



Perceptions of the Civic University

Qualitative research from two cities, February 2018

1. Introduction

In this opinion research project – supplemented by our quantitative poll – we set out to discover whether, in two English cities, the population feels connected to the universities previous generations of city residents helped establish. City A is a large northern metropolis while City B is a smaller city. Both cities are home to both pre- and post-1992 universities. We held four groups in total: in each city, one group with ordinary “lower middle class” and affluent working class (C1/C2) residents; and one group with self-consciously “civic minded” residents. These civic minded residents – people who volunteered locally, for example - were generally more affluent and better educated (more “middle-middle class”).

2. Key findings

(a) Civic pride exists - and universities underpin this pride for some. In both City A and City B , participants across groups felt pride in their universities. There was a sense the universities “put them on the map”. For example, participants in both City A groups were able to identify the fact there are several famous scientists teaching at the city’s main university. Crucially, there was also a clear understanding that the local NHS benefited from the presence of high-quality universities locally. While it would be too much to suggest people across all groups were glowing with pride about the existence of top quality universities there was an overall sense of quiet satisfaction. The idea of the civic university, in this fundamental sense, is real.

(b) More affluent, better educated and civic-minded residents have better perceptions of local universities. While pride existed *generally* across groups, it was far more strongly felt amongst those we recruited as being specifically civic-minded. The locally-targeted initiatives of the universities are more visible and better received by the civic-minded. Because the civic-minded residents tended to be more affluent and better educated, we do not think it is a stretch to say that socio-economic grouping (SEG) and education are determining factors in shaping attitudes towards local universities. In both cities, the civic-minded groups unanimously regarded local universities as being a key part of the fabric of their city while the C1/C2 group had mixed attitudes towards local universities - some indifference, some hostility, some pride.

(c) An expanding student population seems to create barriers to civic pride in universities. The City B C1/C2 focus group had an *extremely* negative attitude towards the student population. The City B C1/C2s felt very strongly that rising student numbers put pressure on housing and changed the “feel” of where they lived. They felt that support for a rising student population came at the expense of support for the local population. The City B civic-minded group mentioned some of this in passing but shrugged them off as not being especially important. Negative perceptions of the student population were not evident in City A. City A’s sheer size suggest that it is the exception. Some of Public First’s recent work with city regions suggested that there is a growing discontent with university expansion.

3. What does this mean for the Civic University Commission?

The purpose of the Civic University Commission is to make substantive policy recommendations to government and to universities in answer to two questions:

- 1) How can universities be both local and global?
- 2) What should a civic university in the 21st Century look like?

With regard to the first question, the focus groups suggest there is a fundamental question about what “being local” means for a university. If a university is to be relevant to – and to engage with – every stratum of its city’s population, “being local” has to be something more than holding open lectures. The challenge for the Commission is to understand what this “something more” is. On the second question, the focus groups suggested barriers to civic pride arising from a perception that local universities do not fit with the realities of a city’s economy and community. For example, an underlying theme in the City B C1/C2 group was that the success and expansion of the university was at odds with the post-industrial path that the city had been on. A challenge for the Commission, therefore, will be to make recommendations that are relevant to universities regardless of their location. The Commission is also going to have to address the simple fact that large numbers of students in university towns and cities creates challenges.

The focus groups also indicated what the Commission should not do. Firstly, it should not simply be an exercise in promoting examples of civic engagement – case studies are easy to generate – but it is also critical to understand how universities are designing their civic engagement activities, and what their strategy is to make them relevant to the different groups of local residents. Secondly, the Commission should try to understand how universities try to understand the cities in which they are based, and how that links to them being part of the economic future of the city.

While there is huge power to qualitative research, obviously a small number of focus groups cannot provide robust and significant recommendations. That said, we think the focus groups gave some early indications of ideas worth exploring:

- A potentially very successful way of emphasising and showcasing universities' worth to a city is through their contribution to the NHS, both in terms of major activity like treatment-discovery but also through attracting expertise to centres like teaching and specialist hospitals.
- Despite universities still being seen as a key civic asset, they need to be better at talking to all their fellow-citizens. Local communications should be seen as a priority. Some groups are probably being "super-served" while others feel ignored. We think this is particularly true on the area of economic impact, which seemed lost on many people.
- Universities are about education and possess unique abilities to engage people in this area. We would recommend the commission think about the full range of educational opportunities for people in the local area, and how the university could advance those opportunities. The most enthusiastic answer to what universities should be doing to engage local people focused on pre-18 education, with advice and outreach for school students.

Detailed findings

4. Discussing what people have noticed about higher education

Focus group participants were asked if they had recently seen or heard anything about universities. In the week leading up to the groups, the Government's review of post-18 education and the lecturers' strike over pension reforms had been in the news. The issue of high university fees had general cut-through and was the first thing mentioned by both groups. Vice-Chancellor remuneration also had cut-through, with around half of participants mentioning it ("*Somebody got a dog shipped over from Australia for a thousand pounds*", City B man approaching middle-age, C1/C2 group). All of these issues were raised without prompting. It would be too much to suggest they had very strong feelings about these stories, but participants did notice them.

5. Discussing attitudes towards local universities

Across all groups there was some evidence of civic pride in local universities – it was universal amongst civic-minded groups but more complex among C1/C2 groups.

The participants of the civic groups in both City B and City A undoubtedly felt close to, and engaged by, the local universities ("*They are so accessible to us, the public*", middle-aged City B woman, civic-minded group). The views of those in the C1/C2 groups were much more mixed. A few participants did reference things about local universities that made them proud.. But these positives were secondary to a general sense of benign indifference towards City A's universities and near-hostility in City B. Overall, the C1/C2 groups described barriers between them and local universities.

One particularly interesting point to come out of the City A C1/C2 group was that these attendees felt that, with fees at £9,250 a year, students had every right to have the university facilities to themselves - and that it was unfair to expect money coming from students to subsidise activities for other people ("*If I was paying out all that money I'd want it spent on me, not on other people*" City A man in his 30s, C1/C2 group). This suggests that a more transactional approach to higher education poses something of a threat to the idea of a university as a civic institution with responsibilities to the whole city, not just its students and staff. It was also interesting to hear that coming from people who would probably be a great deal worse off during their lifetimes than most university graduates.

Another set of attitudes that was common to the C1/C2 group was to see learning in a very practical way. ("*I don't associate City A University with learning just for the joy of learning in itself. I'd associate that much more with [the local post-1992 university]. Their courses are a lot more interesting with things like web design,*" City A man in his mid-30s, C1/C2 group).

6. Discussing the costs and benefits of local universities

In both cities, apart from minor gripes about traffic congestion and busy pubs, the civic group only referenced benefits of local universities. One other major benefit was seen as the NHS - with several attendees talking about how they had been able to access new treatments because of City A's medical expertise. Attendees were also interested in how the city's universities also supported specialist services like the local cancer hospital. We believe it can only help universities' cases with the public if their research output is associated with tangible benefits for local people – with health close to the top of the list. The C1/C2 groups referenced the same benefits as the civic group, but with added caveats and without the same enthusiasm. The international dimension of local universities was mostly regarded as a benefit across both groups in both cities. In City A there was a sense that - even if they did not know what they were studying and never spoke to them - the fact that so many international students came to study there helped prove it was a globally-significant city.

A key point is that the City B C1/C2 group felt that students were being given more favourable treatment by the city than locals. Some blame for this perceived imbalance was attributed to the university – the expansion of student numbers in recent years was always going to mean that more housing was needed as universities chase cash. In City A, this was not an issue. One possible explanation for this is that City A is much bigger than City B - with a students-to-population ratio perhaps a third of the ratio in City B.

7. Discussing what local universities are doing to engage people

Across both cities, the C1/C2 group and the civic group had had positive engagement with the local universities. Music recitals, public lectures, use of university grounds and access to sports facilities were all mentioned. The story of why people didn't engage – from both groups – was largely one of awareness (*"I see plenty of posters for parties, but not for any of the study stuff"*, middle-aged City B woman, C1/C2 group), but also of irrelevance (*"Doesn't really interest me"*, young City B man, civic group).

The most enthusiastic answer to what universities should be doing to engage local people focused on pre-18 education, with advice and outreach for school students. One attendee in City A – a nightclub doorman in his 40s – spoke about how his daughter was desperate to go university and he had been impressed by some help that a local university had provided. He was, however, keener that she should go away (*"I want her to have the full university experience. I had friends who did that and they made friends for life. It's a wonderful thing to do and I want her to have it"*). There was a sense that universities had intellectual capital to spare and it should be easier for local people to participate. Unsurprisingly, this was a stronger point of view in the more affluent groups.

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