

# 'It Starts with Conversations': Report on Civic Engagement in the College of Social Sciences

Sarah Armstrong and Maria Fletcher  
April 2021



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This project was proposed and agreed in March 2020 to explore understandings and forms of civic engagement in the College of Social Sciences (CoSS). Several questions guided broad consultation of colleagues across the College, covering: (1) the meaning of civic engagement (CE); (2) what it looks like in terms of practices; (3) the place that is a focus for CE; (4) the distinctive contribution of social sciences in CE; (5) motivations to do engagement work; (6) barriers and supports; and finally, (7) CE through the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Background

The context of this project is a wider effort across the UK to develop strategy around civic engagement and the civic university. Influential reports shaping ideas of the civic university make almost no mention of the contribution of social sciences to civic engagement, with the exception of economics, and in contrast to STEM and Humanities.

The University of Glasgow has taken its lead from these efforts and is developing its own civic engagement strategy. Hence, this project provides a useful opportunity to fill a gap in exploring the perspectives and role of the social sciences in civic engagement.

## Process

Between May and August 2020, we facilitated eight workshops to explore the key questions. We also received comments and extensive material on civic engagement via email. Around 65 academic and administrative staff and students in the College took part, with staff coming from all career stages.

## The meaning of civic engagement

People talked about civic engagement as working with those outside the university to make the world a better place, to work towards just societies. In social sciences, this especially focuses on inequalities in Glasgow, Scotland and beyond. Civic engagement can be found in teaching, research, public events, knowledge exchange and administrative activities of the university. CE is a source of professional pride and many expressed a personal need to feel part of a civic institution.

Defining civic engagement is something that participants felt strongly was to be generated collaboratively with diverse representatives within the university as well as with all the communities that come into contact with it.

## What it looks like

A key finding was the diverse range of activities, relationships and processes that are part of civic engagement for those in CoSS. Examples range from personal volunteering with grassroots charities to high-profile government partnerships as part of research projects; from the delivery of student placement opportunities to the design of internal processes that are accessible and fair. There was a concern about narrow ideas of civic engagement as expertise on tap or something that could be achieved quickly with demonstrable impacts. Building relationships and starting conversations were seen as part of engagement that supports organic and helpful forms of collaboration to emerge.

## The place of civic engagement

The city of Glasgow has a distinctive identity, but it is connected through history and composition to other places and times. The legacy of African slavery and contemporary racism in the city and university are examples of this. Some parts of Glasgow have particular connections to the university and vice versa – the neighbourhoods ‘on our doorstep’ and the areas where staff live and where their research happens.

The push for internationalisation of research and in the student body calls for new ways of thinking about what the civic comprises and how it is engaged.

## The distinctive role of the social sciences

Two themes related to civic engagement and social sciences emerged across comments: Social inequalities as a focus and motivation of engagement; and inequality as a structural problem for the university itself. The former means those in CoSS have substantive knowledge, methodological strengths and rich networks to address health, migration, criminal justice, housing, racism, business opportunities, neighbourhood deprivation, disability, legal access, social justice, widening participation and more.

The insights and methods of social sciences also are able to identify and assist addressing inequalities within and between universities. This can support improved sustainability of engagement activities within CoSS and across the University.

## Why do civic engagement?

Most expressed the desire to work at an institution that makes a difference, one that has a mission bigger than individuals and their careers. Some had strongly personal commitments and relationships to particular communities or recognised the specific challenges in Glasgow. Doing work that is relevant, helpful and timely were consistent themes in comments.

Ideas of domination, competition and advantage, which have emerged in some strategy papers around CE, were resisted by participants and not seen as motivators.

There was awareness of the risk of naïve desires to help. Many wished to challenge assumptions that all help is good help, and that only those in universities hold

the necessary knowledge to make others' lives better.

## What are barriers?

The most commonly mentioned barriers to civic engagement work were: time; recognition; equal access to opportunities resources and support; and university bureaucracy. Workloads and university structures and timescales were seen as major barriers to civic engagement work. Engagement work is timing consuming but also emotionally and intellectually draining, and most described points of exhaustion. Key issues related to lack of university recognition of engagement work, and a sense of it not being valued, for example by being embedded in promotion and reward processes. Some found it difficult to navigate university support or wanted more user-friendly ways of knowing who to approach and what resources are available.

## What are supports?

Engagement work is supported by a strong sense of personal commitment. This is enhanced by supportive managers and colleagues, positive feedback from partners and enthusiasm from students. This also was felt to be potentially exploitative, in that the university might expect engagement activity to carry on without addressing some of the structural barriers to it.

Small resources of time and money also can make a big difference to supporting engagement activities. Participants gave examples of how this might work.

## Civic engagement in a pandemic

Reflecting emergent writing on higher education and COVID-19, people expressed both worries and hopes about how the pandemic would shape university life and civic engagement. There was a sense of wanting to build solidarity with other Glasgow universities as well as become a more locally embedded university through the pandemic.

## Implications and recommendations

Based on the foregoing, we identified five areas of implications and recommendations about civic engagement in CoSS and the University: (1) Recognise the distinctive contribution of social sciences to civic engagement; (2) Develop a locally situated sense of civic engagement's value; (3) Adopt an inclusive and representative approach to a university CE strategy; (4) Focus on getting the balance right between centralised and de-centralised support; and (5) Enable a range of ways to structurally recognise engagement work.

# Introduction

In March 2020, we proposed **a project to explore understandings and forms of civic engagement in the College of Social Sciences (CoSS)** which was supported by Sara Carter, the Head of the College of Social Sciences. The pandemic took over initial plans of exploring this (such as to include external entities) and was re-framed to include COVID-19 and coming through the pandemic reflecting on the University as a civic actor. This provided an opportunity to gather information about and reflect on Glasgow's civic engagement within the College that would both inform university-wide efforts and CoSS' own reflection on its civic role.

A key consideration and motivation for this project was to gather views and information as well as support open dialogue in a grassroots way, across all subjects, schools, grades and categories of work. While there is a growing literature on universities and civic engagement, there is little attention to the views across diverse roles and relationships in the University.

This document offers a summary account of this project. It is structured around the main questions explored in consulting colleagues:

- What does civic engagement mean?
- What does civic engagement look like?
- What is the 'place' of civic engagement?
- How do the social sciences contribute something distinct?
- Why do it?
- What are barriers, what are supports?
- Can the University emerge as a better civic actor through the COVID-19 pandemic?

## Background

The idea of the 'civic university' has become a focus in recent years, emerging from the convergence of a number of debates around increasing access to higher education, calls for accountability and transparency of a taxpayer funded sector, and 'value for money' especially of fee charging universities, and this is situated in wider existential debates about the mission and meaning of the university in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see, e.g., CUC, 2019; Calhoun, 2006). One document has become particularly influential – the Civic University Commission's 2019 report – which has also shaped the University of Glasgow's own incipient civic engagement strategy. The Commission worked under the aegis of the UPP Foundation, an independent charity funded by UPP, the 'University Partnerships Programme', the UK's leading provider of on-campus residential and academic accommodation infrastructure' ([UPP website](#)).

The CUC effort seeks to make explicit and reconfigure the relationship of universities to the places in which they are located. Key dimensions of the CUC vision of the civic university relate to 'educational growth', 'economic life' and 'cultural wellbeing' (CUC, 2019: 42, 55, 60). These are echoed in another part of the report discussing the range of issues the civic university should encompass from 'economic development to raising attainment to simply being good neighbours' (Id.: 5). It prescribes criteria for assessing the value of a university's civic strategy and defines a 'civic university' as something distinct from, and distinctly desirable over, universities involved in 'civic engagement'. Above all, what separates the former from the latter is having a 'systematic and strategic' approach based on the needs of a clearly-defined place (Id.).

Interestingly, **'social sciences' appears only once and without discussion in the CUC report, while 'arts' and 'culture' and 'STEM' appear more frequently and are identified as specific contributions of universities;** the topic of 'economics' is mentioned nearly 80 times. The CUC consultation process included focus groups with the public, evidence sessions and gathering of expert views; it did not appear to include views or experiences of academic staff, students or administrative staff in universities. These points combine to make clear the **need to explore the role specifically of the social sciences in contributing to civic activity** as well as to include the perspectives of a wide range of staff and students most directly involved in this activity.

In addition, other perspectives supply alternative framings and identify important issues for considering a civic role of universities. Some have pointed out the importance of autonomy (in relation to state, market and religion, Calhoun, 2006) and the unique role of the university as a space above all for free thinking (e.g. [Reclaim the University](#)). A critical literature raising concerns about the university's reconfiguration through neoliberal and market forces is too extensive to cite here; however, these works are regularly invoked in questioning the emphasis on economic goals and rationales of the civic university (permeating practices such as partnership and so-called service learning) and the responsabilisation of staff and students as units of delivery.

A rare example of presenting the community as well as academic view of engagement is contained in a [Brighton University report](#) about community-university partnerships (CUPP, 2010). We draw on this report below as it echoes many of the points we heard from colleagues during our consultation. Another community-focused document is the strategy report recently produced by Edinburgh University on its [Community Plan 2020-25](#), which offers **a deeply place-based and community responsive account of university engagement**. These documents supplement a vision of civic engagement focused on driving economic growth and providing cultural and heritage resources to localities.

COVID-19 has had reverberating effects on universities, their staff and students, and the communities surrounding them. Speculation on the pandemic's impact on universities diverges between a path of [greater equity and care](#) and one of [entrenching inequality, within and between universities](#) as well as in society.

# Process

An initial scoping workshop was followed by eight open workshops (with between five and twelve participants) that were facilitated by Maria and/or Sarah between May-August 2020. This was the primary mode of discussing civic engagement and gathering reflection from colleagues. In addition, through College-wide notices of this consultation we received numerous emails containing reflections and ideas as well as documents prepared in different Schools documenting engagement activity or strategy; we circulated a collaborative document shared via the CoSS newsletter and held one-to-one meetings with colleagues unable to attend workshops. We also had some further meetings and feedback from a small number of colleagues in early 2021, and these comments are included in the analysis.

Overall, we engaged with approximately **65 colleagues from every School and many Centres in the College of Social Sciences**: There was mainly academic engagement (with good representation of all career stages and contract statuses), 6 PGR students, 6 MPA staff but low participation of administrators in teaching and support functions like finance, and no technical and manual staff participation.

A key finding from the workshops is about **the value of this process itself, and of having opportunities for more deliberative encounters with colleagues**. Many colleagues, the authors included, found the opportunity to meet with others - and from so many subjects and schools - in a shared conversation to be both rare and rewarding. Having the **time and space for open-ended conversations**, admittedly at an early point in the pandemic lockdown and when term was winding down, felt like a rare and positive opportunity to practice the forms of meaningful reflection that people saw as part of engagement, too.

## What does civic engagement mean?

The distinctive social sciences meaning of civic engagement includes **a focus on inequality and social justice**. This involves addressing the vital problems and needs of our times and in this place: inequality is a major theme here, but different specific contexts of this, such as increasing awareness of universities working in a context and history of colonialism.

Participants felt this focus encompassed **engagements with those outside the University** but also meant ensuring the University is **a place that is open and welcoming**, to all who pass through it for whatever purpose or length of time. This involves **opening up the conversation about what civic engagement means** to include all those who are a part of the University.

There was a strong sense that people feel it is important, and **a source of professional pride and personal need to be part of a civic institution**. *'It's important to me to work in a place that is engaged with communities'*. Many felt universities have a civic duty as part of their wider purpose, which **extends beyond training students for careers**. Some wanted

retention of the University's distinctiveness as a space of free thought autonomous from government and market, to remain present even in thinking through its civic role, in order to distinguish it from other knowledge providers and partners.

*"What we mean by 'civic' should be something we develop and agree in discussion across the institution and the city region. It needs to be a bigger conversation with smaller partners and civil society groups as well as bigger institutions and government. It also needs to involve discussions with our staff, students and visitors - not just our professors but everyone including our cleaners and technicians and everyone that comes onto and has been part of our campus. Of course, that's a massive undertaking and I am not suggesting we need huge investment in a big consultation exercise but some kind of citizens assembly or forum to explore these things and maintain a dialogue would be worth considering."*

## What does civic engagement look like?

The key message here is the **diversity of activities and practices** that people were involved in and identified as civic engagement, with research comprising only a small part of this. These include teaching and student experience; personal volunteering, all external activity and partnerships; exploratory research; impact and engagement activities. However, many more kinds of relationships and practices were regularly mentioned making clear civic engagement is not, for the most part, conceived as a result or a thing, but as a set of processes and relationships: *'it starts with conversations'*, *'[the University is] a place that anyone feels welcome in'*; *'supporting different types of conversations'*.

Many identified **student experience and teaching and learning activity** as central to the University's civic role (including in particular widening participation, lots of working with third sector in teaching/placements/student research collaborations, duty of educating students on Glasgow's history and place in world, but also generally stimulating a sense of curiosity about the world and a person's place in it.)

*"Student community and nurturing a diverse and supported community is central to civic-ness of the university."*

*"I think this absolutely goes to the heart of the 'civic university'. Universities by their very nature are middle class institutions and as such can at times struggle to understand the nature of the barriers encountered by WP students. I have a broad understanding of WP here considering income, occupation, ethnicity, disability."*

*"GU needs to embed CE into the curriculum more."*

*“COSS students take real advantage of valuable university initiatives that connect students to community organisations in meaningful and mutually beneficial ways (e.g. SRC Volunteering Service and Internship Hub Find a Solution project) but these need to be properly and sustainably resourced.”*

**Research that is responsive to current needs and issues** is recognised as an important aspect of civic engagement, though most felt this was already well understood. This is reflected in the REF impact case studies, and while some championed the effectiveness of these, others felt that it is important that recognition through the REF is not the driver of engagement. **A range of activities beyond ‘delivering expertise’ was seen as important. Slow and careful building and nurturing of partnerships around specific issues is key:** It is necessary for mutual trust and developing deep understanding of the most valuable forms of exchange and support. It also protects against superficial and patronising forms of engagement.

*“There is a need to close the gap, ‘shrink the space’, between the University and local communities – this needs to be done with real care, mindful of unequal power dynamics and avoiding ‘poverty safari’. Ideas include solidarity walking groups, ‘world classroom’ where different communities of interest take over the curriculum” and “outreach work in communities but also inviting communities onto campus to enrich, share, participate.”*

Many people also talked about their own **civic engagements outside, alongside, or through their university roles**. Examples of this included volunteering and sitting on community and third sector boards. This clearly revealed the entwined nature of personal and professional commitments to engagement.

There was a **resistance to instrumental, narrow understanding** of civic engagement as something in which university and community are clearly demarcated, with the former delivering a tangible ‘good’ based on the latter’s specification of a particular gap, e.g. skills transfer, employability, expertise on tap, responsive evaluation. While this is part of how universities can fulfil a civic role, most talked about the need to challenge this as the only or main approach.

*“There is an inevitable tension between an ‘organic’ approach to CE (understood as unpredictable and exploratory rather than in the sense of ‘natural’ or ‘unthought through’) and institutional drivers/bureaucracy. A realism must be maintained: CE can and will be instrumentalised but the key question is how we can productively engage with this.”*

Overall, civic engagement looks like a range of encounters and processes that initially are not focused on specific ideas of improvement or instrumental relationships, but of shared interests that, through (often) slow, relational interactions can reveal paths of action. There were lots of comments around the time it takes to build relationships not only for trust and meaningful collaboration but to gain sense of what is worth focusing on. The exploratory nature of this work is an important part of the process. Engagement was seen not only as

academics going out to communities, but the University's own doors being open to all to foster a sense of belonging and hospitality.

## The place of civic engagement

Place was an interesting theme as most saw Glasgow as the place around which the 'civic' is organised, but felt **Glasgow is connected to and implicated in other places (and times)**. Some parts of Glasgow have particular connections to the University and vice versa – the neighbourhoods 'on our doorstep' and the areas where staff live and where their research happens. There was awareness of a traditional view of 'civic' meaning being engaged with a city's leaders 'about policy', but most wanted and recognised a widened understanding, acknowledging more people and place connections in the local community and beyond. Some mentioned the University's historical slavery work as an example of this; we need to connect with those in other places who have been affected, but also have a duty to educate students about the history of the institution and city they are part of. Being up front and honest in facing the University's less admirable activities and legacy was seen as important in tackling issues such as racial justice.

There was strong consciousness of the University being an elite institution in a region with high levels of deprivation. This connected with concerns about **not assuming that those in the University know what is best for those in communities around it**, nor of pathologizing communities as in need of saving.

*"it feels arrogant to suggest that civic engagement is one-way; I do think our 'being' in the city and our actions could come with a little more humility."*

*"How we talk about people and places really matters, and some of the 'received' language around the CE agenda is quite painful."*

Many challenged the conventional understanding of the 'civic' as referring to the city of Glasgow alone. The University's pursuit of an internationalisation agenda has led to a more international student and staff community as well as international research collaborations; a traditional definition of civic engagement might exclude all of these. **Reconciling internationalisation and civic engagement agendas, and avoiding the compartmentalisation of these areas, seems important.**

*"Notion of CE that seems to have emerged is about doing stuff here and locally – largely geographically bounded to Glasgow city region – but that excludes a lot of people and their work."*

*"Should civic engagement really be understood as engagement in relation to the city region? As an urban studies scholar, one asks what is the city? It extends to relations beyond the geographical boundary and includes relations with the past."*

*“Is CE mainly rooted in Glasgow/Scotland? I think a key part of this is to improve the understanding of events/social change going on elsewhere among stakeholders and the general public in Scotland. An example of this might be the GRAMNet film series.”*

*“Another important part of public engagement extending beyond the immediate locality where we work is the importance of feeding back findings to the communities we work with internationally, in languages that are accessible to them.”*

## What the social sciences bring to civic engagement

Two related themes emerged illuminating the potentially distinctive role of the *social sciences* at the University of Glasgow. These were connected by a notion of working to address inequalities:

**Social inequalities as a focus and motivation of engagement:** The examples given of engagement work almost universally addressed some aspect of inequalities. Not infrequently, motivations for this were personal: a number of colleagues are from communities or backgrounds affected by inequality and this shaped both their research and engagement activities as well as their views of working in a university. Regardless of background, the topical areas of engagement work clearly involved an inequalities element. This included **work in the areas of health, migration, criminal justice, housing, racism, business opportunities, neighbourhood deprivation, disability, legal access, social justice, widening participation and more**. While this translated for many people into engagement activities, working with those directly impacted by inequalities, there were strong markers of **engagement across all levels, from grassroots groups to larger third sector organisations to examples of partnership with local and national government** levels.

**Inequality as a structural problem for the University itself:** The pervasiveness of inequalities outside the University led many to point out the extent to which these are mirrored within it. Examples given included: **precarity and casualisation, gendered divisions of labour, concerns about racism and other forms of bigotry, inequality of pay and grade** (within academic roles, and between academic and administrative ones), lack of access to sites of decision-making, and perceptions that career development and recognition are focused on ‘individual stars’. This was seen as **a model of academic success that made engagement difficult for those with caring responsibilities, less senior or non-permanent roles, and those with heavy teaching responsibilities**; it was pointed out that all three of these factors often are combined.

*“I think that for the University to think about civic engagement, it has to look inwards as well as outwards. This means: examining the culture of work it advocates, rewards, and recognises; the challenges it faces around equality,*

*diversity, and inclusion within our own departments, schools, and colleges; the tension between an institutional duty of care on the one hand, and its desire for us to be constantly productive and functional workers on the other hand.”*

These themes suggest particular **understandings and strengths that those in the College of Social Sciences uniquely bring to civic engagement**. As inequalities are fundamentally a concern of the civic university agenda, social scientists at Glasgow bring relevant substantive knowledge as well as long experience growing methodological and practical skills exploring these issues, whether in teaching, research or other activities. Contemporary awareness of structural racism, sexism and disablism has been led by **social scientists, including those at the University of Glasgow, exposing how seemingly neutral practices and processes contribute to oppressive structures**.

In addition, colleagues are attentive to the ways that the University’s own structures can contribute to inequalities within its community, and the ways that structures can also hinder or support work with those outside the University. This underlines how much **the ways and fairness of university organisation shape civic engagement work** and can undermine or support outcomes. **This also feeds into the sustainability of practices**.

Finally, it came across powerfully that those in CoSS already have strong relationships, often built over many years, with a huge range of organisations, officials and communities; many of these relationships are to Glasgow-based entities. **CoSS has strengths in research, teaching and engagement on significant issues, some mentioned included: race and ethnicity, disability, poverty, gender, migration, housing, civil justice, legal access, violence, hunger, death and dying, childhood, neighbourhood quality, jobs and business development, education**. In addition, it is only in the social sciences that policy itself, the mechanism of managing these issues, is a primary area of research and teaching activity. CoSS colleagues across all Schools have rich and deep networks that enable civic engagement work.

*“There is usually an emphasis on engaging with policymakers and politicians in how universities understand impact work, while a lot of public engagement work takes place at other levels (cultural, educational...). I think an important part of public engagement for me is around creating dialogues and conversations around issues that are seen as sensitive or difficult. But I think this kind of work goes under the radar.”*

## Why do civic engagement?

Most expressed the **desire to work at an institution that makes a difference, one that has a mission bigger than individuals** and their careers. A number of colleagues had professional lives prior to university working in community organisations or government roles or business. This attuned them to the challenges of society, and they saw academia/the university sector as a way of working on these problems in sustained ways.

However, there was **unease with the language of domination, competition or elitism as a motivator** for civic engagement. This is language found in some of the strategy documents circulating on the superior position of Russell Group universities to lead civic engagement.

*“we need a local and global focus and we must contribute to change not lead it.”*

*“‘World Changers’ creates the idea of an elitist pool – whatever that means, it comes across as immodest, even arrogant.”*

Notwithstanding concerns about overly reactive research, many people were motivated by **wanting to do work that is relevant and timely**, and which might be of real help figuring out the problems bearing down on communities now.

Civic engagement teaching activity was described by some in terms of **instilling in students a sense of curiosity and concern for the place around them**, to engage in dialogue with others, and working together on issues of shared interest. This was contrasted with a mechanistic skills development approach, where the university mainly addresses gaps in local labour markets or information needs. The latter was seen as de-motivating for both staff and students.

We also heard **intellectual reasons to do this work**. Engaging directly with communities, organisations and policy makers can contribute to theory building and new concepts emerging.

As raised in other parts of this report, many also identified risks of uninformed engagement and were **motivated by wanting to address real problems facing communities in Glasgow** and elsewhere, but concerned not to go into this work in a naïve manner:

*“There are real issues of a digital divide and need of widening participation [but universities are] by nature middle class institutions and we should be challenging assumption that the involvement of the University is always a ‘good thing.’”*

*“[There is a] danger of disadvantaged communities seen as ‘bringing value’ all the while reproducing the inequalities.”*

## What are barriers?

The most commonly mentioned barriers to civic engagement work were: **time, recognition, equal access to opportunities resources and support and university bureaucracy**.

Lack of time and was the most common example of a barrier to engagement. **People felt overloaded in their ‘day jobs’**, preventing a focus on engagement, and said this pre-existed the pandemic. Tied to this were expressions of exhaustion and **burnout in doing engagement work**. As noted above, many described spending years building up relationships, and given the areas of activity, work often demanded **heavy emotional labour and investment**.

Extensive time is devoted to navigating support and reporting structures, building relationships and doing engagement work. This limited the amount of time available for researchers not only to write academic papers but also to do the necessary conceptual work that would advance understanding beyond the engagement.

*“Sometimes you can feel like a service provider ... We are still drawing on theory from the 1970s, where’s the time to develop thinking that comes out of it [engagement work]?”*

Some specifically noted that the time barrier was worsened by what were perceived as **bureaucracy or other obstructions of the University**. Procurement, giving resources to partners, accessing resources from the University, approvals needed for activities, recruitment issues, heavy paperwork burdens were examples mentioned.

*“I feel jaded and may not be helpful because I mostly don’t have positive things to say.”*

There were multiple facets of the recognition barrier. This included the fact that **engagement work is not well-embedded in performance and promotion structures, especially for those in less senior, precarious or administrative roles**. It could feel like engagement work was required, but also viewed as optional or allowable once every other performance target was nailed down. Engagement was not seen as an activity that independently supported career advancement or security.

Recognition for participants also related to how aware the University was of activities, and **many felt their work and its value flew beneath the radar**. This was especially the case where activities were not readily packaged into ‘good news stories’ or where the work was the result of a range of people’s efforts rather than one or two charismatic leaders.

*“I feel like what gets valued are the things that are easy to measure. How do you measure an emerging relationship or informal ways of working, which take huge amounts of time?”*

*“The most under-valued person in this University is a 50-something woman doing an administrative job. They do the budgets, organise the meetings, ease the tensions but are invisible and given no career development.”*

In terms of support, there were comments about **a need for resources in forms most useful to engagement, such as light touch, easy access funds to do small scale, responsive and/or exploratory work** that was not always tied to impact. There was a divide in views around greater centralisation of support. **Some people expressed a desire for more centralised support**, like a hub or at least clarity of contacts to seek out advice, share ideas and experiences etc. **Others resisted centralisation, concerned about what they already perceived as over bureaucratisation** and the dangers of top-down approaches which would continue to prioritise instrumental and short-term aims in engagement work. Granting

space, time and resources for more organic, exploratory engagements to grow was seen as important to those of this view.

Finally, people felt civic engagement was **a balancing act, on one side seeking to avoid co-optation**, where work is taken up by the University in ways that participants are uncomfortable with and may exploit those involved in an initiative. **On the other side, there were worries about harming more than helping communities** through civic engagement activities. This was mentioned particularly in the context of ‘educating the publics’ type forums and the need to recognise **the risk of ‘saviour’ syndrome** as the University occupies spaces of the city.

## What are supports?

**Despite the many pressures and barriers noted, most people had no plans to reduce their levels of engagement.** This seemed mainly down to people’s own commitment and personal sense of reward in doing this work. Supportive managers and colleagues, positive feedback from external partners and enthusiastic students helped strengthen motivation. But **this also was felt to be a source of exploitation**; because people will do this kind of work anyway, the University may feel it does not need to address some of the structural barriers.

**Developing expertise and dedicated spaces to share/develop practices and ideas were seen to be helpful to supporting engagement.** Some observed that there seemed to be more staff recruited to work in engagement in meaningful ways and this might inspire as well as support colleagues. We note that the [UofG Engage Forum](#), which launched in February 2021, aims to bring people together *as equals* (students, staff, external partners regardless of their role at UofG) to share and learn from each other in an open, transparent, community-led way, acknowledging that everyone has valuable insights no matter where their experiences come from. Within the College, there are examples of pro-active work among colleagues to pool and share resources and external contacts for mutual benefit, such as [The Collaborative](#), although it was acknowledged by those leading this initiative that it has been practically difficult to establish and scale up.

**Small amounts of money and time can make a big difference** in doing small scale activities and relationship building. It is important that there is a sense of such resources being available equitably, and not dependent on already ‘being established’. One person noted the value of the former Adam Smith Research Centre pump priming fund, where a light touch process released funds to support small pieces of work. ESRC-IAA funds were seen as helpful to a point; the assumed linear nature of research to knowledge exchange to impact and the compartmentalisation of each element often doesn’t reflect how social science scholars conduct engaged research work. Others mentioned ideas like time banks, or standard allocations of engagement time in workload models.

Some participants mentioned the **American university concept of ‘service’ as a potentially helpful reference point**. The ‘service’ notion has been adopted occasionally in the UK (e.g.

[Kings College, London](#)). While in the American context, service refers to the part of the academic role not covered by teaching or research, it could allow for a more aspirational understanding of university work as involving in its very nature a degree of supporting others. Caution was raised by others in the application of service concepts, as in ‘service learning’, which constructs communities as living laboratories for students to gain practice in.

## Civic engagement through the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic was not a dominant focus of comments but some points were made in this regard that resonate with other work emerging on the place of universities during and after COVID-19. Commentators have suggested two paths for universities after the pandemic: one that takes up **an opportunity for universities to refocus and foster an ethics of care** ([Corbera et al., 2020](#)), or **one that leads to deepening inequalities between elite institutions and less well funded ones** who disproportionately serve more ethnically diverse and less well-off groups ([Robin, 2020](#); [Seldon, 2020](#)).

These thoughts also emerged among those providing comments, who shared **worries about the University, and universities generally, becoming more unequal through the pandemic** rather than less.

*“Social scientists have an important role to play in the digital challenges and shifts that emerge from the pandemic, both within HE and in community organisations. These are socio-technical challenges and not purely technical ones.”*

*“One impact of the pandemic might be to refocus attention to a more locally embedded University. This orientation has been somewhat secondary in last 20 years as University business models underpinned by internationalisation prevailed.”*

While the current University of Glasgow civic university strategy papers emphasise the powerful position of Russell Group (RG) Universities in relation to post-92s across UK and within Glasgow to lead on civic engagement, this contrasted with the views of participants in workshops. **Many expressed the need for solidarity and building meaningful collaborations with non-RG universities in Glasgow around a civic agenda** rather than a preference for a network of RG universities across the UK. Some found it ironic that the civic university agenda, built on the importance of local place, might undermine building local HEI networks. For some, the pandemic provides an opportunity to reflect on and reset the higher education sector, emphasising inclusivity and solidarity:

*“[We should] include our students in the civic mission in a real and tangible way [in] a new solidarity across the University sector as we rebuild after this crisis.”*

# Conclusion

The ideas of a civic university and of civic engagement resonated deeply with colleagues across the College and without seeking to pinpoint a definition of either, at a fundamental level, colleagues wanted to work in a place that seeks to make the world a better place. Working to achieve this ambition requires relationships and structures that are underpinned by values of equality, trust, dignity and reciprocity.

It is important to colleagues that the institution recognises and values its civic dimension and **the sheer breadth of engagement activity that takes place, both internally and externally**. A huge amount of civic engagement activity happens on a daily basis across the University and within the College, whether that is connected directly to our 'bread and butter' of education and research, or associated with being a place of hospitality, or delivering and improving internal systems to support staff and students. Sometimes expressed interchangeably as 'public' and 'community' engagement, **examples range from personal volunteering with grassroots charities to high-profile government partnerships as part of research projects; from the delivery of student placement opportunities to the design of internal processes that are accessible and fair**. One can clearly discern an aspiration that the civic mission of the University extends to every dimension of University activity, and includes everybody who studies, works, collaborates and visits here. It includes not just our outward facing work and relationships and service, but also what happens and how we work internally. In fact, colleagues were at pains to stress the connections between these two dimensions.

Within the College of Social Sciences, addressing **social inequalities emerged as both a prominent focus and motivation of engagement activity**. With considerable numbers of respondents describing their own professional or volunteer experience in organisations outside of academia, the range and extent of methodological expertise and practical engagement experience within CoSS addressing society's most pressing challenges is particularly notable. So too is the strong focus that emerged on internal structural inequalities within the University and the extent to which they negatively impact on civic engagement activity and stifle richer and more inclusive understandings of 'civic-ness' both within and beyond our campuses. How can we be a good civic partner and nurture relations based on equality, reciprocity and trust outside of the University when deeply engrained and structural inequalities persist internally?

Relatedly, how the University is viewed and understood from the outside is an issue that needs to be confronted and addressed, with many colleagues referring to power imbalances, disconnect, elitism and arrogance, whether real or perceived.

**Enablers of civic engagement activity were often framed around strongly held personal commitments; having supportive colleagues and line-managers; having dedicated *space* and *time* to share, reflect on and embed civic engagement activity;** availability of relevant training; access to funding (small and larger follow-on pots) that is not overly bureaucratised. Notably, most respondents were **sceptical about the extent to which formal processes of review and benchmarks (e.g ECDP, P&DR, promotion criteria, TEF, REF, Impact Case Studies) genuinely facilitated, valued or properly understood civic engagement work** in a College of Social Science. There can be no single approach to effectively encouraging and supporting civic engagement work, and addressing this matter will almost certainly require some sustained and critical internal self-reflection within the College and University.

This brief internal study has revealed a deep and diverse commitment to the notion of a civic university among those in the College of Social Sciences. **Expressions of civic engagement can and should be found in all aspects of the University's work, with *equality* and *social justice* emerging as a primary focus of and motivation for activity in the College of Social Sciences.**

# Implications and Recommendations

The points that follow are developed from the many sources of information and participation collected through this project. However, they emerge from our own assessment of this material and do not purport to reflect the views of everyone who provided input. We offer these reflections to support and inform the College's participation in the development of a University-wide civic engagement strategy.

1. **Recognising and embedding the distinctively significant contribution of social sciences in civic engagement:** There is room to reflect upon the distinctive offering of CoSS to inform the University's emergent understanding of its civic mission and identity. In particular, the strongly identified 'social' and inequalities focus of civic engagement (with examples beginning to be documented on the [UofGEngage Blog](#)) could more deeply permeate the nascent UofG CE agenda.
2. **Developing and supporting a locally situated sense of civic engagement's value:** There could be more reflection on the tensions between civic engagement work in Glasgow and formal REF/Impact agendas and processes. These need not be entirely in competition, but Glasgow's unique location and dynamics, as well as the University's diverse community and practices of engagement, deserve a locally grown sense of valuing engagement work.
3. **Taking an inclusive approach to developing a University-wide strategy:** Following from the previous points, it is clear that there is value in providing opportunities for more kinds of people existing in a range of relations to and within the University to take part in the conversation about civic engagement. The review we conducted revealed a diversity of understandings of civic engagement, and demonstrated awareness of the risks and rewards of this work. On the basis of this productive exercise, we call on the University to conduct an inclusive and open listening exercise to co-produce a civic engagement strategy. This could be facilitated by UofGEngage forum and should aim to include members of the University community and external partners and community members on an equal footing. The [National Standards for Community Engagement](#) might offer a useful starting point (in terms of both process and substantive content). A co-produced approach can enable critical analysis of the current standards and wide-ranging buy-in to a values-based approach to community, civic and public engagement.
4. **Clarifying the balance of centralised and decentralised support for CE:** Some wanted more guidance and information about civic engagement – but where and how that can best be delivered needs further thought. Should more be done at CoSS level or should CoSS link into emergent UofG level activity? Whatever the level, consideration should be given to inclusion and visibility of students, staff (in all job families) and external partners and communities. The recently created UofGEngage forum provides a platform and ethos that appears to resonate with CoSS-expressed

views/needs. It is important, moreover, that resources are framed and distributed in ways that recognise the breadth and specific understandings of CE work within a College of Social Sciences, e.g. does a University-wide KE fund work well for social-scientists?

5. Enabling engagement and embedding recognition of CE in multiple ways: Improve support and recognition for civic engagement in the CoSS. Consider *multiple* supportive models (via ECDP, P&DR and promotion criteria, allocating dedicated time for civic engagement (volunteering/service) work, ensuring accessible and appropriately focussed funding within CoSS/UofG, create/ visible and inclusive spaces for sharing and debate.)

## Acknowledgement

We wish to thank first of all Professor Sara Carter, Vice Principal & Head of College of Social Sciences, for giving us the opportunity to conduct this consultation and remaining patient as we managed our other commitments alongside completing this report. We are also hugely appreciative of the support of Monique Campbell, Zara Gladman and Simon Joss who provided feedback, shared resources, and offered encouragement for this work. Finally, we express deep gratitude to all the staff and students who trusted us with their ideas, giving their time and energy to be a part of this effort.

# Sources of Information

## Collected material on CoSS Civic Engagement activity

- [CoSS Civic Engagement Preliminary Examples'](#) June 2020 prepared by Monique Campbell and Simon Joss for sharing to University's Civic Engagement Working Group. See also, the [UofGEngage Blog](#).
- [CoSS voluntary work](#) collated examples from 2020 compiled by Monique Campbell
- Community Engagement and Partnerships focus in the fortnightly CoSS newsletter since April 2020. A summary of 2020 pieces [here](#)

## Collected material on UofG activity

- John Christie, John Finch, Alice Jenkins, Karen Lee, A Civic University? PowerPoint presentation slides.
- John Christie, John Finch, Alice Jenkins, Karen Lee (2019) *Developing a Civic University Strategy and Implementation Plan*, University Leadership Programme 2019 Consultancy Project, working paper/report
- Mike Osborne – several documents re. School of Education response to COVID-19
- Bonnie Dean, Building Our Innovation Capacity, PPT presentation
- University of Glasgow's Third Sector Knowledge Exchange Collaborative: The Collaborative: <https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/third-sector-knowledge-exchange-collaborative/>
- University of Glasgow joins CIVIS alliance of European Universities Associate Partner: <https://civis.eu/el/nea/the-civis-european-university-welcomes-the-university-of-glasgow-as-associate-partner>
- UofG web presence: Civic Engagement examples: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/connect/civic/>
- UofGEngage webpage: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/publicengagement/uofgengageforum/>

## References

Richard Brabner (July 2020) Richard Brabner responds to Nick Hillman: Can universities be local, national and global? <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/07/31/richard-brabner-responds-to-nick-hillman-can-universities-be-local-national-and-global/>

Craig Calhoun, [The University and The Public Good](#) (Thesis Eleven, 2006) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0725513606060516>

Esteve Corbera , Isabelle Anguelovski , Jordi Honey-Rosés & Isabel Ruiz- Mallén (2020) Academia in the Time of COVID-19: Towards an Ethics of Care, Planning Theory & Practice, 21:2, 191-199, DOI: 10.1080/14649357.2020.1757891

Sophie Clutterbuck (2020) Keeping the momentum going: Universities and community spirit during COVID-19 and beyond, blog (8 July 2020), <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/07/08/keeping-the-momentum-going-universities-and-the-community-spirit-in-covid-19-and-beyond/>

Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP) (2010) Working in Community University Partnership: Academic Experiences, Report. University of Brighton. [https://www.brighton.ac.uk/\\_pdf/resp/cupp/academic-experiences.pdf](https://www.brighton.ac.uk/_pdf/resp/cupp/academic-experiences.pdf)

Raewynn Connell (2019) The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why It's Time for Radical Change, Zed books.

John Goddard and Des McNulty (June 2020) Universities and the recovery of local communities from the COVID-19 crisis: A role for the social sciences, blog <https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/news/universities-and-the-recovery-of-local-communities-from-the-covid-19-crisis-a-role-for-the-social-sciences/>

Kings College London (no date), Service at Kings, web page, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/service/about-service>

Reclaiming Our University Manifesto (2016), Movement based at University of Aberdeen: <https://reclaimingouruniversity.wordpress.com>

Corey Robin (2020) The Pandemic Is the Time to Resurrect the Public University, The New Yorker, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-pandemic-is-the-time-to-resurrect-the-public-university>

Anthony Seldon (2020) 'Universities will be changed forever by the Coronavirus crisis – and its aftermath', <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/23/universities-will-be-changed-forever-by-the-coronavirus-crisis-and-its-aftermath/>