



**Sheffield  
Hallam  
University**



# Enhancing the Student Civic Experience

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A photograph of two young women sitting on a couch and talking. The woman on the left has dark curly hair and is wearing a red top. The woman on the right has long blonde hair and is wearing a white sweater with a red and blue stripe. They are in a room with framed pictures on the wall and a wooden cabinet in the background.

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# Enhancing the Student Civic Experience: Executive Summary

The Civic University Network (led by Sheffield Hallam University) and the Institute for Community Studies, working with a range of partners including the UPP Foundation, Edge Foundation, and the University of Liverpool, hosted two workshops in 2023 to develop the existing evidence base and further enhance knowledge of university student civic learning and engagement. These events brought together representatives from across higher education and leading civil society and student organisations to discuss how, when, and where students engage in civic learning and participation before, during, and after their university studies.

The following report argues that universities need to fully adopt a 'truly civic' approach to designing and delivering the student civic experience through formal teaching and learning, campus-based extra-curricular activities, and in the communities where students live and work. University degrees and apprenticeships, regardless of the subjects studied, should enable students to develop their civic identities through sustained opportunities civic learning and participation. There is a need to promote universities as civic and democratic communities of participation to prepare them for a lifelong commitment as active citizens.

Universities and Students' Union should undertake an annual 'Student Civic Health Check' to assess levels of civic engagement and participation in systems of representation, student elections, and local democratic and volunteering networks, and all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study to ensure that all students are provided with opportunities for civic learning and participation.

Our report also outlines four key policy recommendations which draw on the evidence collated for this report.

### **Recommendation 1: Supporting Democratic Participation**

We recommend the introduction of compulsory electoral registration as part of student induction, campus-based local, regional, and national election hustings, and regular on-campus ‘surgeries’ for students and staff, and should be rolled out across the sector.

### **Recommendation 2: Acknowledging the Student Civic Experience**

We recommend recognition and reward for civic universities who embed the student civic experience into their teaching and learning, research, and community engagement through the Teaching Excellence Framework, the National Student Survey, the Graduate Outcomes survey, and the Knowledge Exchange Framework. We also propose the creation of a National Student Civic Awards as part of existing higher education awards.

### **Recommendation 3: Refreshing Civic University Agreements**

We recommend existing and new Civic University Agreements fully recognise the importance and value of the student civic experience to ‘truly civic’ universities.

### **Recommendation 4: Supporting the Student Civic Experience**

We recommend the creation of a ‘What Works’ resource hub to support universities and their staff, students’ unions, and other invested stakeholders to enhance student civic learning and participation on campuses and in communities. A funded programme of research should explore the diversity of student civic experiences, including different institutional approaches to teaching and learning, well-being, careers outcomes, and citizenship ‘gains’ and civic impacts for students.

# Introduction

An enduring theme in debates about the purpose and quality of higher education is that employers are concerned about the lack of appropriate workplace and technical skills of graduates when they are first recruited.<sup>1</sup> In response, policymakers and universities have increasingly focused on enhancing employability and earnings of university graduates in the UK, highlighting the importance of relevant and up-to-date education and experiential learning that supports the advancement of academic and vocational skills. As such, the key indices of 'success' shaping the evaluation of teaching in higher education – principally the annual National Student Survey (NSS) and the Graduate Outcomes survey – focus on personal and professional development predominantly in terms of employability and career progression.

This noted, the civic education of students has proven an enduring – if secondary – lens to understand the value of higher education, with calls for greater recognition of the 'graduate citizen' reflecting concerns about diminishing levels of social and political literacy and engagement.<sup>2</sup> Research indicates that although university students typically engage and participate in civic life to a greater extent than their non-university educated peers, they are still significantly less likely to vote or volunteer than older citizens.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, levels of civic activity decline after graduation, raising questions as to the extent higher education educates and inspires graduates to become lifelong active citizens.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Institute for Student Employers (2023) ISE Recruitment Survey (available at: [https://ise.org.uk/page/ISE\\_Recruitment\\_Survey\\_2023&VID](https://ise.org.uk/page/ISE_Recruitment_Survey_2023&VID)); Chartered Management Institute (2021) Work Ready Graduates: Building Employability Skills for a Hybrid World (available at: <https://www.managers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/employability-skills-research-work-ready-graduates.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup> J. Ahier, J. Beck, and R. Moore, (2003), *Graduate Citizens? Issues of citizenship and higher education*, Routledge Falmer: London; M. Bacon and J. Sloam (2010), 'John Dewey and the Democratic Role of Higher Education in England', *Journal of Political Science Education*, 6:4, pp.336-352

<sup>3</sup> S. Theminimulle, Z. Wilkins, K. Bulutoglu, A. Mycock, E. Morrison, R. Harries, W. Dunn, N. Zia, M. Flinders, D. Mwesiga, O. Kershaw, and T. Carregha, (2022) *Volunteering Journeys*. Research Report, London: Institute for Community Studies

Interest in student civic learning and engagement has increased in the face of growing concerns about the 'marketisation' of higher education. Critics argue that recent changes in the funding and provision of university degrees have had a deleterious effect on rights and responsibilities of student citizenship, and the connection of students with the communities they study and live in.<sup>4</sup> This has led to calls for the positive re-articulation of the social purpose of higher education through a greater recognition of the value of applied teaching and learning that supports active student citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

Evidence would suggest that that this refocusing of the mission and value of higher education would enhance student satisfaction<sup>6</sup> and employability-focused graduate outcomes<sup>7</sup>, thus enriching the diversity of learning and life experiences of graduates as they transition from education to work.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, student (and staff) volunteering can provide an important resource to enhance the social capital of the places they live and study, particularly in less well-resourced or disadvantaged communities (where it can also promote equity of access to higher education).<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, civic engagement has a strong positive impact on the sense of pride in place, belonging, and community identity of both domestic and international students<sup>10</sup> – and also resonates strongly in current UK government policy encouraging 'levelling up'.<sup>11</sup> The 'civic premium' of higher education continues after graduation and supplement the social infrastructure and vitality of the communities where graduates live and work.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>4</sup> J. Annette, 'Community, Service Learning and Higher Education', in J. Arthur and K. E. Bohlin (eds.) (2005) *Citizenship and Higher Education: The Role of Universities in Communities and Society*, Routledge Falmer: London, pp. 39-48

<sup>5</sup> J. Grant (2021), *The New Power University: The Social Purpose of Higher Education in the 21st Century*, Pearson: Harlow

<sup>6</sup> P. MacNeela and N. Gannon (2016), 'Process and Positive Development: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Of University Student Volunteering', *Journal of Volunteering*, 29:3, pp.407-436

<sup>7</sup> Institute for Employment Studies (2015) *Graduate Recruitment and Selection Evidence Report (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Report 231)*, Brighton: IES

<sup>8</sup> T. Bourner and J. Millican (2021), 'Student-community engagement and graduate employability', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 13:2, pp. 68-85

<sup>9</sup> F. Robinson, I. Zass-Ogilvie, and R. Hudson (2011), *How Can Universities Support Disadvantaged Communities*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation; J. Goddard, E. Hazelkorn, S. Upton, and T. Boland (2018) *Maximising universities' civic contribution*, Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy

<sup>10</sup> Edinburgh University (2020), *Fostering a sense of belonging at our University*, (available at: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/belongingguide.pdf>); F. Walsh and S. Santharuban (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/>)

<sup>11</sup> UK Government (2022), 'Levelling Up: Levelling Up in the United Kingdom' (available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62e7a429d3bf7f75af0923f3/Executive\\_Summary.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62e7a429d3bf7f75af0923f3/Executive_Summary.pdf))

<sup>12</sup> C. Taylor, S. Fox, C. Evans, and G. Rees (2020), 'The 'civic premium' of university graduates: the impact of massification on associational membership', *Studies in Higher Education*, 45:7, pp. 1351-1366

The ground-breaking Civic University Commission final report, published in 2019 by the UPP Foundation, provided a radical new vision of how universities can become 'truly civic'.<sup>13</sup> Since its publication, higher education institutions across the UK have sought to build on the instrumental paradigm of employability and earnings. Which has helped to establish a more sophisticated framework to value and scaffold the development of a more rounded set of capabilities. These connect students to local places and increase their transferable skills and employability. At the same time, they have sought to establish a more diverse range of external partnerships which reach beyond traditional links with industry to ensure the benefits of student engagement are felt much more widely across the social sector. Universities have also sought to draw together previously quite disconnected activities, such as volunteering and social action, and embed curricular engagement.

This renewed focus on the civic life of universities has encouraged innovation and change in the civic culture and activities on campuses across the country through innovations in teaching and learning, work placements, and extra-curricular opportunities such as volunteering and social action. Students have thus increasingly been seen as partners in inclusive civic communities which extend across and beyond the campuses where they study and live. This noted, the role of students in the Civic University Commission report lacked appropriate prominence. Moreover, the subsequent development of university civic agreements has not prioritised and profiled student civic engagement to the same extent as traditional forms of research and knowledge exchange.

The publication of the UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission manifesto in February 2022 drew attention to this collective oversight, noting there was an urgent need to rebuild civic links between students, universities, and the communities they live and study in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>14</sup> The Commission Chair, Mary Curnock Cook CBE, noted, the pandemic impacted on many students' confidence, self-esteem, and mental health, while also bringing into sharp relief the complexity of student lives and backgrounds and the impact of different forms of disadvantage. The subsequent two-year review of the Student Futures Commission highlighted that many students feel a growing sense of apathy and a lack of agency students feel over their university experience.<sup>15</sup> Worryingly, it reported that this is fostering a reluctance to participate in both learning and teaching and extracurricular activities

<sup>13</sup> [UPP Foundation Civic University Commission \(2019\) Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places \(available at: https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf\)](https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission \(2022\), A Student Futures Manifesto \(available at: https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A-Student-Futures-Manifesto-Final-Report-of-the-Student-Futures-Commission.pdf\)](https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A-Student-Futures-Manifesto-Final-Report-of-the-Student-Futures-Commission.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> [UPP Foundation \(2024\), UPP Foundation Student Future Commission: Two Years On \(available at: https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/3135-Student-Futures-Commission-Digital.pdf\)](https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/3135-Student-Futures-Commission-Digital.pdf)

such as volunteering.

Place-based civic universities can strengthen a sense of belonging and active citizenship for all students, while also positively impacting on student wellbeing, graduate outcomes, and social capital. Empowering students through the development of civic knowledge, skills, and experiences while at university can allow them to thrive as entrepreneurial, resilient, responsible, and successful graduate citizens who have a pride in the places they live, study, and work. But while the student civic experience is an integral component of the wider mission to embed 'truly civic' universities within communities across the country, it has remained a peripheral theme or dimension of many of the Civic University Agreements signed since 2020.





# Defining the Student Civic Experience

There is no singular or uniform definition of 'civic engagement' but there is widespread acceptance that it typically pertains to the activities, rights, and duties associated with being a citizen within a community or society. It encompasses aspects such as participation in public affairs and elections, adherence to laws, and engagement and participation in community life. The student civic experience can thus be understood as an element of a lifelong process of an enduring commitment to civic learning, engagement, and participation that emphasises a collective connectedness founded on shared social responsibility and community participation.

This rearticulation of student citizenship is both cognitive and relational in that it is determined by an individual's past, present, and future as an active participant in civic and community life. Being an active student citizen is also associated with a sense of belonging to and solidarity with their places of study and the communities they live in, and a desire to contribute to their improvement through volunteering, having an interest in current affairs, and social and political action. This form of citizen participation often requires some level of self-improvement through the acquisition of appropriate knowledge, skills, and experiences, indicating that lifelong learning and active citizenship go hand in hand. The student civic experience is therefore important for the contemporary and future health and performance of democracy, the vitality of community life, and the personal growth, academic progression, and identity formation of students. It also opens space to consider the potential that universities can be rebuilt around a renewed civic paradigm and mission.

The Civic University Network and the Institute for Community Studies, working with a range of partners including the UPP Foundation, Edge Foundation, and the University of Liverpool, hosted two workshops in early 2023 to develop the existing evidence base and further enhance knowledge of the student civic experience. These events brought together representatives from across higher education and leading civil society and student organisations to discuss how, when, and where students engage in civic learning and participation before,

during, and after their university studies. Using a range of online engagement methodologies, space was provided to explore the importance of the student civic experience.

The workshops also profiled case studies of successful curriculum, extra-curricular, and community-based programmes from the Universities of Huddersfield, Kent, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham Trent, Southampton, and Westminster. Evidence was also collated from a range of stakeholders and projects, including Students Hubs, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, the Service-Learning/ Community Engaged Learning (SL/CEL) Network, the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, and the Universities Policy Engagement Network. An invitational roundtable was also held in May 2023 to reflect on the themes emerging from our workshops. The following report seeks to summarise the themes that emerged from our events and the wider existing evidence base in helping develop understanding of the current state and potential future development of the student civic experience throughout higher education across the UK.

# Understanding the Student Civic Experience

The importance of civic experiences at university in enhancing work-based and life skills is acknowledged as part of the wider student experience. There is considerable evidence of the positive impacts of individual civic programmes delivered within formal teaching and learning and extracurricular frameworks. Our seminars profiled a range of successful case studies highlighting increasing innovation in how universities are enriching the student civic experience and graduate outcomes. Together with evidence from other universities across the UK, there is a significant but bespoke evidence base of 'What Works' in building student civic engagement work.

This noted, much of this evidence base is qualitative and anecdotal. There has, thus far, been no attempt to collate and synthesise such evidence or develop a hub to share learnings and resources. Furthermore, there is a lack of understanding of cumulative effects of curriculum, extra-curricular, and community-based programmes, or assessment of the extent to which specific programmes or interventions might determine knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours, and experiences individually and collectively. Longitudinal study of the impacts of the student civic engagement in terms of degree and graduate outcomes, and lifelong civic participation has also not yet been established, meaning there is a limited understanding of longer-term effects or sustained benefits. Although the resonance of student civic engagement has grown over the past decade or so on many university campuses, both students and universities both appear unsure as to how to measure its value.

There are several significant challenges faced by universities in designing and delivering a universal – if not uniform – student civic experience framework for all students. Universities are somewhat hampered by the lack of systemic aggregation of data of new students in terms of their civic knowledge, skills, and experiences prior to going to university. Moreover, there is very limited connection between pre-university and university-based programmes offering opportunities to learn about and participate in civic life. For example, there are no links between citizenship education provision in secondary, further and

higher education, or universal alumni pathways from youth volunteering and social action programmes such as National Citizen Service or the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Evidence indicates that those students who are most civically engaged and active often benefit from sustained support and opportunities prior to higher education study during primary, secondary, and further education, their family and peer networks, and through participation in uniformed and other youth organisations or networks. Many of those students who have a diminished student civic experience often come from disadvantaged, minority ethnic, or disability backgrounds. 'First generation' learners also often lack the parental and peer group guidance to help them fully realise civic engagement opportunities at university.

Limited civic learning and participation prior to university can lead to low levels of civic literacy (through the acquisition of appropriate civic knowledge and skills), experience, and self-esteem. This means many students are unaware of or unable to take advantage of civic opportunities - or actively seek to avoid engagement. Strong evidence that students from less privileged backgrounds and first-generation HE learners less likely to engage in civic activities unless part of their studies ('unpaid work', unaware of the opportunities or the benefits etc). This, in part, is due to their need to undertake part time paid employment to support their studies, thus limiting their capacity to undertake volunteering and other forms of civic engagement.<sup>16</sup>

For many students, the move to university thus extends the fractured and bespoke 'Civic Journey' which shapes youth civic transitions from childhood to early adulthood. Provision on university campuses can extend the disjointed provision of civic learning and participation, and differs from university to university in terms of course-based and extracurricular opportunities. Furthermore, curriculum, extra-curricular, and community-based programmes are rarely integrated to provide a clear student civic engagement framework. The lack of a minimum 'civic offer' for all students means that there often significant variance in the student civic experience determined by academic field of study, the extent of students' union activity, and whether individual institutions support and value student civic engagement.

The increasingly varied domestic and international student body also presents challenges for universities. 'Commuter' students and those who leave home to study from other parts of the UK and overseas have distinctive relationships to the institutions and communities they live, learn, and often work in. Those considered to be 'mature' students also highlight that the diversity of student's

<sup>16</sup> C. Hindle, V. Boliver, A. Maclarnon, C. McEwan, B. Simpson, and H. Brown (2021), *Experiences of first-generation scholars at a highly selective UK university*, *Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 14:2, pp. 1-31

civic experiences, their life circumstances, and capacity for participation can be strongly influenced in both positive and negative terms by age. As higher education student numbers have increased over the past two decades or so, traditional modes of thinking about student citizenship have also changed. This reflects growing diversity in how place, background, and modes of study can influence and shape modes of student identity, belonging and community engagement.

There are also concerns about the impact on student citizenship of an increasingly commodified and transactional higher education system. How community is understood and engaged with is thus strongly shaped by students' lived and felt experiences, and the identities that underpin student citizenship, and reflects growing diversity as higher education has expanded and internationalised. Student citizenship has also been reframed by the diversifying impacts of different devolution settlements across the UK. Devolution has had a significant impact on issues of student identity, community, and citizenship for many studying at British higher education institutions. Students are increasingly offered distinctive opportunities to engage in democratic and social action which reflect devolved national frameworks of civic participation.

Our seminars highlighted that universities are a destination point for students from diverse backgrounds and with different levels of civic literacy and experiences prior to higher education studies. Evidence from across the sector indicates that lack of time, resources, location, and convenience of fitting into academic and life schedules of students means civic engagement is limited in appeal, practicality, and purpose. Life responsibilities (work, parenting, carer etc) severely limit the potential of some students to engage in any non-compulsory civic programmes. Diversity between different types of institutions and limited resources mean there are course-based 'hot spots' and 'cold spots' in civic learning and engagement, and a lack of universal opportunities within universities and across the sector. This means the quantity and quality of the student civic experience is deeply variable. This can have significant negative implications for likelihood of some students to see their civic experiences as positive or worthwhile.<sup>17</sup>

The language of student civic empowerment can however be significant in motivating civic engagement and participation. Evidence from our workshops suggests many students are keen to be seen as changemakers who actively

<sup>17</sup> For detailed consideration of these issues, see S. Blake, G. Capper, and A. Jackson (2022) *Building Belonging in Higher Education: Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach* (available at: <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf>); UPP Foundation (2024), *UPP Foundation Student Future Commission: Two Years On*; J. Dickinson (2024) 'Students need to feel more connected – to both the campus and each other', WONKHE, 11th March (available at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/students-need-to-feel-more-connected-to-both-the-campus-and-eachother/>)

contribute to campus and community decision-making during their studies. However, the 'domestication' of Students' Unions on many campuses is seen to have increasingly limited students' ability to hold universities to account for their actions and other forms of campaigning and student activism. Moreover, the transitory citizenship status of students living away from home meant that local, regional, and national elected representatives rarely established reliable engagement frameworks. This lack of student agency is understood to have had a detrimental impact on student civic participation in both student and local elections.

Few universities provide structured programmes to support civic engagement for graduating students. While many university alumni networks do offer opportunities for graduates to maintain links through volunteering, these are typically bespoke and are not signposted or integrated into formal undergraduate or postgraduate programmes of study. The complex challenges of transitioning from higher education study to work are often associated with changes in living arrangements which can be underpinned by uncertainty and precarity. The lack of structured pathways to support civic engagement after graduation might explain strong evidence of further declines in age cohort civic activities between 21 and 29 years of age.

The absence of a well-defined and resonant concept of student citizenship is also evident in the very limited recognition of the student civic experience in higher education performance monitoring. Though Civic University Agreements and the Knowledge Exchange Framework provide some recognition of the importance of student civic engagement, the primary focus of such initiatives is – thus far – predominantly realised through analyses of activities of academic staff and institutions. The National Student Survey or the Graduate Outcomes survey do not seek to capture views on the student civic experience beyond a small number of questions about student voice and the quality of academic study. Furthermore, the diversity of course-based, extra-curricular, and community-based civic opportunities means there is no universal method of student recognition or reward. This means that both universities and students are not incentivised to promote student civic learning and/or participation.

# Enhancing the Student Civic Experience

Analysis of the existing evidence base and our external events have allowed us to identify four areas where the student civic experience can be further enhanced:

## Hitting the Ground Running

Participants in our workshops frequently drew attention to the importance of students' pre-university background and circumstances, including their civic learning and participation experiences, and their access to sustained support (including mental health), as key determinants in shaping the student civic experience. Most universities adopt a 'year zero' approach due to lack of information about the prior civic experiences and capabilities of students, in part due to the lack of systems and incentives to develop such knowledge.

Our workshops highlighted that successful programmes that universities and students' unions, keen to help students, 'hit the ground running' in terms of what their student civic experience deliver. These are often focused on engagement with new students as they commenced their studies. Many universities – particularly Students' Union – invest considerable time and energy during the induction period and first term of study in seeking to engage and recruit new students to societies, volunteering, and other forms of civic activism. However, the challenges of transitioning to university means many students do not feel in a position to engage with extracurricular opportunities due to the transitional challenges of considerable personal and academic change. Those coming from first-generational learner and minority backgrounds, where pre-university civic experiences and support is limited, were particularly reluctant to engage during the induction period, reflecting both a lack of civic self-esteem and ability to source opportunities. Moreover, efforts to engage with returning students were less developed, particularly as many were less likely to take part in activities and events associated with 'Freshers Week'.

## Connecting the Dots

Participants in our events frequently noted that it is important that all students are empowered to engage with both student and local communities, but there is no 'one size fits all' approach to this work. Many universities adopt a diverse range of strategies which blend curriculum-based, extra-curricular, and community-based opportunities to civic learning and engagement. Where this is done well, students are provided with sustained and integrated programmes of formal and informal opportunities. However, this is not the case for most students. Limited connectivity between diverse programmes is confusing for some students, particularly those with poor civic literacy. Furthermore, the student civic experience can also be determined by the different courses studied, length of study programme(s), and the density of campus and community opportunities.

There is significant potential to develop applied course-based approaches to civic learning and engagement, working with academic staff, Students' Unions, and community stakeholders. It was noted during our events that curriculum-based approaches can ensure that those students from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or who live in communities with low levels of social and political capital are provided with sustained and supported civic learning and engagement opportunities throughout their studies. Curricula-based opportunities to enrich the student civic experience can create opportunities to embed service learning, work placements, and other teaching and learning strategies for all students, and to innovate in assessment strategies and applied pathways to dissertations. For example, Community Engaged Learning (CEL) utilises the skills, knowledge, and expertise of students within their curriculum to address real-life projects identified with community partners. This provides students with relevant work experience, while creating opportunities for universities to work collaboratively with local communities.

The role of external stakeholders can also help in both developing supporting universities to promote opportunities for civic participation while also adding expertise and capacity to institutional programmes. Participants also emphasised the need for universities to consider how they can better connect with local schools and colleges in developing civic learning and engagement. This not only builds connections amongst local secondary, FE, and HE student communities, but also can enhance collective student activism, voice, and agency.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the growing importance of blended 'real world' and online platforms to support civic-focused teaching and learning, and the promotion of civic-orientated opportunities and activities. Universities and Students' Unions do not however always collaborate in providing online



civic resources and participation hubs for students or staff. This means that many find the experience of navigating multiple resource platforms confusing and off-putting, particularly those who lack sufficient civic literacy. Institutions that adopt a 'shepherd' approach through civic mentoring have been proven to provide much-needed support to students with limited experience of civic learning and/or participation prior to university. Our research indicated however that examples of such activities were limited, meaning many students lack sustained and appropriate support.

Many of our event participants drew attention to the need to understand better the realities of why students undertake civic activities during their studies and what facilitates such opportunities. One participant noted that many students were so time and money poor that they were discouraged from volunteering to ensure they focused on their studies. It was argued that such situations reflected the influence of transactional understandings of higher education and civic activism in favour of profiling the connected benefits of personal development and community engagement.

Finally, it was noted that it is important to connect staff to the reimagined civic culture and ethos of their university, particularly in terms of volunteering and democratic engagement. This requires a better understanding of what support academic and support staff need to develop their own capacities to support civic learning and engagement. There is an assumption of high levels of staff knowledge and experience which is not always the case.

## Connecting and Empowering Students

Many universities have invested in promoting the positive benefits of civic learning and participation to enhance both student satisfaction and their overarching Civic University ethos and environments. However, many students report a sense of being disempowered on campuses through official channels of representation (both course-based and through students' unions), resulting in low levels of student participation in campus elections, volunteering, and other civic activities. A number of participants at our events noted that the way student representative roles are designed and promoted needs to be reviewed and reformed. Placing responsibilities on a small number of students limits their experiential impact, with students who are more civically experienced often taking on such roles. Breaking these roles down can mean more students are involved in the decision-making and evaluation processes of their places of study and how they connect to local communities.

Our participants argued there is an urgent need to consider how universities can enhance student voice and agency in decision-making and evaluation

of the student experience and graduate outcomes to better reflect their priorities both on campus and their local communities. This requires reconsideration of the traditional modes of student representation which research indicates has traditionally proven limited in its scope, resonance, and effect. Universities should place students at the heart of campus decision-making, embracing the positive role of student voice in terms of its political as well as social capital.

Students must be able to engage, inform, and challenge decision-makers in their respective communities. Our research however indicated that student engagement with and participation in local and national democracy also varies considerably from university to university. Students have often been understood as having a significant impact on the outcome of elections. This effect is however neither uniform nor consistent, and evidence suggests the significant impact of the student vote is limited to a small number of city-based universities. It is noteworthy that students (18-24 years-old) consistently vote at lower levels in local, regional, or national elections than older age cohorts. This in part can be attributed to the increasing complexities of the 'voter journey' for first-time and younger voters. For example, the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration means that students living away from home are faced with a choice about where to register and vote. The recent introduction of voter identification measures has added a further barrier to voting, particularly for students from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds who are less likely to have appropriate identification documents.<sup>18</sup>

Participants in our events noted that introduction of compulsory electoral registration by some universities as part of student induction has proven popular with students and encouraged great engagement with local politics. This has been achieved through universities working closely with local authority electoral registration teams on campuses and in the communities where students live and work. Supporting students, particularly those intending to vote in their 'home' elections, in organising postal voting can also help increase voter turnout. Hosting polling stations on campuses is another way of making the voter process easier for students, as is establishing student 'voter marches' to local off-campus polling stations.

Research indicates that for many students, hosting elections in early May limits their electoral participation due to assessment deadlines and examinations.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Electoral Commission (2023), 'Voter ID at the May 2023 local elections in England: interim analysis (available at: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/voter-id-may-2023-local-elections-england-interim-analysis>)

<sup>19</sup> See C. Huebner, K.A. Smith, J. Eichhorn, A. Mycock, and T. Loughran (2022) *Making Votes at 16 Work in Wales: Lessons for the Future* (available at: [https://www.ntu.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0039/1559829/Huebner-et-al\\_2021\\_Making-Votes-at-16-work-in-Wales.pdf](https://www.ntu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0039/1559829/Huebner-et-al_2021_Making-Votes-at-16-work-in-Wales.pdf))

Students report that the time required to engage with political parties, read and consider competing manifesto pledges, and participate in campaign activities themselves is severely constrained by academic demands. Our workshops indicate that some universities do host election hustings for students on campus to raise awareness of elections and for students to meet candidates standing for election. Online peer-to-peer networks can also connect students on campus and can aid the building of links with young people in local communities.

There is however no systemic approach to electoral engagement and participation, and many students remain uncertain or unaware of the contestation of elections and do not have opportunities to meet candidates or fellow citizens. Establishing sustainable links with local, regional (where appropriate), and national elected representatives throughout the academic year and not just during election periods is critical in ensuring that students are able to influence decision-making both on campus and in the communities where they live and work.

## A Civic Agenda for Student Citizenship

As already noted, it is clear from our pilot work in this space that there is no one-size-fits-all approach – nor should there be one. There was however shared ambition from all those who generously gave their time to help develop our understanding and appreciation of the student civic experience that universities are key civic spaces that can aid social and political participation and transformation. Civic-orientated universities can provide impactful environments and experiences that support confident, self-aware and empowered graduates who can articulate their skills and attributes and contribute in meaningful ways to a global society. There is a need to ensure that all students – regardless of where they study and live – can learn about and participate in campus-based and community civic life.

It is noteworthy that current debates concerning freedom of speech and political extremism and indoctrination have rarely considered the role of students as independent, literate, and critical-thinking adults. This has led to a series of policy developments which sought to regulate university campuses as civic spaces without considering the issues of civic literacy and student citizenship. Our event participants agreed that a common understanding of student citizenship and how it realised by students has been underdefined and overlooked in debates about civic life on university campuses.

This has several implications for efforts to enhance the student civic experience. There is a significant disconnection between personal (the 'me') and community (the 'we') dimensions of student citizenship in the development of class-based and extracurricular civic programmes and initiatives. Universities have typically

framed civic engagement in terms of enhancing student employability and graduate outcomes without considering broader implications for their personal or social development or development of campus and community belonging and identity. Participants in our workshops and roundtable frequently highlighted the need to move away from understanding student civic engagement primarily in graduate employability outcomes contexts. Most students get involved in civic activity because it is something they are passionate about. a whole sort of set about friendships and connections. These students are thus driven to engage by a wide range of personal, educational, and community interests that reflect a desire to enhance their academic achievements and careers with issues of wellbeing, social action, and global awareness.

There is an urgent need for universities across the UK to come together to develop a recognised and universal sector-wide framework for civic learning to underpin a new civic agenda for student citizenship. To do this, the higher education sector, the UK government, and research funders should invest in building an evidence base to further develop understanding about drivers and interests that inform student civic engagement (and how they might better connect them with like-minded people and civic opportunities), variabilities in such engagement, and why some students chose not to participate during their studies. Further research of student citizenship could also shine new light on the interconnections between academic, career, life, and health and wellbeing benefits of student civic engagement through research (with strong peer-action dimensions). Indeed, initial research undertaken by Students Minds for the UPP Foundation<sup>20</sup> indicates that students engaged in climate change activism and who engage with green spaces on their campus and communities reported better mental health outcomes.

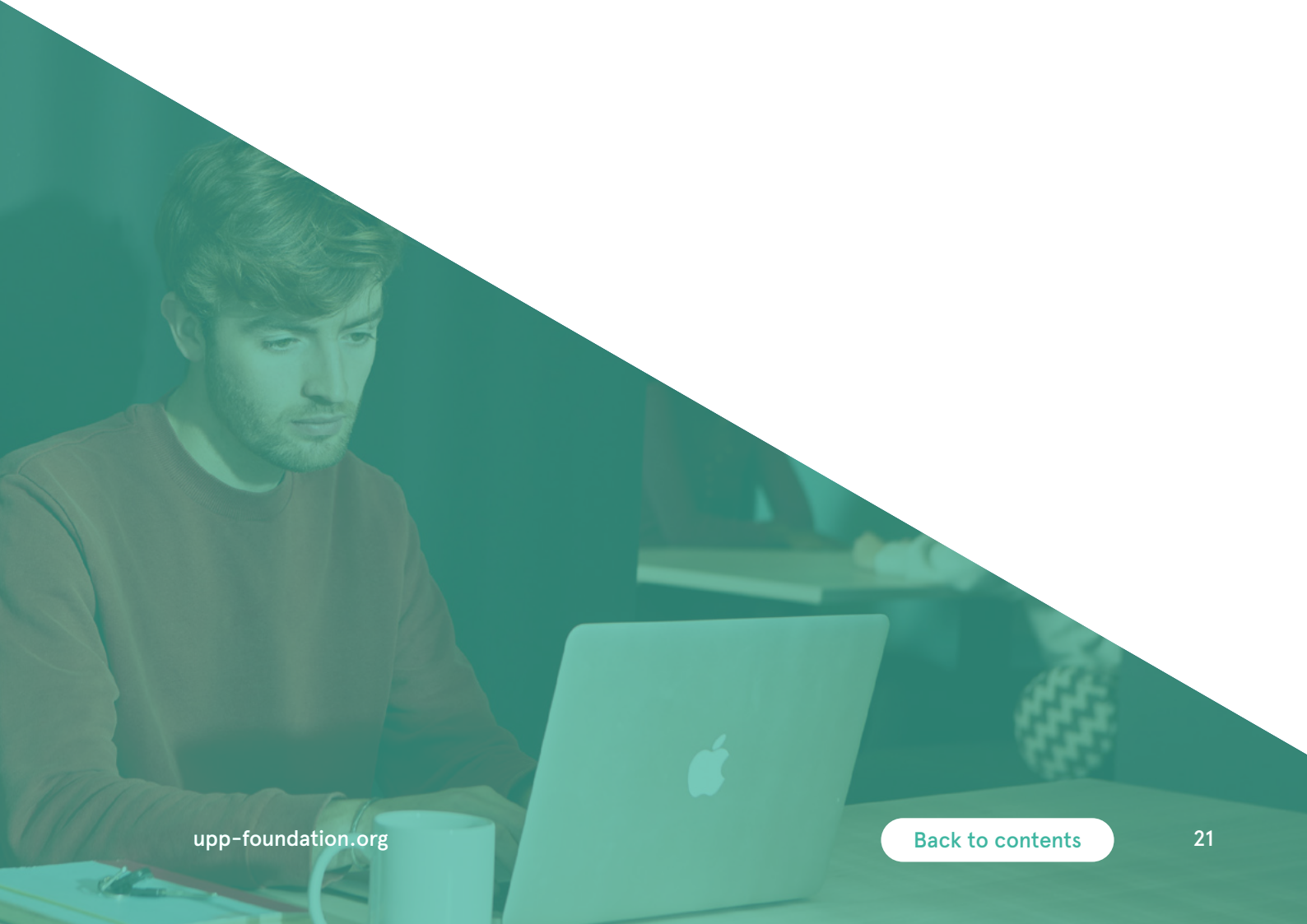
Critical to such work is the development of research into how universities enable students from diverse backgrounds and with different levels of civic literacy and experience to be active student citizens during their studies, and how these impact on their academic, career, and life outcomes. Analysis of the structure, purpose, and impacts of diverse institutional approaches to the student civic experience could establish a clearer framework to understand student citizenship and realise its potential through the development of a 'What Works' resource hub.

Greater incentivisation of the student citizenship experience is also vital as part of this work. At present, there is no national framework to support students or motivate all universities to engage with the student civic agenda. There is a need to consider a uniform or nationally credited programme of student recognition that is acknowledged and accepted by employers and volunteering

<sup>20</sup> [J. Smith \(2023\), \*Climate Change and Student Mental Health\*, \(London: Student Minds\)](#)

and charitable organisations. Institutional buy-in for the student civic experience agenda needs to be better incentivised and rewarded too.

Finally, our workshops indicated that university alumni networks do not continue to support or promote civic engagement after graduation. This is a significant oversight as many students continue to feel part of their university communities after graduation. Moreover, graduates are ambassadors for their universities and continue to benefit from the value of learning, research, and civic engagement throughout their lives. The potential for universities to extend a sense of shared student citizenship after graduation does not only have value for their alumni, but also opens up opportunities for graduates to support new generations of student to be more civically engaged and active.



# Conclusions and Recommendations

Debate concerning the value of higher education for students, the communities they live and study in, and society more widely is rightly a matter for greater consideration by policymakers, university leaders and educators, students, and others with a vested interest in the future health of our democracy and civic life. The growing resonance and profile of work underpinning the Civic University agenda highlights the need to develop thinking concerning purpose, profile, and value of the student civic experience. This report provides further evidence of the importance of prioritising student civic learning and participation in the classroom, on campuses, and in local communities as a key element and outcome of the wider student experience and graduate outcomes. By embedding the student civic experience at core of their wider civic mission, policymakers and universities have the opportunity to refresh and reframe the value of higher education degrees to students and society more widely.

Our workshops and evidence review, when combined with the existing academic research literature and higher education sector reports, highlight that there has been a marked increase in innovative and impactful initiatives which provide students with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours, and experiences that underpin student and graduate citizenship. The report also draws attention however to the lack of equitable and sustained access of students studying at different universities to programmes of study and/or extra-curricular opportunities to both be and become active citizens.

Our workshops highlight that if universities took a truly civic approach to designing and delivering the student civic experience, they should pay attention to:

- The student's social and political identity: being mindful of who they are – what they bring in terms of social, cultural, and political capital into their universities.

- They would design a curriculum which enabled students to develop their civic identities – built upon a robust pedagogic and philosophical articulation of civic learning.
- They would ensure the ‘community’ of the university was democratic and provide significant opportunities for active participation.
- They would be mindful of how students move out into the world beyond the university and prepare them to thrive within this.
- They would seek to ensure all their institutional culture, behaviours, systems, and processes cultivate student civic capability and are greater than the sum of their parts.

The evidence we collated in the production of this report would indicate there are a number of actions which universities and Students’ Unions should undertake as a matter of urgency to ensure all students are provided with a rich and sustained student civic experience – regardless of where or what they study. Universities and Students’ Union, working in collaboration, should undertake an annual ‘Student Civic Health Check’ to assess levels of civic engagement and participation in systems of representation, student elections, and local democratic and volunteering networks. This ‘health check’ should incorporate the following elements:

- Universities and Students’ Unions should seek to connect pre-university programmes of formal and informal civic learning and participation, and host volunteering and social action programme alumni frameworks (such as #iWill, National Citizen Service, and Duke of Edinburgh’s Award).
- Universities and Students’ Unions should consider how they can extend their promotion of civic engagement activities beyond the induction period to extend throughout the duration of study. Such an approach should reflect changing student priorities, academic progression, and personal circumstances during their studies.
- Universities and Students’ Unions should review all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study to ensure that all students are provided with opportunities for civic learning and participation via classroom-based, service learning, work placements, and extracurricular interventions and activities.
- Civic learning and engagement programmes should be extended to staff members to develop teaching and learning initiatives, and to build civic capacity and culture across their campuses and local communities.
- All students should be provided with accessible online information about civic learning and participation opportunities both within their programmes of study, on campus, and in local communities.

- Civic mentoring should be included in systems of student academic and personal tutoring.
- Universities and Students' Unions should seek to better connect with local educational and community stakeholders to develop sustainable networks of civic learning and participation.
- Universities, working with their respective Students' Union, should undertake urgent reviews of student representation structures and processes to ensure student voice and agency is at the heart of their decision-making processes.

Our report also outlines four key policy recommendations which draw on the evidence collated for this report.

### **Recommendation 1: Supporting Democratic Participation**

2024 is an important year for democracy across the UK, with local, combined authority (in England) and a general election being held during a period when students have exams and other forms of assessment. Many will also return home for the summer and/or face the challenges of transitional student housing arrangements. Our report highlights the importance of democratic education and participation for all students. Studying at university offers a unique opportunity to support students to learn about and participate in our democracy.

- The introduction of compulsory electoral registration as part of student induction should be rolled out across the sector. Our evidence highlights the importance of electoral registration as part of the broader 'voter journey'. Many students are first-time voters who lack sufficient knowledge of the voting process, and that recent reforms to electoral registration and voting systems have had a negative impact on student electoral engagement and participation. There is considerable evidence that where universities – working with local authority electoral registration officers – provide support for students, they are more likely to engage with elections and vote.
- There is a need to also stimulate student demand for voting. Local, regional, and national elected representatives should hold regular on-campus 'surgeries' for students and staff to meet with them and raise any issues or concerns they might have. University leaders and election candidates should also seek to host election hustings where practicable to encourage civic learning and engagement.



## Recommendation 2: Acknowledging the Student Civic Experience

While our universities have embraced opportunities to enhance the student civic experience, there remains a lack of formal drivers for this activity or mechanisms to assess and evaluate their impact. We believe there is a need to recognise and reward civic universities who embed the student civic experience into their teaching and learning, research, and community engagement.

- The Teaching Excellence Framework should integrate the 'learning gains' of the student civic experience in its assessment and ratings criteria of the student experience and student outcomes.
- The National Student Survey should include questions of the student civic experience as well as issues of freedom of speech.
- The Graduate Outcomes survey should include questions on the impact of university on student civic engagement after graduation.
- The Knowledge Exchange Framework should be enhanced to incorporate the diversity and richness of student civic learning and participation, better rewarding those universities who invest significantly in the civic experiences of their students.
- The creation of a National Student Civic Awards as part of existing higher education awards.

## Recommendation 3: Refreshing Civic University Agreements

The UPP Foundation Civic University Commission chair, the late Lord Kerslake, noted in his introduction to its final report, that becoming a civic university 'is simply a question of ambition'. Our report notes the sector-wide ambition of universities across the UK who have signed innovative Civic University Agreements with local community partners. We believe that there is a need to extend this ambition to recognise the importance and value of the student civic experience to 'truly civic' universities.

- Universities should review and revise their Civic University Agreements to prioritise the student civic experience.

#### Recommendation 4: Supporting the Student Civic Experience

In collating evidence for our report, we have been fortunate to connect with and learn from a wide-range of academics, professional university staff, students, and community actors who have designed and delivered innovative programmes and initiatives to support the student civic experience. It was also evident during our work that our universities are at different stages of development in this work, and do not have equitable resources or capacity. Our workshops highlighted a desire for knowledge exchange to share best practice across the sector. There was however a lack of a 'one-stop' resource to facilitate this work.

- The creation of a 'What Works' resource hub to support universities and their staff, students' unions, and other invested stakeholders to enhance student civic learning and participation on campuses and in communities.
- A funded programme of research should explore the diversity of student civic experiences, institutional approaches, learning, well-being, employment, and citizenship 'gains', and civic outcomes and impacts. This will help inform a progressive and collaborative approach to enhancing the student civic experience for future generations of students.

### **Case study: Community Engaged Learning at Nottingham Trent University.**

Community Engaged Learning (CEL) at NTU has developed over the last few years to develop the skills, knowledge and expertise of their students within their curriculum to address real-life projects identified with community partners. CEL provides students relevant work experience, the community partners an alternative view on a project, and the University an opportunity to work collaboratively with the local community. The Community Engagement and Volunteering Team at NTU have worked to 'embed' CEL at NTU by providing a framework and central support to aid academics in their approaches to teaching and learning. This support can vary depending on the need of academics and organisations (from simply referring organisations, to supporting both fully through the process) and working with disciplines as varied as computer science, business and psychology. The bedrock of this work is relationships with community organisations, and so a lot of this work is built on developing effective, understanding, and collaborative relationships so useful CEL projects can evolve.

### **Case study: Widening the Reach of Student Civic Development at the University of Huddersfield.**

The University of Huddersfield has adopted a whole-of-institution approach to widening the reach of graduate skills and capabilities development for its undergraduates. In particular, Huddersfield's Global Professional Award (GPA) meets institutional aims by focussing on strategies to assist its sizeable cohort of non-traditional students. Students at the University of Huddersfield study the GPA alongside their undergraduate degree, gaining valuable skills and attributes that employers are looking for, while also enhancing their wellbeing through activities which support physical and mental health at university and as a graduate. The GPA also supports students to develop their global and social awareness to understand and navigate the key social and political issues that impact them as students and graduates.

**Case study: Philanthropy in Action: Experiential student philanthropy module for third year undergraduate students within the social sciences at the University of Kent.**

Student philanthropy is a process by which students receive professional training and gain direct experience of real grant-making, with programme evaluations showing multiple short and long-term positive outcomes for students, communities, and universities alike. Working in partnership with the local community foundation, students are tasked with developing a grant giving process and distributing small grant to local community organisations. Adopting a service-learning and experiential learning pedagogy, students critically engage with community and societal issues, are encouraged to recognise themselves as philanthropic and civic actors and engage in a responsible decision-making process with their cohort, who represent different disciplines from across the school. Independent evaluation of this module suggests that experiential learning pedagogy is most successful when carried out in a diverse and multidisciplinary learning space where students reflect on their own moral position and civic journeys alongside others to build consensus and shared understanding. Learning is further enhanced by critical and deliberative engagement with external partners and the 'real-world' impact of the programme. Whilst popular within the US, we believe this is one of the first UK experiential student philanthropy modules for undergraduates.

### Case study: Community Engaged Learning for postgraduate students at the University of Leeds.

The University of Leeds provides a structured approach to postgraduate learning and teaching that connects meaningful community experiences to enhance academics' personal growth, and civic identity. This approach enriches learning by connecting knowledge, research and analytical tools gained in the classroom with pressing issues affecting communities. It is both classroom-based and co-curricular in its approach, fostering personal, professional and civic development, and allow students to work with others to enhance the wellbeing within communities. Postgraduate students are offered opportunities to work with local community partners to develop programmes of applied research that benefit local citizens and communities.

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