



Research  
England

# MAXIMISING STUDENT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO ENHANCE LOCAL PLACES

**EVIDENCE-INFORMED  
ADVICE FOR UNIVERSITIES**

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**National Civic  
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## OVERVIEW

Positive engagement between higher education (HE) students and their institutions' nearby communities is increasingly recognised as an integral part of universities' responsibilities to add value to their local places. Providing experiential learning is also considered essential for universities to foster socially responsible, civic-minded graduates; and university students themselves are a key demographic in their places, who can help shape their local environments, and who may benefit from developing skills, experience and knowledge on the importance of community. This may include learning how to work with policymakers and their community peers.

Meanwhile, for local people, student-community engagement can build cohesion and other benefits. However, students can sometimes be seen as extractive, impacting the shape of the local economy through increased demand for accommodation and local facilities and services, and due to the relatively short or seemingly transient period of time they remain in that place. Some may question students' interest in wider community needs and longer-term strength. For all these reasons, it is crucial that universities support their students to play a positive and active role in the places they live while they study.

This chimes with The Young Foundation's belief that 'positive, vibrant environments with easily accessible, attractive local services and amenities, recognising what local people require of their community, are crucial to improving local health and happiness'. In a wider context, a localised, community-powered approach helps create happier, healthier places - and could support a pipeline of regional leaders within communities. This could lead to the co-development of policies and investment plans, designed with collaboration at the core, and regularly reviewed to recognise the community impact. When it comes to how such an approach could work in practice, [The Young Foundation's research](#) has found that local people understand what their neighbourhood needs to thrive, and often come to the table with locally informed expertise and insights.

Recognising that a huge barrier to community engagement with policymakers can be finding the time to contribute meaningfully and long term, university students can, with the right support and guidance, support their community peers - for example, through volunteering their time or sometimes as a compulsory, timetabled component of their university course. This can and should take different shapes depending upon the community's needs, students' and universities' experience and expertise, and the policy levers available to policymakers.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

Crosscutting areas and best practice from the Institute for Community Studies research in this space focus on physical sites of engagement, identifying key elements that make engagement meaningful and impactful for students and communities, and the tensions that can present both enablers and challenges for delivering meaningful student community engagement. The best practice section explores different types of approach the research found to be effective.

## Crosscutting areas

The research identified crosscutting areas that can support universities to design and deliver meaningful community engagement for students. It is crucial to recognise that each of these crosscutting areas value university students and members of their institutions, local communities, and community groups. Bringing together all these stakeholders in collaboration enables them to effectively recognise what communities want and how these needs can be met to benefit local place and people. These crosscutting areas include the importance of:

**Sites of meaningful engagement** Where possible, communities should have opportunities to choose where they meet for projects, helping them feel comfortable and increasing the likelihood the site matches their needs.

**Connections and relationships** Beyond the project goals and outcomes, both students and community members value the opportunity to build connections, and to share and understand each other's perspectives. If these opportunities are built into projects, engagement is likely to be higher.

**Shaping student identity** Community engagement can provide students with opportunities to build new skillsets to support future employment. However, it is also crucial to recognise that such activity can help to shape students' identities and values in wider society. These are opportunities that can have a higher value to students.

**Tangible change** It is crucial that engagement projects are meaningful and worthwhile, so that both students and community practitioners see tangible benefits and change.

**Enhancing local provision** Community organisations face everyday pressures around time, resource and capacity, making it crucial that engagement with students is impactful, enhancing the community offer wherever possible.

**Responding to community need** Being responsive to community need and genuinely collaborative, with two-way dialogue from the outset, is crucial for positive outcomes. Without this approach there is a risk that communities feel student engagement is extractive or tokenistic. Supporting students and communities to co-create the aims and direction of projects, with all participants regularly sharing updates on what has been achieved, helps avoid disillusionment and cynicism.

**Longevity** Community participants stressed the importance of longevity in their engagement work with students and universities. One way of achieving this is through directing funding and resources to build community capacity without the need for continued student or university engagement (Harney and Morrison, 2022).

**Voluntary vs compulsory student engagement** Most community, students, and staff participants in this research strongly favoured voluntary participation, believing it brings genuine commitment and passion, which were fundamental enablers of successful and meaningful engagement. However, it is crucial to recognise that voluntary models may only attract students already inclined toward community engagement, excluding students who could significantly benefit from the potentially transformative impacts of engagement.

**Resourcing** Adequate resourcing is crucial to making meaningful engagement projects successful for all partners involved, and yet this is commonly acknowledged as a challenge in civic work (Civic University Network and NCCPE, 2022 and Dobson and Owolade, 2025). As Dobson and Owolade (2025) highlight, resources go beyond financial input and also include time, skills, emotional labour and long-held relationships for university staff, students and community partners.

## Best practice

The research points to four types of best practice that can help universities maximise the impact of students-community engagement in a place, including work with local policymakers. Communities should feel the benefit of students living in their place, and students should be able to feel a part of the community. An overview of these types of best practice include:

- **Students collaborating on community-led issues**

Students working with their communities to understand what they require from policymakers and beyond, then working with them to develop and deliver campaigns driving progress towards those community requirements.

- **Co-created community-focused projects**

Projects that strike a balance between offering students practical experience and supporting them to gain skills and experience, while also understanding what it is to be part of a community and achieve meaningful community collaboration. From a community perspective, the projects should recognise and amplify local voice and increase capacity to deliver community-centred projects and services.

- **Data-informed, tailored support**

Universities working with communities to develop data that enables them to make informed decisions. This supports communities and universities to work with key stakeholders and policymakers, to develop projects that reflect community's needs.

- **Enhance local provision**

Engaging with students and universities, there is the chance for community organisations to add to and enhance their community offer.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is not a 'one size fits all' approach to successful, positive student-community engagement that can be used across the country to benefit local places and build cohesion. There are several reasons for this. The first is that each university will have its own strengths that it can bring to community work, which other universities might struggle to replicate. A university's student intake should also play a crucial role in the types of projects they can deliver and the impact these projects can have. Community needs will also change over time, making it crucial that the work between universities, students, and the community in their place is able to flex. Finally, it is crucial that if universities do undertake community-focused work, those undertaking the work do this to the highest standards possible, so that the relationship between universities, students and communities is strengthened. It is therefore vital that universities create quality spaces for students and communities to come together, have honest discussions on the projects they have undertaken, and openly discuss the impact they have, and the type of work required in the future.

This research highlights the vast potential that university student-community engagement practices could have, including how they can drive impact and value for individuals, communities, and places.

Practical recommendations emerged for institutions, students and communities through this research, to better support meaningful student-community engagement in places:

- **Give students greater autonomy and choice** Trust students as important civic actors to shape and lead meaningful community engagement initiatives that match their own interests and passions.
- **Respond to local community need** It is crucial that engagement is driven by genuine community need and takes a non-extractive approach. Universities and students should listen to local needs and ensure that engagement practices seek to amplify and extend local community provision.
- **Seek tangible change for communities** Design projects with actionable outcomes that will produce tangible benefits for local places and people, even if at a very small scale. Consider how to leverage university resource to achieve longevity for communities despite the short-term nature of engagement – for example, through allocation of resources, long-term partnerships or investment, and community capacity-building.
- **Invest in sustainable resourcing** Recognise what is required to make student-community engagement successful from all actors involved. This may include long-term funding, financially compensating community partners and students, as well as ensuring that staff and partners have adequate time and support to deliver engagement projects.
- **Remove university barriers to community engagement** Ensure that university processes are appropriate for enabling and supporting student community engagement in a holistic way. Consider how procedures such as financial processes and accessibility of university spaces can be adapted to meet community needs.

- **Shift the priorities of student civic engagement** Move away from framing and measuring student civic engagement as primarily a skills-focused, employability exercise for students. Instead, demonstrate and champion the wider benefits and social purpose of student-community engagement for both students and local communities.

In terms of how universities can work with policymakers to unlock these opportunities, it would seem logical for this to happen at a regional level - especially as a 'one size fits all' approach is unlikely to work, due to the unique variety of skills and knowledge held within different universities, and due to places and communities holding unique combinations of strengths and challenges, requiring different interventions.

Civic agreements are a key lever that could help universities and key anchor institutions in their place, such as local government, The NHS and colleges. To work together to develop meaningful student-community engagement. However, the crucial takeaway from the research is that the levers and projects will need to change over time, in line with community needs and funding. Therefore, what is more important than the levers is universities and regional policymakers finding ways to engage with communities more broadly to understand what they require. This will enable universities and policymakers to work in their places to improve local cohesion and develop the types of projects that support communities in line with their needs. It will also enable students to gain the invaluable experience of collaborative working with their community peers, to help deliver what the community and place requires to thrive.

## Civic Agreements

As a starting point for this work, civic agreements, civic strategies rooted in a robust and shared analysis of local needs and opportunities and co-created with local partners, offer a framework to develop projects that empower students to work with local residents to co-create and co-deliver community-focused projects. These should support anchor institutions to meet their targets and responsibilities to the communities in the region, while also meeting community needs. By using civic agreements to recognise synergies between policymakers, universities and communities, there is also the chance to develop deeper partnerships that can deliver greater and long-term outcomes for communities and places.

To put into context the value of these agreements, the Civic University Commission identified four principles that should underpin any Civic University Agreement. These all offer Combined Authorities the chance to use university capacity to help deliver on their areas of competence:

**Place** – universities should be committed to attaching a high priority to the economic, social, environmental, and cultural life of local communities.

**Public** – roles should be informed by an evidence-based analysis of the needs of their place, developed collaboratively with local partners and informed by the voice of the local community.

**Partnerships** – collaborations between universities and anchor institutions aimed at overcoming the challenges facing local communities.

**Measurement and impact** - be clear about what is being done and how it is being measured, to ensure confidence in what has been achieved – and how it could be done better in the future.

Using these principles, universities and anchor institutions can recognise how universities and their students can help to support communities (including student communities) and places, combining their expertise and knowledge with that within local communities to deliver for their place. This will create opportunities for students to gain experience and valuable skills, while also having the chance to connect with their community and start to understand the value of community-centred work. It can also build greater trust between communities, students, universities and anchor institutions, leading to better working relationships between all these crucial place-based stakeholders.





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