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Developing a university-voluntary sector collaboration for social impact

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Developing a university-voluntary sector collaboration for social impact

Abstract

This article outlines how a team of academics, professional staff and students from a Scottish University in the United Kingdom worked with voluntary sector partners to achieve civic and 'social purpose' goals, through setting up a project called The Collaborative. This is a reflective paper that draws on collaborative autoethnography and is written collaboratively by that team of academics, professional staff and students. We explore how universities can achieve their civic engagement goals by serving as anchor institutions, and we develop a conceptual framework for how anchor institutions can enact their institutional mission of 'social purpose'. We uncover important considerations for university initiatives aiming to improve academic and student engagement with community partners for social change, with three learning points around building relationships, building capacity, and barriers to engagement. Service-learning can be used as a pathway to becoming a civic university, however, there are structural barriers that need to be overcome. This is an account of an ethical fact-finding project, reflecting on our experience of working with the local voluntary sector, designed to facilitate the University's better engagement with such collaborative 'social purpose' ventures.

Practitioner Notes

1. To build relationships with the local voluntary sector for impact, an internal broker is needed who understands the internal dynamics of Higher Education Institutions, has knowledge of and a commitment to the voluntary sector and can map existing opportunities for engagement.
2. By engaging in activities such as service-learning, particularly with the voluntary sector, universities can achieve more inclusive service delivery. As there may be institutional constraints on academics' time, service-learning activities may offer a more convenient initial route for greater civic engagement.
3. Projects that focus on real-world problems and that have the potential for generating authentic and meaningful consequences are valued by students. However, if there is a lack of institutional support for wider-scale activities of this nature, the workload is likely to fall on educators, and the efforts and impacts (for students, staff and voluntary sector organisations) will be on a smaller scale. However, if there is institutional appetite and support for this type of work, then educators can utilise our model in their own university and the scale can be much improved.

Keywords

Civic engagement, anchor institution, higher education, service learning, voluntary sector, collaborative autoethnography, cross-sector collaboration

Introduction

In Scotland and much of the Western world, Higher Education Institutions (HEI)¹ are anchor institutions in their communities. Anchor institutions are

large, locally embedded institutions, typically non-governmental public sector, cultural or other civic organisations, that are of significant importance to the economy and the wider community life of cities in which they are based. (Goddard et al., 2014, p. 307)

In addition to their primary role as repositories and generators of knowledge, HEIs as anchors are significant economic agents and act as hubs for knowledge exchange and community learning.

The Collaborative is a project initiated in March 2020 by two of the authors at the University of Glasgow (UofG), a large Scottish research institution, that functions within this community knowledge exchange arena. The Collaborative aimed to develop a network of academics and other staff at the University interested in using their expertise to support organisational improvement initiatives in local voluntary sector organisations (VSOs); the primary focus of the initiative. The vision was for a core set of academics to serve as advisors to VSOs alongside students who would work with organisations on projects via integrated coursework modules, internships or collaborative dissertations. The project also aimed to develop a network of interested VSOs for future engagement through a close working relationship with the city of Glasgow's primary voluntary sector development agency and official project partner, Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector (GCVS). The Collaborative project team facilitated engagement between academics and organisations via learning events and individual brokering activities so that VSOs could work with academics on projects of mutual interest that would benefit local practice; including in areas such as risk management, marketing, and digital delivery. The project team of five, all co-authors on this paper, included early career academics, professional staff and students.

In this paper we use the experience of this social impact project to consider how HEIs can and should engage with communities, specifically as they aim to improve the socio-economic life of their local community. This paper aims first to establish the benefits of universities engaging with partners in local VSOs to achieve civic engagement goals, drawing on existing literature on universities as anchor institutions and the more recent narratives of the 'civic university' in the UK. This analysis focuses primarily on the inter-institutional dynamics of HEIs when working collaboratively and we develop a conceptual framework which adds to the evidence on how anchor institutions enact their 'social purpose' mission. Given this focus we primarily speak about university staff and academics from our view as project staff but acknowledge that the voices of both voluntary sector partners and students are vital to include in any future research.

Through reflection we then consider the lessons learned in the first phase of The Collaborative (a period of approximately one year) and consider the implications for how universities can achieve their civic engagement goals by serving as anchor institutions in collaboration specifically with the local voluntary sector. We discuss the future directions of a project of this type, including the practical and ethical considerations of a complex project aiming to facilitate engagement between these two types of partners. We also consider how projects like this can and should develop within existing programmes of teaching, learning and student engagement in other universities.

¹ In this paper we focus on universities, but are using the terms university and HEI interchangeably.

Literature review: How do universities impact their places and spaces?

In this section we discuss the theoretical literature on anchor institutions, how universities as anchors can and should address civic engagement, and the new ‘civic university’ approach in UK HEIs. We then consider these literatures together in our conceptual framework, which guides our discussion.

Anchor institutions

The concept of an ‘anchor institution’ has been widespread in the US since the 1990s. While the term was coined in 2001 (Fulbright-Anderson et al., 2001 in Ehlenz, 2018), Taylor and Luter (2013) trace its roots back to the 1960s where “‘anchored’ institutions were in a position to address the [economic and social] void” in depressed communities (Ehlenz, 2018, p. 75). Anchor institutions range from public and private universities to large ‘rooted’ private sector organisations (The Work Foundation, 2010). Although there is no agreed-upon set of characteristics that define anchor institutions, Harris and Holley (2016) delineate four characteristics of spatial immobility, corporate status, institutional size, and institutional mission to define anchors, which we use in this paper.

Although these four characteristics do not specifically address local and regional economic development, an anchor institution often plays a leading role in the (re)development of places. These institutions have been considered “sticky capital around which economic growth strategies can be built” (The Work Foundation, 2010, p. 3). Existing research on UK HEIs as anchors often focuses on how universities and their members (staff and students) impact an economy, particularly at a regional level (Goddard et al., 2014). Universities and their campuses influence the economy both indirectly and directly through retail growth, providing skilled workers to the job market, and the creation of new communities of student housing and consumers in a specific place. Many of the strategic collaborations in UK HEIs occur with larger public sector bodies or, more often, with the private sector for traditional regional and local development initiatives (Drucker and Goldstein, 2007; Dyason and Kleynhans, 2017).

While this evidence illustrates the economic impact of anchor institutions, there is some debate about whether all anchor institutions possess a “social-purpose mission” (Harris and Holley, 2016); this is not specifically a requirement of anchor institutions (Taylor and Luter, 2013). The limited research on universities as anchors suggests that even if universities may not explicitly address how to implement a social mission in their communities, nearly every university has a social mission as part of its strategy. However, there is less empirical research about how university social responsibility is integrated into all university activities (Harris, 2019).²

Anchor institutions and civic engagement

Universities as anchor institutions are uniquely placed to contribute to the socio-economic life of their place, as they are designated as charitable institutions in the UK as elsewhere (e.g., US) and many of them have social missions at their core. Indeed, some researchers believe HEIs have a moral responsibility to support social missions in their communities (Maurrasse, 2001). To do this, universities need to build upon traditional knowledge production activities to deliver social impact education, engage diverse learners, and provide space for other members of society (including local

² Notable exceptions include the work of Ehlenz (2021) and Harkavy (2006).

organisations and community members) to come together to achieve shared goals for their place (Urquilla, 2016).

There is ample evidence, particularly in the US, of how universities integrate community and civic engagement in their university via service-learning, community service and applied research within and beyond the curriculum (Ehlenz, 2018, 2021; Ramastrop and Peterson, 2020; Reardon, 2006). Service-learning involves students drawing on their academic learning while providing a service in response to identified community need, emphasising the mutual benefits that all parties gain from the learning experience (Ramsaroop and Petersen, 2020). Although these initiatives have met with mixed results (see Harris, 2019; Hartley et al., 2010; Watson, 2008), university-wide strategic focus of civic engagement and collaboration beyond the private sector has been practiced since the early 2000s in the US. Some US universities even consider themselves a ‘service university’, which orients the whole university directly towards local communities with a focus on citizenship (Annette, 2010). In the UK, however, these types of community engagement activities are not as integrated into the curriculum across fields and are rather more discipline-specific (e.g., Adult Education and Lifelong Learning) (Annette, 2010).

Recent research and UK-wide initiatives have begun to address the need for new strategic orientations of UK universities for both economic *and* social impact. The recent ‘civic university’ movement builds on the idea of universities as anchor institutions (UPP Foundation, 2019).³ This movement aims to reorient the entire work of universities towards creating value for the place they are located (either local or regional); where place is defined in collaboration with civil society partners, the public and private sectors. ‘Civic university’ founding documents encourage all universities who want to scale up their strategic civic engagement work to produce a *Civic University Agreement*. This agreement addresses how a university is currently incorporating the views of local people into its work; the population being served by university activities; how the university is connected at a strategic level with other local ‘anchors’; and how the university measures the impact of current engagement activities (UPP Foundation, 2020). This agenda frames much of what UK university leadership is doing currently to build collaborations for both economic and social impact aims.

The concepts of anchor institutions and civic engagement are therefore relatively natural bedfellows but have not often been brought together to analyse collaborative social impact projects at universities. In this paper we aim to address both theoretical and empirical data gaps to understand how collaborations with ‘new’ university partners can help to achieve the goals set forth in existing frameworks of anchor institutions and ‘civic universities’ in the UK.

Developing our conceptual framework

HEIs can act as inclusive anchor institutions across several dimensions. Newby and Denison’s *anchor institution progression framework* (2018) identifies five dimensions within which these institutions function: employment; procurement; development (i.e. bricks and mortar); service delivery; and corporate/civic behaviours (including partnerships). The first three of these dimensions connect to local and regional economic development, while the *service delivery* and *corporate and civic behaviours dimensions* align more with a university’s role in social impact, inclusive of all members of the university community.

³ Professor John Goddard, who was one of the first academics in the UK to study universities as ‘anchor institutions’, is one of the leaders of the Civic University Network in the UK.

The *service delivery dimension* is concerned with how a HEI delivers its core business – in this case, teaching and learning – so that it delivers the most inclusive outcomes for the economy, people and places that it serves, including its students (Newby and Denison, 2018). An important mechanism to achieve these aims is through a clear focus on innovation in new partnerships with other community anchors, such as VSOs, in the course of an HEIs day-to-day work.

The *corporate and civic dimension* has two elements. First, the anchor institution needs to recognise that it is an anchor and then translate this into practice. The second element is to champion anchor collaboration. This involves learning, sharing, and promoting the services of other anchors. This dimension is focussed on making an institutional commitment to being an inclusive anchor, which may require a reconsideration of resources (Newby and Denison, 2018).

Finally, there are four key dimensions that are paramount for a university to exhibit as a ‘civic university’. The *place dimension* focuses on universities that “attach a high priority to the economic, social, environmental, and cultural life” of local communities (UPP Foundation, 2020); the *public dimension* focuses on how a university engages with their ‘public’, which includes working with local community partners and students; the *partnerships dimension* focuses on the need for universities to foster a broad range of collaborations to achieve their goals; and finally, *measurement and impact* focuses on clearly delineating how social impact will be measured, a process done in collaboration with civic partners (UPP Foundation, 2019, 2020).

The conceptual framework considers how the key characteristics of anchor institutions provide the basis upon which engagement and collaboration can be progressed and what it means for universities as anchors. Figure 1 details these relationships where we consider the concepts as building in specificity from general anchor institution concepts, which apply to all anchor institutions, to how universities can deliver on their promise of becoming truly civic anchor institutions. The concepts in bold are those this project engages with most notably, focusing on the institutional mission of the anchor institution (inner circle); the service delivery and corporate and civic behaviours dimensions of the anchor institution framework (middle circle); and the elements of place, public, and partnership of the ‘civic university’ model (outer circle).

Figure 1: Conceptual framework: UK universities as anchor institutions



The project detailed in this paper primarily adds to the evidence on how anchor institutions enact their institutional mission of ‘social purpose’ and contributes to identified gaps in the current literature about how a social purpose mission is integrated across both student and staff activities in a university.

Methodology

Project context

Scottish universities engage with the voluntary sector in a variety of ways through academic and professional staff and their students. At UofG, this engagement includes individual academics collaborating with VSOs for research projects, VSO engagement in relevant course modules, student placements for specific degree programmes (e.g., Adult Education and Lifelong Learning), and internships via a centralised hub. These engagements have been worthwhile for VSOs, students and staff. However, like many other universities studied, engagement with the voluntary sector is not integrated fully into UofG activities. Engagement is a relatively diffuse endeavour: many different departments contribute to external engagement (including with the voluntary sector), creating a complex web of projects and initiatives whereby VSOs can potentially work with academics and their students. However, these parties may not be fully aware of all the opportunities available across UofG.

Through previous research and engagements with VSO partners, the two co-investigators observed that while there are clearer routes into UofG for large VSOs the opportunities for small- to medium-sized VSOs to engage in a coordinated way are more limited. The Collaborative was developed to create new engagements between individual academics, existing UofG initiatives and these VSOs and to create a new pathway for academic expertise to be utilised to solve the pressing problems facing these organisations in the city.

Project team

The project team (Table 1) was initiated by the two co-investigators, who developed the initial scope of The Collaborative and sought pilot funding for the project via an internal ‘impact’ funding stream. The pilot funding received in July 2020 allowed for the recruitment of a knowledge exchange associate who was known to the co-investigators as a voluntary sector expert. This associate became responsible for most of the project deliverables and was the key point of contact for the official project partner and any VSOs or academics who wished to be connected to one another. Additional research assistants were recruited through open vacancies to research future directions for the project, including a scoping exercise of student/voluntary sector engagement (a topic beyond the scope of this paper). Experience and interest in the voluntary sector were key selection criteria.

Table 1: The Project Team

Team member	Career stage and track during the project	Department and subject area	Voluntary sector connection	Role in The Collaborative
Research Officer (Co-investigator)	Early career, 2 years into first post; Research career track	College of Social Sciences research and knowledge exchange unit (poverty and inequality)	Interest in sector as related to community-based poverty interventions	Strategic role, relationship building
Lecturer (Co-investigator)	Early career, 5 years into first post, Learning & Teaching career track	Business School: Management (Risk, resilience, partnerships, VSOs)	Researching VSOs for a decade; Teaching a course on management in VSOs	Strategic role, relationship building
Knowledge Exchange Associate	Early career, 1 year into first post	Urban Studies: Voluntary sector relationship with the state	Prior to PhD, career of over 30 years as practitioner in sector	Relationship broker, matching VSOs and advisors, working with internal partners
Research Assistant	Early career, doctoral student and later post-PhD viva	Business School: VSO performance measurement	Prior to PhD 25-year career as voluntary sector practitioner	Researcher, mapping existing student/voluntary sector engagement at UofG
Research Intern	Final year undergraduate student	Business School: Economics	Prior internship experience working with the voluntary sector	Researcher, reviewing literature

Method

In this co-authored paper we use a reflective, collaborative approach as a method of enquiry, drawing on the methods of collaborative autoethnography (Lapadat, 2017) and collaborative writing (Gale and Bowstead, 2013).

Drawing on collaborative autoethnography, we have reflected on the process of developing the ‘product’, The Collaborative, via co-production of the model with our external partner and conversations with internal stakeholders (students, academic staff and others engaged with the voluntary sector). All work has been virtual, mainly through a Microsoft Teams project page, emails, and video calls. We analyse our experience of initiating and developing The Collaborative through the theoretical lens of our conceptual framework. Taking a reflective approach enabled us to recognise the paradigms and assumptions driving both the UofG’s and other HEIs’ engagements with the voluntary sector as well as reflect on our personal motivation for engagement.

Before we began writing, we discussed our perspectives on The Collaborative, drawing on our unique positions in the initiative. Some of us were closer to the ‘coalface’, interacting with VSOs and academics; others were more engaged with university administrators; another was rooted in the literature review. This process of bringing our differing past and present perspectives together built a common understanding of the evolution of The Collaborative.

This paper was written over an intense three-month period, involving conversations via video calls, Teams’ chat function and the document’s comment function. We met weekly to write collaboratively as well as writing independently, though always in a shared document enabling us to review everyone’s writing. The reflective, collaborative process created “lines of flight” (Gale and Bowstead, 2013), moving us from one area of focus into new directions, building energy and insight. Rather than being a group of people building mechanically on each other’s ideas, we represented an assemblage (Gale and Bowstead, 2013).

The focus of this paper is on the process of developing the model, not on the experiences of potential users of the model. Therefore, the stakeholders of the model are only represented in this paper through our reflections.

The Collaborative project

This section describes The Collaborative project. We begin by outlining the institutional mission of the university in which our initiative was able to take seed and provide some context about an important ‘public’ the UofG can and should engage with, the local voluntary sector. We then describe The Collaborative, which we frame as exemplifying the service delivery and corporate and civic behaviours dimensions of the anchor progression framework.

Engagement with place and public through institutional mission

The UofG is in an urban environment with a population of 633,00 (ONS, 2019) and contributes over £1.5bn in economic output to its communities (Muscatelli, 2020). The UofG makes tangible contributions to Glasgow as a major employer with more than 8,000 staff; through ongoing work in the city-region at high levels of policymaking; through serving a major role in development initiatives in key industries of life sciences and business innovation; and in developing an innovation zone in a regeneration area. All these areas of activity reflect the key characteristics of an anchor institution as it relates to economic impact.

UofG also reflects some important characteristics of an institutional mission focused on social impact. As a charity, its purposes include the advancement of education; the advancement of health; and the advancement of arts, heritage, culture, or science. However, universities now need to align even more closely with societal needs. Graduates need to have key skills not just for succeeding in

gaining employment, but also to benefit the key sectors in recovery from the economic crisis following Covid-19 (Muscatelli, 2020). These key sectors include civil society, an organic social realm outside of the state and the market (Kenny et al., 2015) that is an important ‘public’ that universities as anchor institutions should engage and partner with.

One expression of civil society is the voluntary sector, a term used to describe a range of organisations, including associations, community groups, and social enterprises; some of these are charities (National Audit Office, 2021). VSOs are generally independent of government, are values-driven, and reinvest any surplus into their social purpose. In 2018 there were over 2,000 charities in Glasgow, with close to 27,000 staff and over 12,000 trustees (SCVO, 2020). Over 40% of these charities had an income of less than £25k (0.4% of overall sector income), and 59% had no paid staff (SCVO, 2020). The Covid-19 crisis has disproportionately impacted the voluntary sector, as higher demand for services and a constrained funding environment exacerbated many core challenges facing VSOs (Clifford, 2017; Macmillan, 2020).

The UofG currently engages with the voluntary sector through several projects and initiatives across a diffuse and complex university structure. While these projects individually have positive outcomes for both UofG staff and students and the VSOs they engage with, the authors found that the projects are siloed and therefore their reach is not maximised. At the time of the project’s founding, there was no broker within the university to try and connect VSOs and academics to the variety of existing projects. We also found that there was not an existing, well-known pathway for small- to medium-sized VSOs in the city to be connected to individual academics for *pro-bono* advice and consulting to address some of the core challenges where academic expertise would be beneficial. To address these gaps in engagement with both the public and place, we developed and instituted The Collaborative model.

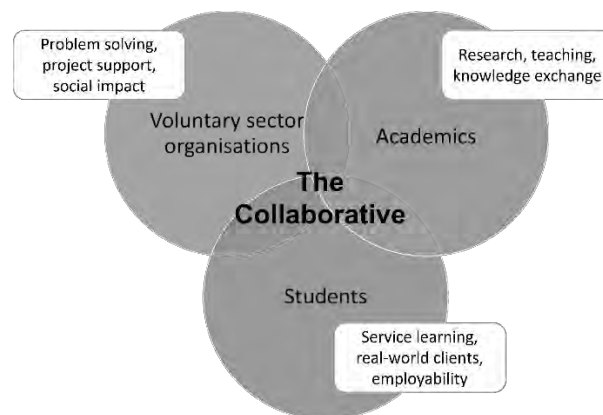
The Collaborative model

The Collaborative model is illustrated in Figure 2, reflecting both the corporate and civic behaviours dimension and the service delivery dimension of the anchor progression framework. Regarding the corporate and civic behaviours dimension, the model posits that VSOs receive *pro-bono* advice and assistance from individual academics or through existing coursework modules, collaborative dissertations or other service-learning opportunities. VSOs benefit from the expertise of academics which contributes to the strengthening of their organisations, creating value for the local community. The Collaborative aims to provide another way for local VSOs and academics in the UofG to partner if they do not have existing relationships or mechanisms to do so. Project officers serve as brokers, relationship managers and experts to help make these individual connections successful and recruit academics and VSOs for engagement. This is one way that a university team can translate the aims of an anchor institution into practice as a civic partner.

The Collaborative also creates a new pathway for social impact in communities served by VSOs through delivery of the core services of teaching and learning. For academics, The Collaborative provides an opportunity to work with organisations to solve problems, which can be used for individual research and impact purposes and to develop pedagogical tools and service-learning experiences for students. For students, the model creates opportunities for engagement with external partners to gain professional experience, apply course topics and skills via service-learning, and connect with potential organisations for dissertations. The model creates a hub, engaging VSOs, academics and students in mutually beneficial collaboration and exchange within the context of core service delivery.

From a pedagogical perspective, The Collaborative enables Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) that may include approaches of problem-based learning, project-based learning, experiential learning and service-learning. It most closely aligns with the service-learning pedagogy, focusing not just on increasing student learning and development, but also on addressing social needs and promoting social change (Perrin, 2014). One could argue that this applies not only to students' learning, but also to academic staff. Indeed, this is why the Lecturer (Table 1) wanted to engage in this type of activity, in order to apply her learning, learn from practice, and improve her pedagogy.

Figure 2: The Collaborative Model: Supporting Civic Engagement



Findings and reflections

Next, we reflect on the process of developing The Collaborative model, focusing on three learning points: building relationships, building capacity, and barriers to engagement.

Relationship building

We began by developing our relationship with the local voluntary sector through our project partner, the Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector (GCVS). The organisation is an intermediary body; supporting the capacity of the sector, representing its interests, and providing an interface between the sector and other stakeholders. From the outset we worked collaboratively, co-producing a model of engagement to strengthen the university-voluntary sector relationship. GCVS identified priorities for training and acted as our gatekeeper through targeted outreach to its members and promotion of two training workshops delivered by The Collaborative.⁴ We built relationships with VSOs that attended the training and promoted opportunities to subsequently work with academics on individual projects. Some pursued opportunities to receive *pro-bono* advice and/or offered to host student projects. Working closely with GCVS allowed the project team to better understand the needs of the voluntary sector, enabling us to design engagements that were timely, relevant and had optimal

⁴ One workshop was on risk management in collaborative working and one on digital and hybrid working.

impact potential for all partners. Perhaps the most notable outcome of the project thus far is a strong and effective inter-organisational relationship with GCVS.⁵

Early on we also began promoting The Collaborative within the university, hosting an information session for staff. We received 30 expressions of interest from academic staff, post-doctoral researchers, doctoral researchers, and research managers. Based on the needs of a VSO, The Collaborative then worked to match staff with appropriate expertise for projects. The interest from staff suggests that there is indeed an appetite for more and deeper types of engagement with the local voluntary sector.

Upon reflection, we were somewhat naive in our approach to internal relationships, as we had not considered the myriad bureaucratic and political tensions that exist within a large HEI. There was fierce competition for internal resources and The Collaborative was perceived as a risk to existing funded initiatives. We also learned the importance of taking care with language; our vision of providing an easy route for the voluntary sector to engage with the UofG created the impression, for some, that we were trying to take over *all* voluntary sector relationships. Navigating and brokering internal relationships to better coordinate engagement with the local voluntary sector became a more important part of the project as it progressed.

Capacity building

Part of our work was to act as a broker between VSOs and existing UofG activities including internships, collaborative dissertations and student projects. This led to a partnership with a team at the Business School that links academics to practitioners, mainly in the private sector. This held the promise of sustainability for The Collaborative, as we received vital administrative support. An important aspect of this new relationship involved building an understanding about the voluntary sector amongst administrators and academics. To develop this knowledge The Collaborative has provided training and mentoring to this team and adapted documents to be more reflective of voluntary sector terminology. As the UofG seeks to improve VSO engagement across the university, we believe a key role for a team like The Collaborative will be in capacity building of this type so that staff understand the uniqueness of the sector. This includes ensuring partners use appropriate language; for example, referring to it as a ‘sector’ rather than an ‘industry’, an ‘organisation’ rather than a ‘company.’

An unintended consequence of the relationship with this team was a shift to responding to the Business School’s needs for organisations to host student projects, rather than a focus on the voluntary sector’s needs. This has changed the dynamic from one that starts with voluntary sector needs and seeks solutions within the UofG, to one that prioritises the Business School’s demands for service-learning hosts and looks to the voluntary sector as a supply mechanism. Consequently, and given the volume of hosts needed, The Collaborative’s role may become focused on supporting existing pathways into the UofG rather than creating new pathways to and for the voluntary sector.

Barriers to engagement from both sides

One of the key learnings is the enormous challenge that VSOs face in taking advantage of the opportunities presented by The Collaborative. While there has been much verbal interest from VSOs

⁵ More information about this can be found here: Bruce, I. (2020) GCVS and the Third Sector Knowledge Exchange Collaborative: A valuable response to our challenges. Policy Scotland, <https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/gcvs-and-the-third-sector-knowledge-exchange-collaborative>.

in engaging with the UofG the follow-through has been slow. Discussions with VSOs suggest that while organisations recognise the benefits that engaging with the UofG will bring to their organisation, they cannot currently reserve time to build that promising relationship. In relation to service-learning projects, a tension exists between the needs of academics who need commitments from voluntary sector hosts for course projects well in advance and the constraints for VSOs who, again because of capacity issues, may find it difficult to plan ahead. VSOs also report high levels of interest in students seeking placements but most of those requests are turned down due to the challenges of current operational pressures. Simultaneously, VSOs recognise that the benefits of student engagement, when successful, can have a long-lasting positive impact for their organisations, often providing them with innovative solutions to existing challenges.

Similarly, academics who expressed an interest in providing *pro-bono* advice to VSOs have, for the most part, declined opportunities to become academic advisors due to heavy workloads. All have indicated a strong commitment to being involved when their schedule allows but given the pressures of university workloads there are questions as to whether this situation will change. A few, while declining an academic advisor role, have requested the opportunity for service-learning projects, again shifting the focus from the needs of the VSO to the needs of the academic. Questions have been raised about whether hours spent providing *pro-bono* support would be backfilled by the UofG or recognised in their workload, highlighting the lack of institutional embeddedness of the initiative.

The constraints experienced by academics highlight the challenges of engagement in impact activities beyond more immediate service-learning integration and are reflective of the inflexibility of workload models. This has been keenly felt in the context of Covid-19 with clear direction from Senior Management to prioritise teaching. Long standing issues exist regarding the lack of reward, incentives and time allotted within workload models for civic engagement activity to occur in day-to-day work (identified elsewhere as well, see Harris, 2019). A recent report undertaken within the UofG cited time, recognition and bureaucracy as key barriers to civic engagement (Armstrong and Fletcher, 2021).

Implications

The project has uncovered some important considerations for university initiatives aiming to improve academic and student engagement with community partners for social change. Our experience also sheds light on the challenges universities face in acting as anchor institutions, with implications that are relevant to different types of HEIs that wish to implement their institutional mission more effectively.

Service-learning as a pathway to a civic university

Assuming that core services in universities are research and teaching, we suggest that by engaging in activities such as service-learning, particularly with the voluntary sector, universities can achieve more inclusive service delivery. Given existing institutional constraints on other aspects of academics' time, service-learning activities may offer a more convenient initial route for greater civic engagement. While research on WIL activities appear focused on integrating this approach at a course or programme level (Dean et al., 2020; Durham et al., 2020), many educators may not know what support HEIs offer in delivering such resource-intensive courses or programmes. Educators may choose not to engage such pedagogy in favour of selecting the 'easier' route of doing traditional lectures, simply due to the time commitment of finding organisations to work with, administering the student-VSO matching process, and evaluating the learning activity. The Collaborative's role as

a broker for service-learning with the Business School is where the model has had the most traction. Scaling up similar models would overcome some of the hurdles for academics wishing to incorporate WIL into their teaching. In the UK, where this university-wide service-learning mission is less developed, starting small in this way might be a first step in the process of becoming a ‘civic university.’

While universities benefit from becoming more ‘civic’ by supporting WIL with the voluntary sector, there is also a strong pedagogical argument, with benefits of WIL well-established in the literature. Projects focused on real-world problems with the potential for generating authentic and meaningful consequences are valued by students. This type of work also places students in ambiguous situations, thus resembling professional life far more closely than university assignments might. However, not all students engage or have opportunities for this included within their degree programme, or for other reasons face barriers in engaging in activities like placements (Dean et al., 2020; Piggott and Winchester-Seeto, 2020). Given the increasing pressure on HEIs to produce graduates that are prepared for the workplace or the workforce, and for increasingly flexible career pathways, students need to develop transferable employability skills in addition to their discipline specialism skills (Durham et al., 2020; Winchester-Seeto and Piggott, 2020). Universities therefore need to enable many different forms of WIL. Models like The Collaborative can support a university’s WIL offer as it draws together existing initiatives, enabling students to engage with varied pathways and improving the coherence of civic engagement initiatives. However, such models need to be appropriately resourced and promoted by HEIs or else the burden falls again on individual staff members and their overwhelming workloads.

Overcoming structural barriers to civic engagement

An exclusive focus on service-learning with community partners has limitations; the student involvement is usually short-lived, tied to academic requirements or CV building, and it also runs the risk of obscuring the wider and more meaningful role that staff can have with VSOs, using their expertise through co-produced research and impact activities. To support university social impact, particularly in the social sciences, universities need to incentivise and support their staff to engage with social issues and the local community (Gamoran, 2018). Structural barriers have impinged on the ability of academics and other members of the UofG community to provide pro-bono consulting advice to VSOs. One practical solution for HEIs is to allocate workload hours for staff to engage with external stakeholders, building activities into annual work plans and widely promoting such opportunities. The active promotion and provision of this tangible resource would demonstrate a university’s commitment to being an anchor institution.

An additional barrier may also be the university complexity and bureaucracy itself. Our experience demonstrates the risks associated with bottom-up initiatives that respond to the strategic direction of a university but are not institutionally recognised nor integrated into existing administrative and incentive systems. While The Collaborative’s aim was to put VSO needs at the heart of the initiative and to harness academic expertise in response, the model has pivoted to putting the needs of UofG at the centre with the voluntary sector playing a more instrumental role in providing opportunities for students. The pressures of workloads and the lack of recognition and institutional support for academics to engage in new ways with civic engagement opportunities like The Collaborative highlight the distance between the stated commitment to being an anchor institution for social impact and its realisation on the ground.

Conclusions

The experience of this collaborative project provides some important lessons for other HEIs interested in improving their social impact, particularly with the local voluntary sector.

HEIs are large complex institutions that engage with external stakeholders in multiple and often disconnected ways. To build relationships with the local voluntary sector for impact, an internal broker is needed who understands an HEI's internal dynamics, has knowledge of the voluntary sector and is committed to its values, and can map existing opportunities for engagement. The voluntary sector is similarly large and diverse, and a trusted local intermediary or network is needed through which the broker can nurture and develop relationships. The broker not only facilitates relationships between the HEI and the voluntary sector but also within the HEI, playing a key role in maximising existing institutional resources.

HEIs are often hampered in championing effective collaboration because of a lack of resource commitment; even as recognition and resource commitment are required corporate and civic dimensions for an anchor institution (Newby and Denison, 2018). The brokering role takes time and to be effective needs to be supported at both strategic and operational levels. Additionally, institutional support is required for staff to be able to engage with the voluntary sector beyond service-learning. Systems change is required which brings with it resource and policy implications for human resources (e.g., a new leave category for staff engaged with the community), planning workload models and teaching allocations; issues that must be addressed by university leadership.

A key question arising from our project is how HEIs can support mutually beneficial relationships that result in positive outcomes for academics, students and VSOs? We suggest that the commitment to a truly civic HEI requires a full integration of social mission work throughout core service delivery. Rather than civil society becoming an instrumental vehicle for HEIs, we suggest that HEIs start with social impact as a way of framing the core services of teaching and research. This requires scaling up service-learning opportunities with stronger collaboration at the outset with VSOs, alongside a reconciliation of academic workloads to allow for additional forms of mutually beneficial collaborative projects to flourish. As it stands now in our university, and likely in others, there is a mismatch between the desire for academic engagement to be VSO-led and the pressing need to fulfil service-learning requirements. This fundamental reorientation of mission will allow HEIs to flourish as anchor institutions in their local communities.

While this paper focused solely on our experience of designing and implementing The Collaborative model, future research into social impact models should more explicitly consider the voices of all other stakeholders, including students, VSO partners, and academics.

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