placing regular and structured contact points in the programme, the teaching team are able to provide reassurance, challenge and support as the students learn to use their nascent leadership skills. The value of these points in the programme have become apparent when students have encountered particular moments of challenge in their placement, such as unspecific tasks, initial vagueness of their project, or worktime pressures. Regular catch-up meetings also allowed the timely discovery of communication deficits between students and placements which as a result could be addressed.

Through learning, and then applying their developing leadership skills to projects co-created with local stakeholders, students are able to engage with real world problems and produce tangible outcomes for both themselves and their partners. Moreover, the YiCL has built a network of community partners for UoB who have developed (lasting) trust in student abilities and are keen to continue this work in other frameworks as well e.g. the final year research project and shorter placement opportunities, which is an additional institutional gain.

Authentic and reflective assessment enables learners to develop key skills in changemaking, design thinking, and reflective practice. By challenging their own values and assumptions, they are given a mechanism through which to evaluate and then extend their own expertise to the wider community. Above all else this impact relies on partnership. Stakeholders need to be able to see a benefit from these partnerships in return, in terms of a tangible output and no overt demands on their worktime. For those operating in the third sector, there is often a challenge to capacity for developing future facing projects, and the use of co-creation and authentic assessment provides a civic engagement opportunity that offers mutual benefit for student and stakeholder alike.

Conclusion

Teaching a programme such as YiCL provides a wide range of educational opportunities, the impact of which is not found in conventional forms of delivery. By confronting the students with real life situations allied to continuous and empathetic reflection, we are able to see them grow in confidence. By placing themselves in a situation where they are 'learning by doing', having to navigate real world challenges, and building confidence to get their voices heard in the placement setting, students often encounter moments where self-assurance is lacking, and teaching staff need to help guide and build resilience. For educators this creates a unique set of challenges in regard to both time and response. Unlike most forms of delivery, or conventional placement teaching, civic leadership provides key skills in changemaking, which requires a higher level of small group and tutorial support, coming with a time implication if it is to be delivered effectively. With students working off-campus in a placement, the delivery of set contact points, and timely responses to problems are shaped by the rhythm of placement partners and their work practices, which often runs counter to the academic calendar. This requires the educator to have a flexible approach to time and create space in the academic week where they can respond, sometimes at short notice, to student or placement partner queries. Such an approach, although resource-intensive, has the longer-term benefit in building resilient and impactful networks with stakeholders. This type of teaching is scalable in a gradual fashion, and is already being offered beyond LANS to the wider university as an intercalated year. Likewise, our approach provides a framework for other disciplines to incorporate similar learning into their programmes in different ways. However, to offer this kind of opportunity more widely requires institutional support in terms of investment in staffing time and capacity, alongside resourcing to manage recruitment of placements. Therefore, backed by sufficient resourcing, civic education requires an appreciation of the challenges and benefits of embedding CE learning opportunities more widely in the curriculum within an articulated civic engagement strategy. In this way, implementing a civic facing education demands the same agility and openness from universities that these learning experiences require from the students themselves.

Note: All research for the EUniWell Project “Civic Leadership to Improve Social Well-Being” was carried out following University of Birmingham Ethical Review approval ref: ERN_22-0598.

References

- Annette, J. (2010) 'The challenge of developing civic engagement in higher education in England', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 58(4), pp. 451-463.
- Bandura, A. (1994) 'Social cognitive theory of mass communication', in Bryant, J. and Zillman, D. (eds) *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, pp. 61-90.
- Butcher, C. (2015) 'Describing what students should learn', in Fry, H., Ketteridge, S., and Marshall, S. (eds) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing Academic Practice*. London: Routledge-Taylor & Francis Group, London, pp. 80-93.
- Charles, D. (2003) 'Universities and territorial development: reshaping the regional role of UK universities', *Local Economy*, 18(1), pp. 7-20.
- Elmuti, D., Minnis, W., and Abebe, M. (2005) 'Does education have a role in developing leadership skills?', *Management Decision*, 43(7/8), pp. 1018-1031.
- Ehrlich, T. (ed) (2000) *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* (preface). Westport: American Council on Education and Oryx Press, pp. v-x.
- Ganz, M. (2010) 'Leading Change: Leadership, Organization, and Social Movements', in Nohria, N. and Khurana, R. (eds.) *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice*. Harvard Business School Press, pp. 509-550.
- Giuffré, L., and Ratto, S.E. (2014) 'A new paradigm in higher education: university social responsibility (USR)', *Journal of Education & Human Development*, 3(1), pp. 231-238.
- Goddard, J. (2009) *Reinventing the Civic University*. NESTA Provocation 12.
- Grant, J. (2021) *The New Power University*. Pearson, London.
- Larrán Jorge, M. and Andrades Peña, F.J. (2017) 'Analysing the literature on university social responsibility: A review of selected higher education journals', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(4), pp. 302-319.
- Ostrander, S.A. (2004) 'Democracy, civic participation, and the university: A comparative study of civic engagement on five campuses', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 33(1), pp. 74-93.
- Queen Mary University of London (2016) *Our Civic Agreement: Opening the Doors of Opportunity to East London and Beyond*. Available at: https://www.qmul.ac.uk/media/qmul/docs/Queen_Mary_Civic_Agreement.pdf (Accessed 24 November 2023).
- Scott, G. (2019) 'Social Enterprise and Sustainable Development in the Age of Acceleration', *Envigogika: Charles University E-journal for Environmental Education*, 14(1) doi.org/10.14712/18023061.587
- University of Birmingham (2023) *Our University of Birmingham Strategic Framework 2030*. Available at: <https://university-of-birmingham.foleon.com/bham2030/strategic-framework/birmingham-2030/> (Accessed: 1 February 2023).

UNESCO (2017) 'Education for Sustainable Development Goals – Learning Objectives'. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development/what-is-esd> (Accessed: 11 September 2022).

University Partnerships Programme Foundation (Civic University Commission) (2019) 'Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places'. Available at: <https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf> (Accessed: 2 April 2021).