The Hive: A Love Story or When Two Libraries Become One

Janine Downes
University of Worcester and Worcestershire County Council, jdownes@worcestershire.gov.uk
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JANINE DOWNES

UK: University of Worcester and Worcestershire County Council
jdownes@worcestershire.gov.uk

Abstract

An active embodiment of the concept of the Civic University, The Hive in Worcester is the UK’s first fully integrated public and university library. This paper will explore the partnership and dialogic approaches that led to its creation and subsequent success and examine to what degree Calhoun’s assertion that universities should “educate citizens in general, to share knowledge, to distribute it as widely as possible” has been fulfilled and whether that has resulted in a contribution to the public good.

To do this I will explore the literature of the public good of universities and the civic university. This alongside customer data, and staff and customer feedback gained from 7 years of service delivery and public engagement at The Hive.

It can be shown that through dialogue and partnership, significant beneficial outcomes in relation to health, learning and employability have been experienced by all our communities, including the students of the University of Worcester and the wider community of staff, volunteers and customers. The Hive is more than a bridge between the university and society. It puts them in the same space, in dialogue with each other, bringing communities and knowledge together for mutual good.

The Hive in Worcester, a partnership between the University of Worcester and Worcestershire County Council, is home to the UK’s first fully integrated university and public library. Opening in 2012 and 10 years in the making, it is the embodiment, the making physical, of the concept of a fully integrated and accessible library space and resource. There is no area designated for students. Resources, wherever possible, are made available to both university and public members. Our communities are one: co-mingled and sharing spaces across the building based on what you want to do, rather than who you are. The Hive embraces a democratic sense of equity across its spaces, services and resources. Teams intermingle, sharing values, standards, knowledge and skills.

I will explore The Hive in the context of the notion of the Civic University. Questioning whether by successfully integrating the university's library with the public library, we have gone some way towards achieving the "hard, slow work" of genuine exchange between local government, other public sector organisations and universities [Goddard, 2009]. Have we created the civic allies and deep partnerships needed in a truly civic role by a university? [UPP Foundation, 2019] That of not only building a bridge between cloistered academia and the rough and tumble of working with and in communities, but of really embedding it.
The Civic University Commission's final report “Truly Civic: strengthening the connection between universities and their places” published in 2019, found few examples of a systematic and strategic approach to the civic role in universities in the UK, despite impressive ‘menus’ of civic engagement activities. Universities have a wealth of culture and intellectual capital which can enrich the lives of people in their communities but it often sits as a separate strand of work, an add-on, rather than as an integral part of a university’s core work. [UPP Foundation, 2019]

The report signals a commitment in the UK to the role of universities being of their City and not just in the city. It challenges universities to re-shape their role and responsibility to their communities, to realise their potential as drivers of a new civic agenda. That the learning, research and knowledge flows not just from the university outwards but is informed by and integral to society, community and the locality in which it is born. This reflects the concept of the Quadruple Helix innovation model - encouraging processes and dynamics that allow for both top-down policies and practices and bottom-up civil society and grassroots priorities to interact and engage with each other. [Hazelkorn in Goddard, 2016]

The UPP's report led to the founding of the UK’s Civic University Network in 2020, which was established to support universities to develop and embed civic aspirations at an institutional level. It facilitates the development of Civic Agreements: a civic strategy, rooted in a robust and shared analysis of local needs and opportunities, and co-created with local partners, working with government and strategic partners to ensure that a university’s geographic role and responsibility is used more effectively as an agent to drive positive societal change.

In the context of better understanding what might be expected of a Civic University, I will briefly explore their history. The concept of the Civic University, the bringing of public and social benefit to communities via Higher Education institutions, is not a new one. Many of our institutions worldwide are founded on civic university principles: Land Grant institutions in the US which have at their core a duty to develop the communities in which they reside. [Goddard, 2009] The development of Britain’s modern civic and redbrick universities from 1825 and then into the 20th Century the vocational and technical institutions of Higher Education served to widen the access to an education heretofore only provided by the ancient universities. They took pride in the things that set them apart from Oxbridge, including their architecture, research, scientific education, and relationship to the locality and region. They are described as being a hub of culture and enlightenment in their community. [Whyte, 2015]

Whilst Oxbridge were focussed on the national and international, modern universities were seen as more rooted in their locality, teaching predominantly practical and professional subjects and not divinity and the academic and liberal arts. Lord Roseberry stated that “the new universities are totally different. They meet the demand of great cities which require they they shall be situated in their midst, and that their Universities shall meet the demands of their community” [from Whyte, 2015]

There was however a time when the civic responsibilities of the university had faded away and universities focussed on the supply side of the knowledge economy. It now however appears that the demand side is gaining traction and that civic engagement is again being recognised across the sector. [Goddard et al, 2016].

So why this resurgence? Why the need to commission the Civic University Network to further the work of embedding civic values into the work of Higher Education? As the world changes and we enter an era of even more stark inequalities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an imperative, and a responsibility for universities to step into their civic role. It has never been more important. Alongside this, students in the UK are paying significant fees and demanding more of their learning experience. As are the communities in which universities are located. Specific concerns about widening participation, costs, student debt and graduate employability have also led to an increased emphasis on the social role of Higher Education institutions. They are having to justify themselves -
and consequently there is a focus on the importance of co-production. The practice of engaging students and our wider communities in developing services and education programmes collaboratively. The potential of the truly civic university rises again. “The pendulum is moving from academic self-accountability towards stronger and broader ways of asserting social and public accountability.”[Hazelcorn & Gibson, 2015] There really has never been a time when universities’ civic role has been more important than it is now.

At the heart of the Commission is a question about the difference between civic engagement, and a civic university. Truly embedding the civic in a public statement of strategy and intent was found to be rare at the time of the commission. More common was a menu of civic engagement - holding open lectures and events or Widening Participation activity. Engagement has to be an institution wide-commitment, not confined to individual academics or projects. “It is crucial that university leaders introduce an institution-wide strategy for civic engagement, a strategy that reaches across teaching and research rather than being boxed off as a third stream of activity.” [Goddard, 2009]

The Hive is a purpose built fully integrated university and public library, and the only one of its kind in the UK. Located in Worcester, a small city of around 100,000 inhabitants, the University of Worcester [now with 10,000 students] was for several years the fastest growing in the UK. The key partners: The University of Worcester and Worcestershire County Council, came together in a bold endeavour to fully share in this project. The University has for many years had a strong focus on community impact, it’s latest Strategy stating that “The goal, simply put, is to be engaged more productively than ever in the city, nation and world around us.” [University of Worcester, 2019] and The Hive is just one of the physical manifestations of that.

The Hive is a reimagining of the modern university library, developed to be public by design and opening its doors to the community. It is a fully shared space and daily blurs the line between town and gown, as students sit next to jobseekers, sit next to retirees and so on. It is a building and a space in which the university is the civic. Students are citizens as much as they are students, learning alongside all of society, rather than in sequestered cloisters or in isolation from the diversity of real life. And rarely do we see as much of life as in public libraries. A universal and free offer, public libraries are home to all of humanity. The openness and diversity within the social infrastructure of libraries requires an absorption of and adaptation to difference. People learn to live in community, alongside each other, to recognise, tolerate and embrace each other’s differences. There is a recognition from Klinenberg in his landmark book on public infrastructure ‘Palaces for the People’ that dealing with difference brings about as much pleasure as challenge”. [Klinenberg, 2018] It’s a valuable life lesson and one that is reflected in a song from the Liverpool students’ songbook.

Not ours the groves of Academe,
Where learned pedents drowse and dream;
Not our the cloistered calm retreat,
Around us roars the city street,
Whose surging tides of ceaseless strife
Sound like a badge to call to life [Mackenzie, 1996]

We should not underestimate the importance of the shared purpose built environment. Charles Kelsall’s dream of a modern university was … a series of buildings, in which the students learn as much from their surroundings as they did from their lectures. It was also an institution rooted in locality . [Whyte, 2015]

The Hive was built with openness, equitable use of spaces and exchange at its heart. It is a physical space in which the exchange of people, ideas and learning was intended to flourish. A fully integrated space, there is nowhere in the public areas that groups of people as identified by their demographic,
age or title are not allowed. We have fought off attempts to create a zoned area for students only - supporting management of the spaces by purpose and not by person. A clean, open, environmentally friendly space - it was built as a bridge between the University and the community. And rather than being a University building into which the community are invited - it belongs from its conception, to everyone. More than a bridge - it might come closer to John Goddard’s ideal of the university’s civic endeavours: the traffic over the bridge. [Goddard, 2015].

This shared space - both conceptual and actual - has resulted in some integrated work which has the potential to have real economic, societal and cultural impacts on our communities.

Civic Engagement
Firstly in the arena of civic engagement or activity. The public programme at The Hive is collaborative - bringing together the work of the core partners and additional stakeholders to produce a comprehensive cultural programme which has proved very popular. Prior to the existence of The Hive, Worcester City library’s public programme consisted of, like much of the rest of the libraries’ programme, traditional public library fayre which met some of the needs of a range of people in our communities. It did however lack resource and external input to attract a wider audience or bring in expertise. Following the establishment of The Hive, both the number and scope of cultural or social activities which could be put on increased significantly as well as participation. The university actively contributes to the programme with lectures on topics of interest or areas of research as well as CPD activity for teachers/healthcare professionals. Engagement with activities at The Hive is over 7 times that of the library in its previous location, going from 8570 in 2011/12 to over 63,000 in 2019.

An example of the increased activity comes from our relationship with the West Midlands STEM Hub. The University of Worcester is the STEM Hub for the regions and is therefore well positioned to support children’s activities in The Hive, bringing in experts from industry or lecturers working on new research or projects. There is an additional benefit, that by being a university library, The Hive attracts interest from a wider range of external partners including experts in industry. For example, the ESA [European Space Agency] supported our annual Space Day providing informal education activities for children and families about Space, the Space industry and technology. We also attracted a range of other Higher Education institutions to exhibit and demonstrate their research which we couldn’t have hoped to do previously. The Hive provides a space for knowledge exchange, community engagement and widening participation.

Similarly The Hive has attracted [and been able to afford by sharing costs] an impressive range of writers, illustrators and performers, including Michel Rosen, Axel Scheffler, Jaqueline Wilson and Kate Tempest. Students of education might benefit from a masterclass alongside seeing the impact of live engagement with inspiring artists on the children who take part. The partnership in this context not only enables the work to take place, but facilitates a virtuous cycle of learning and knowledge exchange. Students see their learning in action which creates a better understanding of community impact at first hand.

Another significant avenue for this collaboration has been the establishment of the Business & IP Centre [hereafter BICP], initially at The Hive, and now across Worcestershire Libraries. This has facilitated a powerful partnership between Economic Development teams, the LEP, the British Library and the University - providing access to resources, signposting and expertise for individuals looking to start a business or SME, which is squarely rooted in communities and local libraries. The BIPC also hosts work placements for law students providing [with support] free employment advice. It has also created opportunities to research new approaches to community rooted business start up support. Entrepreneurial students wishing to start a business are supported in an environment where they mingle with the wider business community and are an integral part of civil society, not operating in a separate third space. Hosting these services within The Hive creates an ecosystem in which each
contributor feeds the other. There is a healthy cycle and flow to partnership working which listens to its communities, businesses and each feeds the other.

Skills Development

Untold reciprocal opportunities have been created through the partnership in The Hive. Staff learn from students who have a different set of skills and abilities, as well as access to the latest learning on a given topic. A student developed our new Business & IP Centre Instagram account bringing her skills and knowledge to the fore and providing creative content to engage younger customers with our services. Similarly illustrations students have designed bookmarks and worked on briefs with partners to develop their client skills alongside benefiting the local business community with affordable design. Several PHD students have presented their work in our public programme, enabling them to extend their skills and confidence around public speaking and provide learning and entertainment for our community. This resulted in several of the audience members becoming research participants. Students learn customer service skills alongside highly skilled staff - and understand the importance of positive engagements with communities. They get to contextualise their work which in turn feeds into shaping it more meaningfully for the community.

Opportunities to Innovate

While there have been few opportunities to use The Hive as a gateway to research, this has not yet been exploited fully. A project on customer-to-customer interaction was initiated after it was observed by library staff that our wide customer base brought about unique challenges for staff to support our full range of customers to access the building and services happily alongside each other. A series of semi-structured interviews with staff resulted in significant changes to our approach to staff training, enabling us to incorporate and value the time taken to recount experiences, tell stories and use scenarios as the basis for training.

The Hive also creates additional opportunities to co-develop services. An example of this would be computing students developing Minecraft activities for children and families applying their technical knowledge in an applied setting - enabling them to hear customer feedback and shape their work accordingly. The student also presented his work to a national library conference with a library colleague, thus gaining public speaking skills, and a potential audience for his work in a supported context. Similarly a student of early years was able to apply her knowledge of engaging with children at different stages of development, and incorporate it into a set of session plans for online storytimes during COVID-19 for staff usage.

Much has been achieved. There is no doubt that the commitment to a joint library which resulted in the building of The Hive has built bridges and created opportunities for a significantly enhanced connection between the university and the community. There is a free flow of knowledge both to and from the University where there wasn’t previously. But whether we can categorically state that engagement with civil society no longer remains a third task across the organisation and is fully embedded is questionable. To return to the Love Story metaphor, we fell in love, had the wedding and got the mortgage, but we all know that a marriage is much more than this. It is the daily long hard work of listening, talking, living day in day out and working at it.

Whilst within the Library, engagement is, by necessity, happening all the time, we can’t say we’ve got this 100% right. There is the danger that we are still to some degree siloed and there remains work to do on embedding and mobilising civic engagement across both teaching and research across the whole institution. The University of Worcester is signed up as a Civic University and is working towards the Civic Agreement to provide a strategic framework for this work. Goddard suggests that “good university engagement can be codified and taught. It involves knowledge of both what to do and how to do it: leadership skills, and knowledge of how to work with and through other people. If universities are to work with civic partners, both will need boundary-spanning skills. These skills need
to be developed at all levels within all partnering organisations.” Perhaps our next task is just this. To take the skills we have learnt in and through our partnership and share the love.

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