

CIVIC UNIVERSITIES AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS

EXPLORING SITES AND
PRACTICES OF MEANINGFUL
ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN
STUDENTS AND LOCAL
COMMUNITIES

A RAPID EVIDENCE REVIEW
BY LILY OWENS-CROSSMAN
JANUARY 2025



National Civic
Impact Accelerator

BACKGROUND

The National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) is an ambitious three-year programme to gather evidence and intelligence of what works, share civic innovations, and provide universities across England with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. The programme is funded by Research England, part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It aims to drive collaboration and policy and practice innovation, involving universities, local government, business groups, and the community sector to inform place-based transformations.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation is carrying out primary and secondary research activities to generate an evidence base supporting the NCIA programme. This research focuses on the role of universities in delivering impact in their places, considering the perspectives of a range of organisations, actors and communities, to develop a holistic understanding of the impact of university activities and strategies.

The evidence generation process of the Institute is guided by four co-commissioning panels which represent a range of stakeholder perspectives. This rapid evidence review responds to the input of the Social and Cultural Impact Panel, made up of representatives from universities across England and third sector organisations with a stake in the issue.

Following on from the Institute's Society, Culture and Locally-connected Universities evidence review, the panel prioritised three lines of enquiry around the social and cultural impact of universities, which the Institute team developed into research questions. This publication explores one of these priority areas: meaningful student civic engagement. The aim is to ensure the evidence produced by the Institute is as meaningful and useful to a range of stakeholders as possible within the natural constraints of the project. For a full description of the process and prioritised research topics, please refer to the Research Agenda published by the Institute.

1. INTRODUCTION

University students are increasingly being recognised as integral actors in civic work, with their relationship to local communities central to how a university engages with and adds value to its place. Universities have an important role to play in creating opportunities for their students to positively engage with place beyond the campus, both to enhance the student experience and to benefit local communities.

Despite the growing recognition of student-community engagement as an essential element of the civic role of universities, the concept lacks clear definition and understanding, and there is little consensus around how to measure its value (Mycock, 2024). Practices of civic engagement can vary widely between and within universities, and while this diversity is important for maintaining an adaptable and reciprocal civic offer, it creates challenges in evaluating and understanding impact at a sector level. In addition, there are differing ideas about the purpose of student civic engagement and therefore what makes it ‘meaningful’ is difficult to define. As a result, there is relatively little evidence about the impact of student and community engagement to understand what is working when it comes to student civic activity, and for who.

Discussions of student-community engagement remain largely within higher education and are therefore dominated by university perspectives. Consequently, attention is often given to practices of engagement most commonly encouraged by universities, such as student volunteering, and less is known about alternative forms of student civic activity. In addition, there is a distinct lack of community perspectives on student engagement, which are essential to understanding what meaningful civic practice looks like. Though higher education practitioners and policymakers often argue that universities have an obligation to encourage every student to engage in civic activity, we must question the assumption that this is inherently beneficial for all actors involved.

This evidence review responds to the question: what are the sites and practices of meaningful engagement between students and local communities? In a rapid secondary research process, it brings together literature and evidence, alongside short case study examples, to understand the state of student-community engagement in the UK. Though there is a wealth of literature on student civic engagement, what makes for meaningful practice, particularly for communities and place, is still not well evidenced. Within this body of literature, this evidence review focuses on what is known, and where gaps exist, in relation to sites and practices of student-community engagement and the extent to which they may be considered meaningful for different actors.

2. CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Within civic literature, there is an increasing expectation for higher education to support students to become 'good' citizens, who are committed to lifelong civic engagement and possess the necessary civic skills, knowledge and democratic attitudes (Bingle and Wall, 2020). This has been connected to wider government agendas to develop a sense of 'citizenship' in all members of society, defined as people feeling a sense of belonging to the country they are in and a responsibility towards it (House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, 2018). While different conceptions of citizenship have been explored (see: Geboers et al., 2014), citizenship generally refers to two somewhat distinct areas: a social domain, particularly volunteering and social action in the community, and a political domain, which encourages democratic participation (House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, 2018). This institutional understanding of citizenship remains central to universities' conception of civic work, with these two domains strongly shaping the sites and practices of civic engagement that are most commonly promoted and recognised by universities.

3. SITES AND PRACTICES OF ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES

There is no standard framework or definition for what student civic engagement includes; it can encompass a myriad of activities between students and communities, which may vary significantly by university, field of study, the extent of student union activity, and institutional support for student civic engagement (Mycock, 2024). Kelly and McNicoll define student engagement as any activity that is 'releasing student capacity for community (and student) benefit' (2011, p. 46). Common examples of student-community engagement practices presented in the literature and by universities include:

- **Student volunteering:** students give their unpaid time to a community organisation, often as an extra-curricular activity.
- **Service learning:** a pedagogical approach, which integrates community engagement into an academic course, to provide students with both academic and 'real life' knowledge.
- **Placements:** students complete a mandatory work experience placement as part of their academic course.
- **Collaborative research projects:** students work in collaboration with community partners to design and undertake a research project.
- **Student union activities:** students engage in activities offered through their student union, such as organising public events, fundraising, and connecting with local groups and causes.
- **Political engagement:** often represented as students engaging in democracy, for example becoming student representatives and electoral voting, but also includes political action such as demonstrations.

These activities generally take place on university or organisation premises, though these physical sites of engagement and the differing effects they may produce are not widely acknowledged or discussed in existing literature. Recent years have seen a greater shift to online activities, which have been shown to expand student-community engagement opportunities by offering a larger range of community partners, including international organisations, and increasing accessibility for students who may face barriers to in-person engagement (Krasny et al., 2021). Though this may help to foster 'global citizenship', it risks further reducing both student and university connections to their local place. Additionally, online interactions may not offer the same in-depth and transformational experiences for students and communities as in-person engagement (Krasny et al., 2021).

While many practices of student-community engagement are recognised in the literature, there is an opportunity for greater understanding and comparison of what may make different sites and practices more (or less) meaningful for students and communities.

3.1 Common sites and practices of civic engagement

Of all student-community engagement practices, student volunteering is the most recognised and has received the most attention in the literature. Student volunteering is encouraged by universities to reinforce responsibility and self-reliance, as a form of moral engagement, and importantly to support the employability of university students (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010; Barton, Bates and O'Donovan, 2019). Students may volunteer as part of course-based learning or as an extra-curricular activity, for example through their student union. Volunteering most commonly takes place within community settings and premises. Student experiences of volunteering and its potential benefits have been widely explored in the literature, as detailed in the following section. However, there is a scarcity of literature that centres community perspectives on student volunteering. Despite its popularity, there also remains no coherent framework to effectively evaluate the longitudinal benefits and outcomes of volunteering in higher education to understand its wider social impact (NCCPE, 2009).

Service learning is another common student-community engagement practice, particularly for undergraduate students. It takes a structured approach to embedding community engagement, generally as a mandatory requirement, in students' academic experience. The community involvement gives students an opportunity to learn by practical experience, and it is usually developed to support students to achieve the learning outcomes required by their course. Evidence suggests that service learning has potential to be a powerful way for students to explore social issues and inequalities both inside and outside of the learning environment (Tansey, 2019). Service learning also improves student retention and ability to understand complex social problems, as well as supporting a culture of democracy among students (Geier and Hasager, 2020; Lau and Body, 2021). However, there is a lack of evidence to support assumptions that service learning positively benefits local communities, with the few studies that do explore community perspectives suggesting that service learning needs to be made more effective for community organisations (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010)

CASE STUDY

New models of service learning: University of Kent

'Learning By Giving – Philanthropy in Action' is one of the first student philanthropy modules in the UK, a form of service learning most commonly seen in the US. The module is co-delivered by staff at the University of Kent and the local community foundation. It emphasises meaningful engagement and encouraging students to think critically about philanthropy as an act of civic participation.

The Learning By Giving module facilitates a direct giving approach, where students explore local social issues and work in partnership with the local community foundation. The module concludes with students making practical, real-life giving decisions, distributing a funding pot of £1,500 to local community organisations.

In a critical reflection of the Learning By Giving module, conveners highlight some of the aspects that enable it to be successful. Embedded pre and post reflection activities were valued by students and conveners and allowed students to understand the diversity of philanthropic activity, to reflect on their own moral position and to recognise their role as philanthropic citizens moving forward (Body and Lau, 2023). The space was diverse and multidisciplinary, and in particular students were given the opportunity to engage with a wide range of partners from charity practitioners to donors, aiding them to connect theory to practice (Body and Lau, 2023). As a module that enables students to have real world, local impact in a critically engaged way, the Learning By Giving module seeks to act as a blueprint for developing further student philanthropy modules in the UK.

3.2 Broadening the sites and practices of civic engagement

While volunteering and service learning are familiar activities which receive much attention in the literature, there is an opportunity for universities to rethink and expand the recognised practices of engagement between students and communities. Some argue that the ultimate purpose of civic engagement is to enable students to critically engage with and challenge systemic inequalities (Jacoby, 2017; Tansey and Gallo, 2018; Body, 2024). Yet many established practices of student-community engagement - such as volunteering, service learning and philanthropy - have come under criticism because they risk perpetuating social inequalities by reinforcing the power dynamic of a more privileged, benevolent individual 'helping' a deficit other in need of charity (Tansey and Gallo, 2018; Body, 2024). By teaching civic practice in this way, the potential for community engagement to help students and communities to challenge inequality and ultimately to generate wider social change, is reduced. It also undermines the reciprocal nature of civic engagement, failing to recognise that communities can provide essential learning to students and universities. There is an important opportunity for universities to create new spaces and practices for critically engaged, transformational civic learning, which promotes the potential for long-term social value.

Moreover, student-community engagement is currently defined by universities using institutional conceptions of acceptable civic behaviour and 'good' citizenship. Yet, it is important to recognise that students themselves have agency in shaping their civic journeys and often play a crucial role in opposing and extending university models of citizenship (Klemencic, 2016; Cheng and Holton, 2019). For example, a key element of 'good' citizenship is political involvement and participation, particularly to encourage increased electoral registration and voting among young people (House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement, 2018; Mycock, 2024). However, student-led activism and protest beyond mainstream politics, often in conflict with government and university agendas, is a common but much less celebrated practice of political civic engagement. Other forms of student-community engagement, particularly those that may be student or community-led, - such as faith-based activities, community action, or student participation in community interest groups - also remain largely unrecognised and unexplored within current literature. We must recognise that students may choose to engage with local communities in a broad range of ways, which should sufficiently represent the diversity and needs within student and community groups (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010). There is therefore a need to explore and embrace all forms of student-community engagement in our understanding of what constitutes civic activity and citizenship. There is a particular gap in the literature exploring what these alternative and less-celebrated sites and practices of engagement look like, and the extent to which they produce meaningful experiences for both students and communities.

CASE STUDY

Alternative practices of student engagement: Kings for Change

Kings for Change is a student-organised group at Kings College London who strive to create meaningful change through community organising. They state that, 'By focusing on thoughtful grassroots action, utilising the relational power of 1-2-1's and active listening, we empower students to make a difference in their community' (Kings for Change, n.d.). They aim to mobilise the student body at King's College to make change within and beyond university, by providing space for students to start their own campaigns and to participate in community organising training through a partnership with charity Citizens UK.

A current Kings for Change campaign focuses on mental health within the university community. Recognising that the university mental health system is inadequate for students, they are utilising community organising methods to listen to student voices and advocate for institutional change with senior members of university staff.

4. WHAT IS MEANINGFUL STUDENT-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

4.1 Measuring student-community engagement

Due to unresolved challenges in defining and measuring student civic engagement, the scope of student-community engagement practices and their potential impact remains relatively unknown. In a context where civic work is often under-resourced and undervalued, programme evaluations are not common. Similarly, student civic activity is not currently included in existing measures of university performance, such as the National Student Survey, the Teaching Excellence Framework, or the Knowledge Exchange Framework, nor is there a commonly agreed set of outcomes for civic engagement (Bingle and Wall, 2020). The existing evidence often explores individual case studies from university perspectives, which though helpful, offers limited learning at a sector level. This makes it difficult to systematically assess and demonstrate its value, and therefore to understand what makes it meaningful for the variety of actors involved.

Moreover, the longer-term impact of civic engagement for students and communities remains unexplored. It is known that university students are still less likely to vote or volunteer than older citizens, and that civic activity declines after graduation (Mycock, 2024). It is also recognised that the social divide between 'town and gown' continues to exist, and that the value universities bring to their places is often unclear to local communities (Harris and Holley, 2016). This suggests that current civic engagement efforts are not particularly effective, nor sufficient for creating wider positive social change. There is a need to better understand what outcomes and experiences are deemed valuable and meaningful for those involved, and how these might translate into wider social change.

Though lacking systematic measurement, a small body of existing evidence does offer insight into student and community motivations and experiences of civic engagement. This provides a helpful starting point to identify and understand some of the conditions and outcomes that make for meaningful engagement, as explored in the following section.

4.2 Student experiences of civic engagement

Much of the evidence base on student civic engagement focuses on the student experience, and therefore the benefits of community engagement for students are more commonly recognised. This section explores student perspectives on community engagement, with a particular focus on volunteering, as this is the dominant engagement practice discussed in the literature.

Civic engagement literature argues that community engagement has the potential to enhance students' sense of belonging and connection to their place and to build active, engaged citizens who foster collective interest, and contribute to the public good throughout their student lives and beyond (Klemencic, 2016; Bringle and Wall, 2020; Mycock, 2024). Literature that explores student volunteering agrees it can be a powerful engagement practice for students with many benefits, including 'health, wellbeing, citizenship, a sense of belonging, and skill building' (Tansey and Gallo, 2018, p. 88). Student volunteering also increases student confidence, career readiness, employability skills, and positively impacts educational outcomes, including for students with lower academic attainment and from low socio-economic backgrounds (Williams, 2017; Kerrigan and Manktelow, 2021). Though some of these measures are self-reported by students, others are set by universities. It is not always clear if they are the most valued or meaningful outcomes for students themselves.

Universities, along with schools and colleges, often promote student civic engagement to enhance employability, develop skills for work, and improve graduate outcomes (Lau and Body, 2021; Mycock, 2024). This may encourage students to view volunteering as an instrumental, 'tick-box' activity that is necessary to further their career prospects, instead of being motivated by a genuine desire to be involved in their local communities (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010; Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014; Themiminulle et al., 2022). Literature notes this tension between choice and coercion in student volunteering: higher education institutions should enable students to make active, personal choices to give their time instead of creating mandatory requirements to engage in volunteering or other civic activities (Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014). While some literature argues that all students should undertake civic activity (Mycock, 2024), recognising students' agency to decide if and how they want to participate is essential to meaningful community engagement. Volunteering undertaken out of necessity limits the potential for meaningful engagement from student and community perspectives and, at worst, risks exploitation of communities for personal development (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010).

To better understand student motivations for civic engagement and what, ultimately, constitutes a meaningful experience for them, it is helpful to explore their perspectives in greater depth. In a study on student volunteering with undergraduate and postgraduate psychology students, Barton et al (2019) found that student motivations for volunteering initially focused on career development, in particular because their university presented volunteering as necessary to increase their employability. However, as students continued to volunteer, motivations shifted to include doing something good for others, participating in a social activity, and learning by experience (Barton, Bates and O'Donovan, 2019). Similarly, in research on young people's volunteering journeys, Themiminulle et al (2022) found that a weekly volunteering structure alone was not seen as providing much value to participants, but seeing a direct impact on the communities worked with, and personal wellbeing, were key factors determining a positive volunteering experience. Other literature indicates that international students value volunteering for helping foster a sense of pride in place, belonging and connectedness to the local community (Walsh and Santharuban, 2023). This suggests that students find wider value in community engagement than is often promoted by universities, and these benefits require greater exploration and recognition. There is an opportunity to broaden measurements of student volunteering beyond frequency and instrumental benefits, to identify alternative outcomes and value for students.

In the existing literature, there is little discussion of different types of university students and how opportunities for, and experiences of, community engagement may vary. The majority of available literature focuses on undergraduate students as a homogenous group. It is known that students from lower socio-economic and marginalised backgrounds are less likely to volunteer, often due to having less access to resources that enable them to do so (Kerrigan and Manktelow, 2021). A US study found international students also perceive barriers to volunteering - including time constraints, unfamiliar logistical processes, different cultural perceptions of volunteering and language barriers (Kwenani and Yu, 2018). Further research is required to explore the motivations and experiences of different groups of students such as postgraduates, mature students, international students, home students, disabled students and students with a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

4.3 Community experiences of civic engagement

Within the literature on student civic engagement, there is an assumption that student-community engagement is equally beneficial for communities, and yet there is little evidence to support this (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010). In fact, there may be a growing dissatisfaction with student engagement activities from community perspectives (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010). University community engagement efforts often have poorly defined target communities and lack evidence to understand their effectiveness (Harris and Holley, 2016). Most literature focuses on the student experience and is significantly lacking in community perspectives to understand whether, and under what conditions, engagement with students might be meaningful for local people and place. It must be recognised that community engagement is not inherently beneficial. Rather, greater critical appraisal of student civic activity and what it can offer local communities is required (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010).

A small number of studies recognise the need for community voices within the literature on student civic activity and provide some insight into community experiences of working with students in the most common practices of volunteering and service learning. In regard to motivations, community organisations may choose to host students as part of their wider mission to educate the public about the issues they tackle, to train the next generation of staff in the sector, and to recruit long-term volunteers (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010; Williams, 2017). Others have a need for services or skills that students can provide (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010).

In the existing literature, community organisations do report a number of benefits to hosting students, such as increasing their capacity and visibility, improving their services, and providing new skills, perspectives and enthusiasm (Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett, 2012; Millican and Bourner, 2014; Williams, 2017; Student Hubs, 2023). Some organisations value the energy and commitment of students, including a willingness for training and self-development (Williams, 2017). While some studies find that students continue to volunteer beyond their initial commitment, and in some cases become employees (Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett, 2012), a lack of long-term commitment from students is an issue for many community organisations (Millican and Bourner, 2014). The literature highlights frustrations with students dropping out and not maintaining their agreed commitments to community organisations (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010; Millican and Bourner, 2014). Even when students do meet their commitments, they are often only available for short periods of time during university terms or due to the length of placements set by universities. These short timeframes inhibit the ability to build trust and relationships at a community level over a longer period, which are essential to making experiences meaningful instead of transactional for communities (Millican and Bourner, 2014).

Furthermore, student motivation and expertise varies, and community organisations report that students may be insufficiently prepared for their experience, lacking the skills, confidence or professionalism to undertake the work expected of them (Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett, 2012; Millican and Bourner, 2014). This raises a wider question about the kinds of skills that are taught and valued in higher education, which are often driven by economic factors instead of the 'softer' skills that communities and places often need. As a result, organisations may have to spend additional time managing and supervising students, and may not receive the standard of work they expect (Millican and Bourner, 2014). In many cases, the resource and effort given by community organisations does not match the benefit they receive from working with students.

Existing literature notes that many organisations had their most positive experiences with mature or postgraduate students, who showed higher levels of commitment, professionalism and had greater 'life experience' to bring to their work (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010; Millican and Bourner, 2014). Community organisations raise questions around the extent of relevant experience that younger students can bring - especially when they tend to be from more socially privileged backgrounds - and note a lack of diversity among the students they engage with to sometimes to be an issue (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010; Millican and Bourner, 2014). Students may lack the understanding or awareness to effectively and meaningfully work with community members (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010).

There is a need for greater and more equitable access to student civic opportunities to broaden the range of students who take part, both for student and community benefit. Haw (2023) argues that championing the experience of students from different backgrounds, including showcasing the work of students from disadvantaged backgrounds - and providing opportunities for them to connect with members of the local community who reflect their backgrounds - can help bridge divides, and produce more meaningful experiences for students and communities.

While these studies provide helpful insights into community perspectives, further research into community experiences is needed, especially from more recent examples of engagement. Additionally, the evidence that does explore community perspectives only draws on the views of community organisations; there is a scarcity of evidence that explores the experiences of individuals and community members. More research is required in this area to better understand the wider social impacts for communities and place. Lastly, the existing literature on both student and community perspectives explores a limited range of practices of engagement, - largely university-led volunteering and service learning - and there is a gap to explore what other sites and practices of engagement may produce meaningful experiences.

4.4 Conditions for meaningful civic engagement

Wide variations exist in the ways that students may engage with communities, and therefore the experiences of both students and community organisations are highly dependent on the somewhat individualised nature of their engagement (Lau and Body, 2021). The available literature highlights some conditions that may make for more positive student-community engagement experiences. Properly matching students and organisations in relation to interest and skills is key, with clear expectations around student roles, the skills they can bring, and what is achievable in the agreed time frame (Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett, 2012; Millican and Bourner, 2014). Organisations must be clear about what kinds of students and roles are suitable for their organisation, and what resource and supervision they are able to provide (Millican and Bourner, 2014). Equally, students should be carefully briefed about the expectations required in terms of professionalism and commitment, and who to contact for different types of support (Millican and Bourner, 2014). A robust application process is helpful for coordinating suitable student-community partnerships, giving greater chances of positive engagement experiences (Millican and Bourner, 2014). In addition, community organisations have more meaningful and impactful encounters with students when placements are longer term, and when students actively choose to take part instead of civic engagement being a mandatory requirement (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010). Though funding is not explicitly mentioned in the literature, these conditions require adequate resourcing as an important catalyst for meaningful engagement.

Based on this evidence, there is a role for universities to facilitate and manage student-community relationships. However, existing studies with community organisations show a lack of engagement, knowledge and support from university staff (Tryon and Stoecker, 2010). This also indicates that, while increasingly promoting student civic activity, universities may have little insight into whether an activity they facilitate is truly meaningful. Despite a recognition that maintaining good community partnerships is essential for successful student-community engagement experiences (Tansey, 2012), evidence suggests that, in many cases, universities should take a more active role as mediators of student civic activity. This includes improving communication and support provided to students and communities throughout a placement. Universities should also better acknowledge their own roles and responsibilities in helping to produce positive and meaningful engagement experiences for students and communities.

CASE STUDY

Alternative civic partnership models: Student Hubs

Student Hubs is a youth social action charity that seeks to connect university students in the UK with social issues, by creating opportunities for students to engage with local communities. Their mission is to mainstream student social action and to ensure that their work has benefits for both students and communities (Student Hubs, n.d.). Student Hubs was originally set up by students in Oxford who saw a need and desire for social action in their place, but a lack of spaces within their university for students to engage and work together with their community.

Student Hubs provides an alternative model for developing student-community engagement, acting as an intermediary partner organisation that creates and facilitates engagement opportunities between university students and local communities. On forming a partnership with a university, Student Hubs lead on delivering a project. This includes sourcing community partners and matching them with suitable students, recruiting and training staff to facilitate the project, and providing training and support to students and community organisations. By building strong relationships they ensure that student and partner needs are met throughout the course of the project. In this role, Students Hubs are able to respond to local need to create tailored, place-based projects.

Student Hubs' 2022-23 Impact Report highlights the value of their approach, showing a number of benefits for the vast majority of students they engaged, including enhanced wellbeing, increased confidence and sense of belonging, and an increased willingness to engage in further social action (Student Hubs, 2023). Additionally, a large majority of community organisations agreed that working with students added expertise to their organisation and increased connection to the student community, as well as feeling that Student Hubs tailored projects to their specific needs and were excellent partners for collaborative work (Student Hubs, 2023).

4.5 Conflicting goals

Literature highlights the increasing demand for student civic engagement among universities, yet there is little indication that this is driven by demand from students or local communities (Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014). With an overemphasis on the university perspective, there is a lack of understanding around community desire and capacity to provide these student engagement experiences (Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett, 2012). Gazley et al (2012) argue that greater attention must be paid to the balance between supply and demand of student engagement opportunities, to ensure that communities have the capacity and willingness to properly manage students. Community organisations commonly have limited time and resource, and risk a saturation of students looking for meaningful placements (Millican and Bourner, 2014). To produce meaningful experiences, it is essential that universities better listen and respond to communities to ensure that civic activity is driven by and addresses community need.

In addition, there is often conflict between the goals set by universities, those set by students, and those set by communities for engagement activities. Universities often lean towards learning goals or assessment outcomes for student engagement that may not be aligned with community interests (Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett, 2012; Millican and Bourner, 2014; Mycock, 2024). Not only can this result in undue responsibility falling on community organisations that they are not well placed to deliver, it also reduces the potential for communities to meaningfully benefit in ways that align with their own goals, as students overly focus on their own assessment outcomes (Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett, 2012; Millican and Bourner, 2014). There is a need to better understand the specific goals of community organisations when entering into student engagement activities, and for these to be included in outcome measurement and evaluation. Greater evidence on the realistic outcomes that can be achieved for communities may also help community organisations and universities to better agree and articulate a shared rationale for engagement (Gazley, Littlepage and Bennett, 2012). Within the literature, there is an opportunity to measure community interests and goals against those of students to explore in more depth whether these are being met and how they may be better aligned to fulfil both community needs and student objectives.

Overall, the dominant discourse on student civic engagement gives little agency to communities, who are often positioned as beneficiaries of charitable student civic activity, rather than equal partners (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010). The lack of community voice and involvement in civic university agendas marginalises communities and risks perpetuating social inequalities (Tansey and Gallo, 2018; Body, 2024). To produce truly meaningful practices of student-community engagement, it is essential that higher education recognises and involves communities as key actors in shaping civic activity.

CASE STUDY

Addressing student and community needs: Talent Works

Talent Works is an initiative by University of the Arts London which provides London College of Communication and Camberwell College of Arts students with paid work experience on bespoke creative communications projects with local community groups, charities, and social enterprises.

Talent Works seeks to produce reciprocal benefit for communities and students by addressing two challenges: local social enterprises, charities and community groups find it difficult to access high-quality talent to help them grow, and students, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, can experience challenges around securing their first paid work opportunity (University of the Arts London, n.d.).

At no cost to community groups, students fulfil the organisation's specific communications need, including developing websites, running social media campaigns, creating new branding, making films, taking photographs, and designing print and digital materials.

5. CONCLUSION

Though student-community engagement is a fairly well-established concept in higher education, there is little evidence to suggest it successfully produces place-based social change in its current form. Understanding of the practices it can and should encompass remains limited and is bounded by institutional conceptions of 'good' citizenship. Evidence shows that student-community engagement could bring a range of positive outcomes, yet what constitutes truly meaningful engagement for all actors involved is still not well understood. The literature, and civic engagement itself, is largely driven by universities and their own goals, which provides limited insight into community perspectives and perpetuates unequal, and somewhat extractive, relationships.

This evidence review points towards opportunities for universities to improve their approach to, and impact of, student-community engagement. Firstly, universities can work with their students to recognise and create new and alternative practices of meaningful community engagement. This includes encouraging and supporting greater student agency in civic engagement and better understanding the needs and experiences of students from different backgrounds. It is also important to

broaden the measurement of 'success' beyond employability and academic attainment. In order to produce more equitable and meaningful experiences for communities, it is essential that universities properly understand community perspectives and involve communities as equal partners in shaping civic activity from the outset. This includes equating community goals with those of students and universities, building shared purpose, and actively facilitating and supporting student-community relationships. Shifting the narrative so that student-community engagement is driven by local need and creates opportunities for students to make tangible impact on their place is key to meaningful civic work.

6. OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are several gaps in the evidence base, which present opportunities for further research. Greater in-depth analyses of a range of different sites and practices of engagement are needed, with a comprehensive exploration of community, student and university experiences to better understand perceptions of and conditions for meaningful engagement. This should include an investigation into motivations and outcomes for each key actor, and analysis of how well these align to make for effective practices. Longitudinal research would be especially valuable here, to provide insight into the longer-term impacts and outcomes of civic engagement that are currently unknown and yet essential to determining wider social value.

Additionally, research is needed on alternative sites and practices of engagement - particularly those that sit outside university structures and those that reach beyond commonly understood ideas of 'acceptable' civic activity, but that may, nonetheless, produce value for students and communities. Moreover, examples of engagement practices that are led by communities and/or students would provide important insight into what students and communities themselves prioritise and seek to change within their local places. Further research exploring what constitutes meaningful experiences for different types of students is also necessary. Greater evidence on community perspectives is needed, and should include not only community 'host' organisations but also individuals and wider community members on whom student engagement also has an impact. Participatory research approaches may be particularly suitable, to give precedence to community and student voices within the literature, as these are significantly lacking in existing civic engagement research (Tansey and Gallo, 2018).

REFERENCES

- Barton, E., Bates, E.A. and O'Donovan, R. (2019) "'That extra sparkle': students' experiences of volunteering and the impact on satisfaction and employability in higher education', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(4), pp. 453–466. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1365827>.
- Body, A. (2024) 'Raising philanthropic children: Moving beyond virtuous philanthropy, towards transformative giving and empowered citizenship', *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing*, 29(1), p. e1833. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.1833>.
- Body, A. and Lau, E. (2023) 'Teaching student philanthropy—Possibilities for practice within the UK higher education sector', *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing*, 28(4), p. e1805. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.1805>.
- Bringle, R.G. and Wall, E. (2020) 'Civic-Minded Graduate: Additional Evidence', *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 26(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mjcsloa.3239521.0026.101>.
- Cheng, Y. and Holton, M. (2019) 'Geographies of citizenship in higher education: An introduction', *Area*, 51(4), pp. 613–617. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12527>.
- Gazley, B., Littlepage, L. and Bennett, T.A. (2012) 'What About the Host Agency? Nonprofit Perspectives on Community-Based Student Learning and Volunteering', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 41(6), pp. 1029–1050. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764012438698>.
- Geboers, E. et al. (2014) 'Typology of Student Citizenship', *European Journal of Education*, 49(4), pp. 514–528. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12091>.
- Geier, I. and Hasager, U. (2020) 'Do Service Learning and Active-Citizenship Learning Support Our Students to Live a Culture of Democracy?', *Frontiers in Education*, 5, p. 606326. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.606326>.
- Harris, M. and Holley, K. (2016) 'Universities as Anchor Institutions: Economic and Social Potential for Urban Development', in M.B. Paulsen (ed.) *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. Cham: Springer International Publishing (Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research), pp. 393–439. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-26829-3_8.

Haw, S. (2023) 'Sustainable Cities Depend on Supporting First-Generation Students', *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 1(40). Available at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss40/22?utm_source=repository.brynmawr.edu%2Ftlthe%2Fvol1%2Fiss40%2F22&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

Holdsworth, C. and Brewis, G. (2014) 'Volunteering, choice and control: a case study of higher education student volunteering', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(2), pp. 204–219. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.815702>.

Holdsworth, C. and Quinn, J. (2010) 'Student volunteering in English higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(1), pp. 113–127. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903019856>.

House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement (2018) *Report of Session 2017–19: The Ties that Bind: Citizenship and Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*. London.

Jacoby, B. (2017) 'The New Student Activism: Supporting Students as Agents of Social Change', *Journal of College and Character*, 18(1), pp. 1–8. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2016.1260479>.

Kelly, U. and McNicoll, I. (2011) *Through a glass darkly: Measuring the social value of universities*. National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. Available at: https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/community/pdfs/NCCPE_Social_Value_Report.pdf

Kerrigan, M. and Manktelow, A. (2021) 'Extracurricular activities in higher education: enhancing the student experience', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 17(2), pp. 204–219.

Kings for Change (n.d.). Available at: <https://linktr.ee/KingsForChange> (Accessed: 25 July 2024).

Klemencic, M. (2016) 'On students' university citizenship'.

Krasny, M.E. et al. (2021) 'E-Engagement: Approaches to Using Digital Communications in Student–Community Engagement', *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 25(4), pp. 21–40.

Kwenani, D. and Yu, X. (2018) 'Maximizing International Students' Service-Learning and Community Engagement Experience: A Case Study of Student Voices on the Benefits and Barriers', *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 22(4), pp. 29–52.

Lau, E. and Body, A. (2021) 'Community alliances and participatory action research as a mechanism for re-politicising social action for students in higher education', *Educational Action Research*, 29(5), pp. 738–754. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2020.1772093>.

Millican, J. and Bourner, T. (2014) *Learning to make a difference: student-community engagement and the higher education curriculum*. Leicester: NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education).

Mycock, A. (2024) *Enhancing the Student Civic Experience*. Civic University Network. Available at: <https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Enhancing-the-Student-Civic-Experience-report.pdf>.

Student Hubs (2023) *Student Hubs' Impact Report 2022-2023*. Student Hubs. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DuCFQpl9xPIg-mBpQr5ZXCQ56nF2jQr0/view>.

Student Hubs (n.d.). Available at: www.studenthubs.org (Accessed: 25 July 2024).

Tansey, L. (2012) 'Volunteering within Higher Education—A Literature Exploration and Case Study', in L. McIlrath, A. Lyons, and R. Munck (eds) *Higher Education and Civic Engagement*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, pp. 125–138. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137074829_8.

Tansey, L. and Gallo, M. (2018) 'From homework club to social justice: Critical reflections on student volunteering through the examination of a school–university partnership', *Research for All*, 2(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18546/RFA.02.1.08>.

Theminiulle, S. et al. (2022) *Volunteering Journeys*. Institute for Community Studies.

Tryon, E. and Stoecker, R. (2010) 'The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning', *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 12(3).

University of the Arts London (n. d.) *Talent Works*, London College of Communication. Available at: <https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-communication/business-partnerships-and-knowledge-exchange/talent-works> (Accessed: 25 July 2024).

Walsh, F. and Santharuban, S. (2023) 'The Power of Community: How Local Engagement can support International Students' Skills, Wellbeing, and Belonging'. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/05/04/the-power-of-community-how-local-engagement-can-support-international-students-skills-wellbeing-and-belonging>.

Williams, J. (2017) *Involving Young People in Volunteering: What Works?* London: The Careers & Enterprise Company.



Led by



Powered by



Funded by



Delivered in partnership with

