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The university as a Just anchor: universities, anchor networks and participatory research

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we connect literature on civic universities and anchor institutions with the notion of visibility to explore how universities can play more engaged roles in their areas. We introduce the concept of 'just anchors', which are institutions with strategies to achieve local social, economic and epistemic justice goals through collaboration in networks of other anchors and knowledge co-production with citizens. This paper is based on data from USE-IT!, an ERDF-funded programme that developed mechanisms to build social resilience in inner-city wards of Birmingham, the second-largest city in England. Our findings show that co-production empowers citizens, and that universities are well-placed to facilitate and benefit from the outputs of this process. Based on the experience of delivering a community researcher training scheme, we reflect on the potential of universities to be more visible to, and facilitate the visibility of, marginalised groups, introducing a new theoretical concept into the literature on universities as anchor institutions. We also draw further lessons from USE-IT! to offer practice-based recommendations to other universities seeking to activate their role as just anchors.

KEYWORDS

Community engagement; coproduction; participation; social inequality; university practices

Introduction

Much of the discussion of the wider roles of universities focuses on their economic impact as anchor institutions, particularly through employment, procurement and knowledge transfer (Pugh et al. 2016; McCauley-Smith et al. 2020). Other commentators focus on the impacts of civic university missions, such as engaging with populations to support democratic culture (Giroux 2002; Farnell 2020). Typically, these two approaches towards framing impact are not considered alongside one another. Moreover, there remains a lack of consideration as to how universities can increase the visibility of marginalised communities in such studies. In this paper, we therefore synthesise anchor institution and civic university literature with an explicit focus on the notion of visibility.

The paper is based on data gathered by USE-IT! (Unlocking Social and Economic Innovation Together), an ERDF-funded programme that operated in Birmingham between 2016 and 2019 and developed mechanisms to empower residents in deprived, highly diverse inner-city wards. The programme was a partnership-based urban regeneration initiative that included a community researcher (CR) training scheme delivered by the University of Birmingham. Research outputs

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produced by CRs were delivered to a network of anchor institutions to inform their strategies, with the aim of coordinating actions to reduce duplication and more effectively address complex problems. In this paper, we reflect on the programme's outcomes and lessons learned. Our findings lead us to be critical of the fragmented nature of universities' civic engagement and add our voices to calls for the sector to embrace its capacity for place-based leadership (Hambleton 2018). At present, rather than long-term investment in building up the infrastructure of engagement, a patchwork of short-term projects predominates, reinforcing power imbalances between the researcher and researched (Farr 2018). Our experience leads us to contend that co-production is a crucial mechanism for activating the progressive social, economic and epistemic dimensions of university practice. We conceptualise this through the notion of the 'just anchor': an institution embedded in its community that serves as a platform for, among other functions, citizens' active participation in knowledge production.

Universities operate in a sector that has been opened to market forces, which is portrayed as a way of maximising their contribution to the economy and ensuring a return on investment for government spending (Lebeau and Cochrane 2015). Much research on the wider roles of universities accordingly focuses on economic impacts. Unlike businesses, universities are unable to relocate to exploit lower costs and thereby increase their profit margins. Along with hospitals, cultural institutions, libraries, sports teams and churches, universities are thus anchor institutions that play a critical role in the economic vitality of their communities (Ehlenz 2018). Studies of universities as anchor institutions note their positive impacts upon employment, capacity to play economic leadership roles, procurement of goods and services that benefits local supply chains, and the potential applications of university research beyond academia (Pugh et al. 2016; McCauley-Smith et al. 2020).

This paper opens with a summary of the literature on anchoring, civic universities and visibility, as well as an overview of co-production, which is a mechanism that can enable universities to deliver across these three agendas. The paper's data and research methodology are then introduced, followed by analysis of the empirical material. We identify challenges and opportunities based on our findings and make practice-based recommendations for other universities. While noting the financial imperatives of the higher education sector, we believe that debates on the wider impact of the sector should focus not only on economic effects, but also incorporate civic values and social empowerment. This paper closes by suggesting further research on the institutional change required to enable universities to activate their potential as just anchors in their communities.

Literature review

The notions of 'civic universities' and 'anchor institutions' receive significant policy attention, while the concept of 'visibility' is generally restricted to academic literature. In this paper we integrate the three into the idea of just anchors: institutions with the capacity for long-term strategies to deliver progressive social, economic and epistemic impacts, using the university as an archetype. In doing so, we reconcile the longstanding discussion on the 'town-gown' divide, with universities accused of being closed off from their local communities and paying greater attention to national and international trends in recruitment, teaching and performance metrics (Giroux 2002; Altbach and Salmi 2011).

Literature concerning universities as anchor institutions is primarily orientated toward their impact on local economies (Comunian, Taylor, and Smith 2014), businesses (McCauley-Smith et al. 2020) and urban development and regeneration (Harris and Holley 2016). There is also a focus on universities upskilling local people and enhancing employment rates (Frenette 2009). Such work frames universities as institutions with sufficient scale to have meaningful economic impacts on their areas and play leadership roles (Cantor, Englot, and Higgins 2013; Goddard et al. 2014). Research from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) reflects on the social impacts of the economic activities of anchor institutions, noting how they can contribute to community wealth building through coordinating procurement to maximise the local impact of spending

(CLES 2018; McInroy 2018). According to these studies, anchor economic activity has the potential to enhance local social and economic resilience. An important note on this point is the organisational context in which change among universities towards the anchoring agenda can be achieved. In this regard, the notion of design archetypes and tracks is useful (Greenwood and Hinings 1988). In this framework, transformation is understood not as a single event, but is instead conceptualised as a continual process that may move in multiple directions and be without a clear start or end, or perhaps comprise multiple starts. Moreover, the conditioning function of dominant ideologies and cultures constrains the extent of organisational change. In short, playing a local anchoring role is a transformation that must take place both within and without universities.

Civic university literature considers universities as part of the social milieu, drawing from the notion of *civitas*, or the balance of rights and responsibilities that come with citizenship (Gawthrop 1984). This links to Enlightenment ideals, considering universities as public goods that can support liberal principles (Harkavy 2006; Barnett 2007). As such, there is a democratic understanding of the role of universities in the public sphere in this body of literature (Calhoun 2006). Scholars claim that universities are ideally suited to serve as bridges connecting local people with national debates and international developments (Chatterton 2000). This combination of the global and local has been referred to as 'glocal' and framed as an alternative to the relentless drive towards internationalisation of academic practice (Patel and Lynch 2013). Other research on civic universities considers engagement and outreach that can connect communities with academia and strengthen participatory culture (Harkavy 2006; Tewdwr-Jones, Goodard, and Cowie 2015; Goddard et al. 2016).

Universities can function as public spaces, hosting events for their communities, and encourage participation in knowledge production (Hambleton 2018). Policy reports on this topic recommend that universities begin the activation of their civic roles through conducting research to understand local needs (UPP Foundation 2019). However, researchers note the difficulty of quantifying the engagement activities discussed in civic university literature, which disincentivises universities from carrying out such activities (Farnell 2020). Economic pressure and a neoliberal emphasis on quantifiable return are not the only barriers to universities fulfilling their civic role. Calhoun (2006) also argues there is a structural issue with the sector, from its aristocratic roots to how the system perpetuates class privilege through a superficial focus on meritocracy, failing to acknowledge social capital inherited from parents or acquired through private education.

There are thus two approaches to considering the wider impacts of university practices: economic, as in the case of anchoring; and social or democratic, as in the case of the civic university. These are generally considered separately and there continues to be a dichotomy between considerations of the civic and anchor roles (Ehlenz 2018). However, there are examples where the two concepts have been combined. For instance, Goddard et al. (2016) describe civic universities as those that embrace their anchoring roles while also having a deep connection to their local area, identity, businesses, students and institutions. Goddard (2018) has also written about civic universities as urban anchor institutions that have an important impact on their local economies and community life, engaging through intelligence sharing, community work and widening participation schemes for local students. However, this conceptualisation frames communities essentially as recipients of university impact activities, rather than active or equal participants. We therefore seek to extend this through incorporating the notion of visibility.

Visibility is a concept informed by critique of unequal power dynamics and intersectional debate on how marginalised communities can be better represented (Hill Collins 2017). The notion of visibility is bound to social and epistemic justice, with invisibility being a product of structures that perpetuate the exclusion of certain groups through devaluing their knowledge and lived experiences (Fricker 2009; Hill Collins 2017). With reference to universities, visibility refers to two kinds of space: physical and conceptual. The first form of visibility entails universities maintaining a physical presence in their communities and opening their campuses to the public, embracing their roles as public spaces (Pickering, Kintrea, and Bannister 2012). The second form is conceptual, with universities serving as democratic public forums and sites of knowledge production (Giroux 2002). As

such, increased conceptual visibility means developing mechanisms to benefit from the knowledges of communities who are often so marginalised as to be invisible in debates (Fischer 2006). Visibility is a two-way process: of seeing and being seen (Brighenti 2007). This is an inclusive category that can refer to both the visibility of institutions to the public and the opposite, which is important when considering how universities can be more integrated into the social milieu of their areas.

We contend that co-production methods can link the civic and anchor roles, while also enhancing the visibility of universities to their communities and the representation of communities in university activities. Co-production subverts the traditional knowledge production hierarchy that privileges the 'objective' technical knowledge of experts, who are typically removed from a situation, above the 'subjective' knowledge of those who have lived through it (Negev and Teschner 2013). Co-production enables citizens to articulate and design solutions for the problems they face, avoiding the unintentional stereotyping and stigmatising of behaviours among marginalised communities that often plagues top-down decision-making (Møller and Harrits 2013). Co-production is a tool for empowering citizens and has the potential to create interventions and institutions that are more inclusive (Mügge et al. 2018; Vrooman and Coenders 2020). This is not done at the cost of diluting the effectiveness of policies. For example, evidence from a project to crowdsource the Icelandic constitution shows that active citizen involvement can deliver high-quality proposals, as assessed by subject-matter experts (Hudson 2018).

Co-production is linked to the idea of the civic university as an institution that supports democratic values while facilitating epistemic justice, enabling the public to participate in knowledge creation, dissemination and application (Richardson 2014). This knowledge can inform anchoring strategies and is a practical example of how to achieve abstract goals, such as social justice and empowerment. Interventions based on co-produced knowledge can arrive at more holistic definitions of the problem to be solved and thus more efficiently allocate resources towards the problem. Moreover, co-production is a multi-dimensional concept; it can occur not only along a vertical axis between institutions, but also horizontally between institutions and the public. For example, networks of anchor institutions can collectively co-produce strategies on procurement, supply chains, service provision and impact on local labour markets (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006; Needham 2008; Sicilia et al. 2015; Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016). Co-production is invaluable in enabling institutions to coordinate their activities and enhance their social and economic impacts.

Co-production methods can enable the university to function as a space for visibility through facilitating the input of citizens in knowledge production. This empowerment potential is supported through consideration of intersectionality and reflecting on how it impacts the treatment of individuals' testimonies. In this framework, marginalised groups are considered as those who have lower levels of education or are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, disabled people, ethnic and sexual minorities, and any combination of these (Mügge et al. 2018). In this paper, we argue that it is essential to reflect on visibility when considering how universities can activate their potential as just anchors, with co-production being a crucial mechanism by which this can be activated.

Data and methodology

The USE-IT! partnership facilitated collaboration and the coordination of actions to tackle urban poverty and build social resilience. The programme comprised of work packages delivered by different organisational constellations. These included the delivery of the CR training scheme, a skills matching project to find unrecognised overseas medical qualifications, a social enterprise support scheme, and legacy projects that could continue after the end of the funding period.

The programme took place in a highly diverse transect of inner-city Birmingham, the second largest city in England. The study site was developed into a large social housing estate after the World War II and in recent decades has become a key destination for migrants moving to the city. The area is marked by high rates of poverty, lower employment, and weaker educational attainment when compared to regional and national averages. It is also under significant gentrification pressure

(Zwicky 2021). As such, the programme was carried out in an area of rapid urban transformation where there is a threat that communities could be displaced through gentrification. USE-IT! sought to give residents a stake in this urban change, mitigating negative impacts and building on the positive impacts of development.

As part of a participatory action research agenda, USE-IT! delivered an accredited CR training scheme to upskill residents and enable them to work with researchers on campus to define the problems they face, gather empirical data, and write policy reports to inform decision-making processes among the wider USE-IT! network. The scheme sought to overcome the discrepancies between university and community priorities identified in the literature (Harris 2019). Qualified CRs were commissioned to conduct research on behalf of the partnership. 85 residents gained qualifications alongside work experience. Two were awarded scholarships to study a master's degree at the University of Birmingham. Five received additional training enabling them to deliver the scheme to others, ensuring the capacity to replenish skills transferred to the community in the years ahead. USE-IT! laid the foundations of a community research social enterprise that can be sustained beyond the end of the programme and benefit both residents and institutions through its knowledge generation activities. Further achievements of the programme include the establishment of the Birmingham Anchor Network (BAN) to enable collaboration and coordination of the activities across the city, as well as successfully identifying over 200 people in the area with overseas medical qualifications who have been supported into jobs in the NHS (Bloomfield 2019).

This paper builds on three years' worth of data gathered by the academic team. The qualitative material analysed in the next section is drawn from 36 semi-structured interviews and 10 focus-groups including CRs, project managers and representatives of various institutions from the USE-IT! partnership. To support the evaluation of the programme, interview participants were invited to share their perceptions of the university and other anchor institutions. In addition, responses from two surveys are incorporated, taking in the views of 328 respondents living in the study site with data collected in the first and third years of the programme. Survey questions related to life experiences, economic conditions and aspirations for the future, as part of our work to understand the area. One-quarter of the interviews used in this paper were carried out by CRs as part of commissioned research, with discussion guides co-produced in workshops; the majority were conducted by the academic team and several were carried out independently by the programme's evaluators. We carried out a qualitative content analysis of interview transcripts using inductive reasoning and identified key themes.

Analysis

The analysis of our material uncovered three key themes: attitudes towards the university as an anchor institution, the perception of how different organisations work together, and how participants felt represented and visible at the university. These themes drove the conceptualisation of the just anchor as an institution geared towards achieving progressive economic, social and epistemic goals.

The university as an anchor institution

Universities need to cultivate their role as anchor institutions to deliver the full extent of potential economic benefits they represent to their communities. However, concern was shown by participants on this issue. Although it was suggested by some interview participants that universities are beginning to show interest in the anchoring agenda, one participant mentioned that 'they [universities] are about 15 years behind' other institutions in recognising their anchoring role. This was ascribed to a resistance to change in the organisational culture of universities. Linked to this is the claim that universities pay greater attention to national and international interests than local ones. A representative of one institution described how 'universities see themselves as global, not local. They

see themselves as removed from the place they are in'. It was felt that this is partly driven by research funding requirements and performance metrics that discourage civic engagement and building partnerships with communities. As one participant from the local authority bemoaned: '... academics are praised and get promotion on the back of the number of papers that they write, regardless of whether people read them or not... doing stuff locally to support policy is not really valued'.

A further challenge was raised in relation to universities developing a vision, devoting resources and formulating policies to support anchoring. Multi-level leadership, dispersed management structures and siloed departments were cited as problems. In recognising that anchoring involves engaging with businesses, a representative of one anchor institution said that universities do not understand business engagement as it happens 'in the real world'. Collectively, these points suggest that changes to internal institutional structures and the contemporary operating model of British universities are required to enable universities to activate their anchoring potential.

The lack of emphasis universities place on local recruitment was raised as a further point of contention. One participant in a focus group claimed that 'the only way they [universities] see employment is through graduate employment'. This chimes with a point made by a resident at a community meeting we held, who said that 'universities should focus more on local people and young people as assets, not all overseas endeavours'. Again, this links to university performance metrics, whereby universities are ranked according to graduate earnings, employability rates and competition to raise their international profile, rather than their commitment to local employment or upskilling local people.

Beyond their economic roles, universities have civic and social responsibilities in relation to supporting community development, demonstrating that the social, economic and epistemic impacts of universities are closely intertwined. As highlighted by several participants, there is a desire on the part of local people for more meaningful interactions between universities and communities, underpinned by universities demonstrating their long-term commitment to collaboration and building trust rather than 'parachuting in' each time a project begins. Linking to this is the need for universities to be 'working and learning in communities to break open the gates' (local activist at a community board meeting). This demonstrates that, while participants may not have conveyed their attitudes using the academic jargon on visibility, this theme was nonetheless strongly present throughout the interviews and surveys we conducted.

Anchor institutions working together

When evaluating the CR training scheme, our interviews demonstrated that many of the benefits perceived by participants related to building social connections, feeling a sense of empowerment and fulfilling aspirations to join up public services. There was relatively little emphasis on economic impacts, despite this being central to the theory of anchoring. As such, the idea of a just anchor that serves an active social justice role appeared to be embedded in the narratives adopted by participants when thinking about institutions such as the university.

A resident who participated in our community meeting noted the need to 'minimise the duplication of services which often leads to confusion'. At this event, participants stated that public institutions have different strengths and weaknesses when it comes to providing services. As such, when joined up they can exchange knowledge to design more holistic strategies. For example, CRs went on to work with the university and NHS doctors to research cost-effective 'social prescribing' treatments for diabetes that would benefit patients and save costs for the local authority. However, a participant from BAN warned that: 'it is a bit alarming just how little these organisations know about each other and how to work together'. CRs were nevertheless optimistic about the potential of these collaborative efforts. For example, one CR researched the links between loneliness, feeling disempowered, and having poor mental health, commenting on the need for public services to collaborate on these issues. The CRs cited that being affiliated with the university gave them credibility as

researchers and helped them make contacts and gain access in ways that were not possible for citizens working alone.

An important epistemic dimension raised was how institutional collaboration could empower citizens through mitigating consultation fatigue. One CR commented how the scheme had changed their attitude towards research, seeing the benefits of the partnership of institutions on the programme. They added that ‘people are sceptical of the university and of consultations because afterwards nothing happens. But with community research it feels more serious’. Another CR noted how they were able to access members of a group typically considered ‘hard-to-reach’ because they were part of that community, highlighting the benefit to the university and public services of this approach. A representative of a local community organisation noted how the city council tends to talk about deprived areas as places with problems to be fixed, which can be frustrating to local people who feel excluded from determining the narrative of their areas, thus introducing the idea of agency and whose opinion matters in setting policy agendas. As another participant from a community organisation commented, ‘don’t come and fix us – come and resource us!’

This point relates to the theme of public institutions building connections, both between institutions and crucially between the public and institutions. Social connections could mitigate the negative impacts of staffing churn driven by budget cuts; as several participants noted, the local authority sees a constant turnover of people that makes it difficult to build durable relationships. The chairman of a community organisation spoke about the difficulty in making contact which added difficulty when work with large institutions. In addition, creating spaces for interactions were discussed. One local charity worker contended that traditional ‘bumping places’ for surreptitious social interaction no longer exist, or do so in a much-reduced form, given that fewer people frequent places such as churches and pubs. This participant saw their work as trying to recreate such spaces and strengthen a sense of community and belonging, as well as create a more dynamic ecosystem of ideas and exchanges. The university is well-placed to offer this space in a civic mission removed from the short-term cycles of politics; to deliver the economic benefits of anchoring; and to serve as a site of knowledge production, representation, and visibility for local people.

The university as a space for visibility

The issues of seeing or being seen at the university, and who the university is for, were raised by participants who felt that campuses were for elites and were not places that those without degrees could or should access. Such comments highlight a tension between the progressive aims of the anchoring agenda and exclusive perceptions of who universities are for. One attendee at our community meeting commented that the ‘university is for rich people, not for people like me’. Another local resident felt that access to the university was restricted to those who had something to offer in return: ‘the doors are closed unless there is funding, volunteering, investment ... there is an exclusive business perception when it comes to the university’. One participant on our training scheme said that they had never visited the university before, despite living nearby. The CR scheme helped alter these perceptions, with participants feeling the training bridged the gap between communities and the university. For instance, when CRs in our focus groups reflected on the scheme, one noted that previously they had perceived research to be elitist, but that community research could overcome elitism. Another noted how the scheme had enabled them to visit campus, saying that it showed universities were for everybody, not only people with expensive degrees.

Nevertheless, we identified barriers to the university functioning as a space in which marginalised groups are represented. For example, an interview with a local charity worker talked about the importance of recruiting more ethnically diverse and hence representative staff than the university has at present. Another participant had a different attitude towards the idea of engaging with the community, arguing that ‘community is a middle-class construct. Nobody in this neighbourhood would understand themselves as being a community’. This points to a conundrum in communicating

with what researchers refer to as 'communities', some of whom may not identify as such, or who may not see the university as a place worth visiting. This sentiment was voiced by a representative of a local community organisation, who said that 'if you went into any school in the city and asked if [pupils] were thinking of working at the university, I don't think a single one would put their hands up'. This participant felt the university was not present in the daily lives of most people in the 'real world'. Likewise, a resident we spoke to believed that the university made no attempt to be present in their area. As noted above, there was frustration that accessing the university required you to pay, creating a barrier for those on lower incomes.

On a conceptual level, the idea of the university as a public forum with the capacity to facilitate the inclusion of marginalised communities is exposed as an unfulfilled aspiration by participants, who raised issues such as the ethnicity of staff or the way academics arrive in their areas and talk about 'communities', creating barriers to engagement as equal partners. There was a clear appetite in our public meetings and interviews for the university to allow citizens to be represented in research, particularly when that research influences decision-making. One resident wanted the university to 'tell a better story about this place, we want to have pride in it!' Another wanted the university to understand people's lived experiences, saying that 'the community could enable the university to learn about reality'. This perception of there being a 'real world' that the university is removed from was cited repeatedly by multiple participants. Among those who completed the training scheme, there was a sense that community research could open the university to this 'real world'. Several commented that community research also breaks down elitism, enables minorities and poor people to have a voice, and shows you do not need to be an academic to have a worthwhile opinion – valuable effects that can support democratic culture.

One participant commented that community research means a wider range of views are included and they felt this diversity of thought was inherently good. Another CR felt the relationship was mutually beneficial: the university gained insights into groups they might not be able to access, and the researcher gained a connection with the university which enhanced their credibility. The idea of visibility being contingent on developing relationships appeared to be very important and raises a salient point: how should a person talk to a university? Participants did not want to connect with the university as an abstract entity, but rather wanted someone they could get to know. This seems obvious, but all too often discussions of visibility and civic engagement overlook the human need to connect with others, particularly when facing an institution that can be large and intimidating.

Our findings show that delivering a CR training scheme, commissioning work from CRs, and supporting their research through mentoring and networking can build more durable relationships and develop trust that is more often eroded through the typical pattern of short-term, fragmented projects conducted by researchers. Co-production methods were thus able to activate the progressive economic, social and epistemic roles of the just anchor. As one participant commented at the outset, 'I'm sick of telling my story, it doesn't make any difference'. We found that this cynicism can be overcome, but doing so requires building community capacity and changing the way citizens think about the university, both as a physical and conceptual space, while at the same time making changes towards university practice.

Discussion and conclusions

As we reflect on the results of the programme, several lessons emerge that can inform future attempts to activate universities as just anchors. These relate to the concepts of anchoring and civic university missions, as well as how visibility and empowerment are operationalised in political discourses in the UK.

Firstly, while accepting that the economic impacts of the anchoring agenda are important, we contend that there is at present too little attention on the wider social impacts of institutions that engage with and are open to their communities, which cannot be measured solely by economic

return. Research by CLES (2018, 2019) clearly demonstrates the potential of local procurement, employment and training to economically benefit deprived areas and create new opportunities for marginalised groups. However, disempowerment is not solely economic; as our interviews corroborated, it is also a cultural and social phenomenon (Hill Collins 2017; Mügge et al. 2018). To that end, we believe a more explicit commitment to empowerment and visibility could serve as guiding statements of progressive values alongside the anchoring agenda. In short, just anchors ought to articulate their visions and develop engagement mechanisms within collaborative networks of fellow anchors. Such visions should be developed in partnership with communities to ensure greater legitimacy and a deeper understanding of local needs.

The CR training scheme was a powerful mechanism for realising the social, economic and epistemic dimensions of just anchor practice. Transferring skills to the community to enable citizens to define and address the problems they face incorporates diverse knowledges into policy development and academic research, disrupting traditional binaries privileging technical over lived expertise, while at the same time building social relationships between citizens and their institutions (Fischer 2006; Negev and Teschner 2013). This is mutually beneficial. Feedback from CRs showed that the scheme helped increase trust in institutions and mitigate consultation fatigue. In a highly marketised higher education sector such as exists in the UK, offering subsidised or cost-free training and outreach can help universities be more visible in their areas, while enabling people who are not typically seen on campuses to themselves be visible in knowledge production and in the physical space of the campus (Brighenti 2007; Pickering, Kintrea, and Bannister 2012). Framing visibility as a two-way process can bolster the legitimacy of universities in the eyes of the public and shatter the perception that universities are detached from the 'real world', to borrow the words of our participants.

We do not claim that USE-IT! is a one-size-fits-all solution. The programme encountered challenges that provoke us to reflect on problems with the research design, as well as the cultural change required to coordinate a partnership of public institutions. For example, getting the buy-in of senior leaders can be difficult. Institutions are run according to their missions and the key performance indicators used to measure the effectiveness of their activities, which frequently do not align with those of others and can even come into conflict. Furthermore, while we found excitement about the programme among the partnership, there is a risk that interventions such as USE-IT! fall by the wayside as the novelty wears off and more pressing issues intrude. The perennial issue in this regard is budgetary constraints.

Other problems encountered were those of time: it is time-consuming to design materials and deliver an accredited training scheme from scratch. Time was also a challenge for the CRs; although training was free, participants volunteered time to study towards accreditation in the hope of accessing paid work on commissioned projects. This meant we largely recruited retired and unemployed citizens, and certain groups (including men of all races) were underrepresented. As the funding period from the ERDF came to an end, so did the formal involvement of the university. Legacy projects largely ran on the goodwill and free time of researchers – there is no metric to rank universities according to outreach and community work which could incentivise these actions (Farnell 2020). Support from university leadership to carry out such activities would therefore be warmly welcome. Our experiences of challenges encountered can be instructive for future attempts to activate universities as just anchors and realise the benefits this entails. The outputs of USE-IT! demonstrate the value of doing so. These include the continued operation of a collaborative network for anchor institutions to reduce duplication, coordinate procurement, and share best practice on localising supply chains; knowledge produced by CRs that has benefited policy and service design, and received a large grant to help research childhood obesity in Birmingham; and the overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants on the training scheme that led many to go on to further study or seek employment in the research sector.

A final cultural challenge lies within the university itself. With pressure to produce knowledge that has a 'real world' application, researchers risk becoming swept away by the capricious cycle of trends

in government priorities (Calhoun 2006). The need to increase research income risks pushing university departments toward potentially inappropriately close relationships with funders, with the result that researchers might find themselves unable to challenge those who commission their work. There is a risk that dependence on insecure funding from application processes could curtail the ability to freely speak truth to power in academia. While knowledge production on campus can indeed benefit policy design and achieve a return on investment, the role of universities should not solely be conceptualised in this way. Universities can help create a more participatory democratic culture, thus rebuilding the withered trust in institutions, and challenge assumptions and disrupt processes that perpetuate economic inequality or social marginalisation (Harkavy 2006). These are important products of university activities that are not easily measured on metrics, speaking to a fundamental problem with how performance in the sector is ranked.

Future research could go further to uncover the cultural and institutional change required to enable universities to activate their roles as just anchors, as well as how to build collaborative institutional partnerships with a role for citizens in decision-making processes. In addition, research on other mechanisms to achieve the impacts contained within the concept of the just anchor would be welcome. This might include evidence on making changes to curricula to embed principles of social, economic and epistemic justice; or best practice on auditing supply chains to understand not only local spending share but also the ethical dimensions of spending, and indeed hiring practices too. An important area of further research is also the development of practical instruments for nurturing a culture of civic engagement while facilitating the visibility of communities. To this end, beyond fixating on rankings, we encourage universities to consider how they can be more present in their areas, and in turn enable local people to perceive the university as a place to see and be seen, speak and be heard, and be represented in the process of creating new knowledge.

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