

The civic university: FAQ

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About the Author

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About NCIA

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 with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. The programme, partly funded by Research England, will create collaboration and policy and practice innovation involving universities, local government and business groups, and the community sector to drive place-based transformations.

About CRESR

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) is one of the UK's leading policy research centres. It seeks to understand the impact of social and economic disadvantage on places and people.

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How can universities and their partners use this document?

We don't see this as the final word on 'what is civic'. But we know partners often struggle to define terms and reach a common language and shared understanding of their work. The understandings we've shared here are a launchpad to allow partners to structure their own conversations about how they understand 'civic' activity and what that will mean in practice.

1. What do we mean by 'civic'?

We are aware that the term 'civic' needs defining. 'Civic' is a term that can be articulated and understood in different ways, depending on who is using it and in which context. For the purposes of National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) programme we are focused on the difference that universities can make in their localities while recognising that universities are not the only, or the most important, organisations in any place.

Universities need to be encouraged and equipped to work more closely with their communities and local partners.

There are many ways of thinking about universities' civic activities and mission. We have developed the following definitions to describe civic work:

- We understand universities' **civic activities** as a set of collaborative and inclusive relationships and practices that happen in the service of place, towards a shared set of outcomes coproduced with local institutions, leaders and populations.
- A **civic mission** is a choice by universities to recognise the value and potential of these relationships and practices and invest in them to agreed outcomes.
- **Civic engagement** is the process of building and continuously improving locally beneficial relationships, and **civic impact** describes the outcomes that flow from such relationships.

2. Where does civic work happen?

Each university has its own geography and many have global as well as local networks. We see civic activities as mainly taking place in the locations where a university is physically based, but this will look different in different places.

3. Isn't every university civic?

No. 'Civic' universities are those that actively seek to benefit their local places and populations and want to make this a priority.

4. How can we assess universities' civic impacts?

There isn't a simple metric that sums it up. Instead we've developed a [Civic Impact Framework](#) that encourages universities and their partners to examine seven areas of activity:

- Leadership and strategy.
- Social impacts.
- Environment and biodiversity.
- Health and wellbeing.
- Arts and culture.
- Economic impacts.
- Facilities and placemaking.

The framework invites universities and their partners to map what they do; form partnerships; agree priorities; make sure the partnerships have the resources they need; check whether they are making a difference; and learn from their activities so they constantly improve.

Within each of these seven areas of activity, we've identified seven aspects of what we would describe as a civic approach by universities, which are listed below. We invite you to use these as ways of thinking about your work.

- **PLACE. *Civic as physical location:*** We are choosing to interpret civic as 'local' activity which is focused on realising benefits in a university's location. This could be local or regional engagement, but not national or international.
- **PEOPLE. *Civic as people-centred and relational behaviour:*** Universities and their staff and students are actors in society.
- **PARTNERSHIP. *Civic involves mutual agreements on shared priorities:*** Relational behaviour needs to translate into place-based partnership with other 'anchors' of the community.
- **PURPOSE. *Civic as a pathway to public benefit:*** How universities negotiate, describe, activate and evaluate the value they create through their civic activity, and frame their purposes for civic work.
- **PRACTICE. *Civic as practical action:*** The practical ways in which universities can embed civic practices and behaviours into their academic activity and how they can use their 'anchor' role (procurement, employment practices, facilities etc) to benefit people and place.
- **PROCESS. *Civic as organisational culture:*** What being a 'civic university' means for the ways that universities organise and govern themselves.
- **POLICY. *Incentives or disincentives for civic action:*** Exploring the policy and funding mechanisms which enable or hold back civic activity.



5. How will we understand the difference this is making?

We have developed a theory of civic change to give universities and their partners a tool for thinking about their common challenges, how they will address them, and the outcomes and impacts they expect to see.



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