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Working and Learning Through the Local Community: Four Case Studies from Higher Education That Promote Civic Engagement

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Introduction

Chapter 4, ‘Real World Learning Through Civic Engagement: Principles, Pedagogies and Practices’, discusses the rise of the civic engagement movement in higher education and the mutual benefits of connecting universities with their local communities. This seems to have increased

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urgency following recent concerns about the lack of citizenship education identified at primary and secondary education in the UK due to the pressures of the national curriculum (George, 2018). The UPP Foundation Civic University Commission, founded in 2018, discovered extensive civic engagement across the higher education sector but this rarely manifested itself as part of the university's mission (Brabner, 2019). As a result, the creation of Civic University Agreements (CUAs) has attempted to formalise a “public declaration of a university's civic properties and indicate how they will be delivered in partnership with ... organisations” (Brabner, 2019).

Whatever the local drivers for civic engagement, the four case studies presented within this chapter allow students an alternative route into a real world learning experience. Through ‘giving back’ students collaboratively engage with different populations in diverse communities thus increasing the students’ wider experience and exposure to issues often larger than their university experience. Good examples of civic engagement exhibit powerful ways of connecting students in their present situation, whether as an international student (Case Study 1) or as part of their learning within their own universities (Case Studies 2–4), to challenge and support that takes students to new depths. In fact, students experience authentic, real world situations that can stay with them for the rest of their lives; the type of immersive, innovative learning ‘break(s) the script’ (Heath & Heath, 2017) and is long remembered.

The case studies presented also counteract some of the emerging criticisms of civic engagement in higher education—universities need to work more closely with lower socioeconomic groups and diverse communities, form genuine partnerships where they are not the dominant party, and support quality controlled, regional change (UPP, 2019).

Although the case studies presented have their own unique history, their success is based on commonalities that have taken them all to high levels of recognition and sustainability. Their success has evolved and been built over time, indicative of the importance of a university mindset that recognises the commitment to community engagement for the long term. In Chapter 4, Mason O'Connor and McEwen comment on the importance of linking with institutional imperatives. This can take many forms—Case Study 1's initiative is founded on civic engagement principles from 1972 while Case Study 4 has embedded the extension of their

students' learning into community projects through their own programme ethos.

In setting up the civic engagement initiatives, university staff recognised the potential mutual benefits of extending their students learning through community groups and, in Case Study 2, this created a greater and dynamic ongoing relationship with Hampshire Football Authority and the university modules. As students worked predominantly either in new situations or with unfamiliar groups, mentorship of students was a powerful principle of all the projects. This took a variety of forms—from service level agreements under the supervision of a professional practitioner to mentorship by academics and was dependent on perceived risk and the elements of creativity and initiative that was expected of students.

Assessment within the case studies took a real world learning approach (described further in Chapter 14) where measurement went beyond the attainment of learning outcomes to “process, product, legacy and sustainability” (Case Study 4). The development of students' attributes proved the true measure of civic engagement and this success was celebrated by innovative assessment with high levels of prestige at public events or as part of internal and external award processes. Unusually for higher education, with the propensity for regular revalidation of courses, the sustainability of the civic engagement projects were a marker for longitudinal success and this experience fed back into improving the experience for the students and the communities in which they worked. The support and recognition that students attained at university extended beyond their usual experience by taking less conventional approaches and encompassed the impact on faculty and community.

Case Study 1

University of Limerick—International Practicum Pilot 'Limerick Inside Out' (Tracey Gleeson, Senior Co-ordinator, Limerick Inside Out Practicum, Kerstin Mey, University of Limerick Vice President of Academic Affairs and Student Engagement and Anne Warren-Perkinson, Implementation Advisor, Limerick Inside Out Programme, University of Limerick, Ireland)

The Values of Community Engagement

Civil and civic engagement has been at the heart of the University of Limerick (UL) and its predecessor since its inception in 1972. Exchange, sharing and collaborations with communities in the city and the region have been developed in and across disciplines, from health and sports to law and languages, from entrepreneurship to the sciences and the creative and performing arts. The interactions with communities are founded on a partnership model that seeks to foster mutuality and sustainability, co-creation and empowerment. A decade ago, the university established the President's Volunteering Award (VPA) initiative for students and an award for excellence in service to the community scheme for staff. From the beginning, the university has played a leading part in the Irish University Association's Campus Engage initiative. Campus Engage was founded in 2007 with the aim of establishing a nationwide network to foster civil and civic engagement activities across the higher education sector.

Building on recognised expertise in engaged learning and research and making fruitful existing community networks, UL first developed a *Practicum* for international students in spring 2017. This experiential learning module encompassed a range of practice-based projects co-designed with local community partners and was offered to a limited number of international students at UL as part of their credited Study Abroad programme. The planning, preparation and realisation of projects—within a 12-week teaching term—offered mutual benefits to both the students and the community partners and placed a disproportionate burden on a single academic lead. The one-off interactions created significant complexity and challenges in terms of their underlying logistics and support processes, which rendered the module unviable. In addition, the initial module concept and design was not easily replicable across different faculties and disciplines. Therefore, in response to growing interest from international students and their home institutions, it was necessary to consider alternative methods and sustainable approaches for delivering the UL *International Practicum*.

Following a period of organisational change and internal reflection, a pilot of a restructured UL International Practicum was undertaken in Spring semester 2019. The so-called Limerick Inside Out (LIO) Practicum took on 34 students. While LIO retained key concepts of the original practicum—real world experience, active learning, mutual benefit and empowerment—it tested a revised approach to aid its viability, replicability and transferability to different disciplinary and community contexts.

The pilot module promoted transdisciplinary, cross-cultural and inter-generational awareness development. Learning was facilitated off-campus within three distinct but nevertheless complementary strands: creative, political, interculturalism—which, not least, reduced the dependency on a single academic lead. Pragmatically, less emphasis was placed on singular and one-off co-created projects with community partners. Instead LIO sought to highlight the richness of Limerick City and its diverse community groups. The deliberate shift in focus from ‘depth’ to ‘breadth’ of community engaged learning in this pilot was supplemented by the establishment of a strategic partnership with the Limerick City and County Council (LCCC).

The students were welcomed into Limerick City with an opening session held in a central landmark. To support a broader experience and promote real world learning, each LIO student was issued with a travel pass for local public transport and invited to become a social media ambassador for LIO, with their contribution recognised as part of UL’s VPA scheme. This served to empower students to decide for themselves how often they wanted to be in Limerick working with community partners and seeking permission to speak openly on social media about their experiences both in the module and in the wider community.

The three module strands, with distinct academic perspectives from the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS), demonstrated the value of diversity in LIO as many students (such as those majoring in engineering or business) would not otherwise have had an opportunity to explore concepts of empathy, civil and civic engagement, or interculturalism in a real community setting. The LIO pilot concluded with a high-profile public exhibition of student work in a historic Limerick industrial development site, in conjunction with the premier of a local theatre production. The display was opened by the Mayor and

attended by Council officials, community partners, university staff and media. It demonstrated that the students' work had covered a multitude of topics and learning experiences and served to facilitate not only a further exchange of ideas but acknowledged the evolving mutuality of the broader university-community-relationship.

Student module feedback confirmed the strong initial interest in a module that focused on real world experience as a central learning objective and highlighted ethical practice, added value and 'giving back' as central motives for them to seek out this academic offering. While the different LIO pilot strands delivered an overview of the local context and stimulated a diversity of experiences, most students felt that the direct interaction with community representatives and the teamwork were most empowering.

The students were exposed to novel methods of formative and summative assessment and feedback. The latter included the creation of posters and reflective postcards. Addressing individual challenges, students developed soft skills in support of their future employability. They also gained an understanding of the value of diversity in working with others to generate positive social change in and with their own communities.

As the community partners of the LIO pilot had not been involved in the previous UL International Practicum there were a few little preconceptions and expectations that required careful consideration. By participating in the students' welcome session and the final public exhibition, various community partners with different interests came together in an informal and special setting to give voice to their work. LIO created a unique occasion for them to explore the potential of partnerships both with UL and with each other. As several community groups became aware of further opportunities to engage with students in ways that could create additional capacity and capabilities they approached UL with new ideas for co-created and co-delivered projects.

Through the LIO pilot, community partners recognised how the different backgrounds and experience of international students can contribute to addressing local issues, and that community voices in Limerick can have global audiences augmented through social media. The LIO pilot created opportunities to involve individuals who would otherwise not

have a relationship with the university. It thus catalysed a great sense of pride in both themselves and their community.

Case Study 2

The Solent Football Leadership Programme (Tracey Bourne, Course Leader, BA (Hons) Football Studies, Solent University, UK)

Course philosophy and employer feedback demonstrated the need within the football industry for ‘industry ready’ graduates possessing both academic knowledge and effective employability skills and a working knowledge of the industry. Whilst members of the Hampshire Football Authority (HFA) had contributed well-received guest lectures to football degree modules, the relationship was hardly reciprocal with little in return for the HFA against their involvement. Recognising the value of reciprocity, the Solent Football Development Programme (SFLP) was established in 2014 as a formalised partnership which would offer a range of benefits to students at the university, the HFA and also to a diverse range of stakeholders. The SFLP provided students with opportunities to understand the role that football can play in contributing to addressing social issues in local communities as well as investigating how the sport itself can be evolved to ensure quality of provision for all. The SFLP is a key part of each of the football modules.

The partnership has rapidly developed to incorporate County FA grassroots development projects into undergraduate modules, combining theoretical teaching, based on the County FA Football Development Strategy, with experiential learning via live football development project work. Projects were initially created and designed by HFA in alignment with the requirements of their work programme, County Plan and FA National Game Strategy, and are fully based upon analysis of community needs. The number of projects has expanded exponentially over the years, from an initial 10 in 2014 to 42 in the 2018 academic year. Students engage with a diverse range of projects and participants incorporating areas such as working with the homeless community, women and girls, mental health and well-being, disability, youth and many

more. To work with such a range of participants across a broad spectrum of projects offers students a variety of challenges and problems which are 'real world' and, as such, require real solutions. Additionally, students have to be reflective and proactive in their practice to ensure that their project work continues to meet the needs of the County FA and the local community. It is also sustainable in that it provides ongoing opportunities for those communities to develop and grow their community voice through the vehicle of football. By taking the lead on the projects with community members, students are empowered to make positive change to their own knowledge, experience and employability as well as positive change to those communities with whom they are working. The ongoing nature of the support from the student workforce allows HFA to fully and sustainably support the progression and development of grassroots football in Hampshire.

A key benefit of the partnership is the impact of County FA involvement on the development and delivery of the curriculum of the modules concerned. Football Development Officers from HFA continue to guest lecture on areas of their work programme which is highly contemporary in its nature, giving both students and teaching staff contemporary knowledge and context of the football development climate. Access to changes in policy and strategy are instantaneously available, resulting in core academic content which may not be so readily available through traditional research-led teaching. In addition to delivery, HFA officers also engage on a one-to-one basis with student groups to ensure they are working proactively with their projects and participants. This allows students valuable time to engage in focused, highly individualised learning activities with a potential employer in the football industry. Moreover, it also provides the opportunity to build rapport and develop ongoing relationships with potential employers in addition to those in the local community. Conversely, HFA development officers are able to engage at a deeper level to ensure that their work programme is benefitting from the project work being undertaken, while also ensuring that students understand how the theory applies to context within their particular projects and how it can be applied in a real world setting.

Recognition for the programme's success was seen in the 2016 nomination and award for the FA Grassroots project of the year award and

subsequent nomination by the FA to UEFA for the UEFA Grassroots Football Development Project of the year award for 2016. The SFLP partnership was awarded bronze, a significant award, and European recognition for the work of the students and positive impact on the local community. An additional benefit for the local community and students is the annual Hampshire FA Grassroots Football Awards which include specific awards for the SFLP Volunteers of the year, awarded to one of the student project groups in recognition of their work on an SFLP project. The event is typically attended by over 500 stakeholders from the local community, giving further opportunity for individual students to network, share knowledge and experience with community partners, and showcase their talents and employability to potential future employers. This also allows great opportunities for knowledge transfer between communities and the academic world.

Following the initial success of the SFLP and its positive impacts on the community, the FA has adopted the programme as a model of good practice for County FAs across England, and, significantly, additional HE institutions are developing small-scale renditions of the SFLP. This development has allowed for numerous other communities to engage in similar work, thus broadening and developing the community in terms of reach, diversity, cohesion, employability and empowerment.

To date, the SFLP has reached out to and engaged with over 1500 members of the local football and non-football community, via the delivery of 42 projects delivered by over 600 students. A number of positive community impacts have been identified, with increasing numbers of participants, more stakeholders requesting to be part of the SFLP and more diverse projects such as walking football for the elderly, being incorporated in response to community needs. The local community is engaging with the project work and voicing their needs not just for developing football itself but also for developing communities and community cohesion via the vehicle of football. The SFLP offers a holistic approach to 'real world learning' and brings together the community and students to unite in opportunities that they may not have had access to had the SFLP not been in place.

Case Study 3

The Community Innovation Programme, Solent University, Healthy Living Project (Amy E. King, Health and Exercise Development Officer, Solent University, UK)

The Community Innovation Programme (CIP) at Solent University is a curriculum-based initiative which enables sport and physical activity students to work in collaboration with community members to research their needs in order to develop and deliver a project which addresses those needs. The CIP process provides students with a platform to put into practice classroom-taught theories and skills as well as providing the community with a sustainable initiative addressing a health or social need.

CIPs are developed with local practitioners to enable a gateway to the community group for the students and provide expert guidance. The students and practitioner enter into a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship which is governed by a service level agreement.

A CIP designed by three students in partnership with a local industry practitioner focused on health literacy and weight loss for South Asian women after a lack of women only opportunities which catered for their cultural practices was identified. The students discussed with the community-based practitioner specific needs of the participants, drawing on the partner's knowledge and experience of the demographic. These needs included injury prevention, hydration and cultural differences in regard to nutritional beliefs. Collaboration with the women was critical in shaping the project further and provided participants and students with a feeling of shared ownership and empowerment. The result was a women-only Health Literacy and Weight Loss initiative (HLWL). As the women were diverse in terms of language and ethnicity, team-building exercises were included in sessions to promote cohesion.

The students who were engaged in the HLWL CIP developed and delivered the programme under the professional guidance of the practitioner who provided the facilities, equipment and access to the community group. In return, the practitioner received a research-based sustainable programme delivered voluntarily by the students. The benefit for participants was a programme, free of charge, tailored specifically with them,

which addressed their health and social needs. Although the practitioner provided guidance, the students still had overall responsibility for the CIPs content and delivery method. This encouraged the students to take ownership of the programme which also motivated and challenged them to give their best.

In order to ensure collaboration and mutual benefit among all three parties for the development of the CIP, regular meetings were held. These included focus groups and feedback sessions held with the students, practitioner and participants which also contributed to the monitoring and evaluation of the sessions. These discussions allowed the students to assess and understand the continuing and changing needs of the participants.

Providing students with real world learning experiences such as the CIP promotes processes of learning through discovery and enables the students to put into practice the skills they have been taught whilst studying for their degree. The purposeful exploration and development of these skills through the HLWL CIP was very empowering for the students involving discovery and taking ownership of their learning. When the students worked with the practitioner, they learned the importance of establishing working relationships and development of a service level agreement. They learned that to be effective, partnerships need to be reciprocal and mutually beneficial. The students developed greater understanding of diverse cultures, which led them to adapt their practice appropriately and to introduce approaches which promoted group cohesion to enable effective programme delivery.

Delivering the CIP with sustainability in mind allowed the students to both experience the concept and learn that it is fundamental to initiatives. The successful nature of the HLWL CIP encouraged one of the students to turn the CIP into a business in order to facilitate expansion and provide organisational sustainability.

The HLWL CIP had a very positive impact on the local community. Participants had somewhere safe to remove their headscarves with female only instructors taking the sessions. Coming from different backgrounds, participants were able to mix and become friends through the team-bonding exercises which brought them together. This taught the students that group cohesion is fundamental for success for both the students and the participants. Students and participants actively collaborated in the

monitoring and evaluation of the project through focus groups and feedback. This promoted the participants' interest in sustainability at an individual and community level as well as ensuring their involvement with planning. To ensure individual sustainability, each woman was given a wellness pack which, importantly, included information requested by and discussed with the women, nutritional information, home-based exercise plans, injury prevention information and health promotion material related to their culture. This proved very popular with the women.

The HLWL CIP was very successful with the project still operating several years after conception. This is due to the mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship between the students, practitioner and participants. The collaboration and involvement of participants throughout the development and delivery of the CIP, as well as considering sustainability at an individual, community and organisational level is also what made the project such a great success.

Case Study 4

Making Change Happen—Civic Engagement in Practice (Linda Cooper, Head of Education Studies and Duncan Reavey, Principal Lecturer (Learning and Teaching), University of Chichester, UK)

At the start, we were thinking only of our students—soon-to-be primary school teachers who were great at teaching but less aware how the world beyond school and university operates. We knew that schools and non-government organisations across our area were always telling us their great ideas that would never happen because they had no time or insufficient expertise themselves. It made perfect sense to challenge students to take on these visible, real world projects with local partners.

Initially we called this compulsory module 'Creativity 3'—we were giving students opportunities to develop creativity in the broadest sense. Now it is called 'Making Change Happen'. But, throughout, our pitch to the students has been the same: *You have a problem to solve. Anything goes. Solve it. This is the way the world works and what we reward. Now do it in your first job.*

Significantly, the learning and teaching decisions that led to this initiative were not based on a review of academic literature, but came from careful thinking, talk and reflection by many, including recent graduates, prospective employers and partners in the broader community (Reavey, 2013).

Over 10 years we have had around 300 projects to challenge our student teachers, each one different, and each proposed by a school or other community organisation. Here are examples of projects offered from the local community, normally by schools and NGOs: working with the Government's Department for Education to create a new National Curriculum for first aid; restoring a school pond and generating innovative teaching resources; community sleepovers at a museum; creating new primary school resources to understand the Mayan civilisation; bringing non-English-speaking parents into the school community; making phonics resources for early years children; effective use of 'green screen' technology in school; using historical artefacts and digital resources to bring a museum to life; fire awareness games for the fire service to use with repeat fire starters.

Each project has required students to come up with a creative solution to make change happen. Students address the challenges in self-selected teams of 3–4 students over realistic timescales—typically 6 months—to provide authentic, meaningful end products for and with the external clients. Our aim is that students learn to communicate and act in a professional manner with a variety of stakeholders by working in partnership with them. They learn to negotiate the peaks and troughs of managing a project from conception to conclusion and beyond. They do all the physical work required. They gain marks for process, product, legacy and sustainability of their project.

At the start, students find the tasks daunting and question their ability to succeed. However, they are given the time and support to progress at whatever pace feels right. Lecturers mentor the students; the right level of facilitation (less rather than more) coupled with belief in the abilities of our students gives outcomes that are usually more than students (and lecturers, and external clients) ever think possible. By successfully completing difficult projects, the students are empowered to act as agents of change, a key aim for this learning experience.

Immediately after completing their projects, students enthuse about success in taking risks, solving problems and seeing a difference. However, we find it more helpful to judge success based on their longer-term reflections after they have been teaching for several years. For example, Emily, now a Deputy Head, was part of a project that changed the nature of lunchtimes for an infant school: “More than anything else, it showed us that even with very little experience as new teachers working in a new school, change can be brought about if you have a clear vision. It also showed us the power of teamwork in school, and with different stakeholders on board you really can make a difference ... the teamwork values it taught me are in my thoughts and within my practice every day.”

Nearly all of the 300 projects have led to a distinctive end product which continues to be used. For example, one group worked with the Sussex Snowdrop Trust to produce a resource pack for schools on bereavement and how teachers can address challenges that arise in school if a child in school is diagnosed with a life-threatening or terminal illness. This is frequently accessed online and, according to the charity, is ‘brilliant’. We have many reports like this.

However, some impacts are sometimes harder to quantify. Schools and organisations mostly envision an outcome that is tangible. Initially so do the students—after all, contrasting ‘Before’ and ‘after’ photos will surely generate good marks. However, with some projects it soon becomes clear that change goes beyond this. Projects change people—not just students but also those they work with in the wider community.

Applying Principles of Real World Learning

The model for our approach is simple. No funding, no contracts, simply university and community working as honest, open partners to benefit student learning through doing something useful together. Clearly there is reciprocity as community partners benefit too—there are always more project proposals than we need and, while they are pleased to be able to give opportunities to our students, they certainly see significant benefits for themselves. This is founded on mutual benefit and a clear understanding of each partner’s responsibilities from the start. Our students are empowered in ways they would not expect on a teacher education course, but so too are some of the stakeholders who became significant players

even though not in senior roles (e.g. school caretaker, teaching assistant). From the start, students listen to the broader community voice so they begin to understand diversity of views of stakeholders in the broadest sense—not just a head teacher or the chief executive of a charity but children on the School Council, teachers in staff meetings, people in the neighbourhood. Students will insist on this even when some stakeholders suggest shortcuts. Students are rewarded in their grades for legacy and sustainability of the project into the future—therefore have every incentive to plan a careful hand over—but given their commitment to the project, they would want to do this anyway. Projects only work if students learn how to work in partnership with many different kinds of people and acknowledge that success comes from working across disciplines. Across all of this, perhaps our strongest plea to those designing university courses is to give students the space, support and belief to take on a real challenge so that they can succeed beyond their (and our) expectations.

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