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Commoning Civics: Exchanges of Knowledge Beyond the 'Civic University'

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COMMONING CIVICS: EXCHANGES OF KNOWLEDGE BEYOND THE 'CIVIC UNIVERSITY'

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Abstract: The revival of the 'civic university' agenda in the UK reopens questions concerning the framing, control and application of 'knowledge'. While universities in the UK increasingly have to justify their work through benchmarking systems, questions persist over how 'excellence' and 'exchange' are understood, measured and valued in the context of pervasive capitalism. Such questions lead us to a concern over how knowledges (and knowledge-related resources) are exchanged, between whom and to what ends. In this article we consider the interface between knowledge exchange and political agendas that position higher education as servicing the reinvention of the UK as a 'science superpower', and the implications for development of the concept and practice of the civic university. We do so by reflecting on our own, and universities', situatedness within civic contexts. We explore how ideas of commoning may help us frame civic 'impact' as a multi-directional process in which the university, as much as the city, is changed by encounters with new or differing constructions of knowledge, based on the 'slow work' of relationship building rather than top-down agendas.

INTRODUCTION

The revival of the 'civic university' agenda in the UK and internationally reopens questions around the framing, control, communication, sharing and application of 'knowledge'.[1] Drawing on the authors' research and reflexive praxis in academic and related contexts, this article seeks to tease out how knowledge may be exchanged in the context of activities labelled as civic, and gestures towards a set of approaches that extend beyond pedagogy to include the economic, cultural, spatial and agential impacts of the academy on places and people, opening up questions of what the academy offers or imposes on the terrains across which it performs roles as occupier, sensemaker, neighbour, cohabitant or even friend.

The current notion of the civic university builds on, but is distinct from, notions of the civic embedded in the histories of the UK's 'redbrick' universities[2] or the idea of 'civic education' which encourages students to be engaged and active citizens.[3] It draws more directly on work in the United States that has highlighted the economic value of universities as 'anchor institutions'[4] that help to ensure the vitality and stability of their host towns or cities, often when business and capital have moved elsewhere. Indeed, the anchor institution literature from the United States sometimes conceives of universities as reluctant civic leaders, engaging when local circumstances start to pose a threat to their own welfare.[5] In difficult economic and social situations, universities – in this framing of their role – can bring their skills and knowledge to bear to benefit the community as a whole. In Europe, the Talloires Declaration of 2005 (*The Engaged University*), in which university leaders committed to take action on environmental sustainability, states that 'higher education institutions exist to serve and strengthen the society of which they are part'.

Signatories committed themselves to the 'civic engagement of our institutions' and asserted their 'unique obligation to listen, understand and contribute to social transformation and development'. Tozzi defines a civic university as being 'characterised by its ability to integrate its teaching, research and engagement missions with the outside world without reducing their quality', working via the 'quadruple helix' of research, industry, government and civil society. [6]

In the UK, development of the idea of the civic university has been closely associated with the work of John Goddard, who argues that universities have not only an economic imperative but also a 'moral obligation' to work for the good of their localities and regions.[7] While recognising and reaffirming the economic case for the state to invest in universities and for universities to invest in their localities, Goddard expands the rationale for the civic university beyond business and the commercial economy, viewing universities as significant players in advancing local health and wellbeing and supporting sustainable development.[8] Goddard discusses universities' civic activities in terms of improved connections with regional governance coupled with 'engagement with society locally and globally';[9] there is an expectation that the public investment in educational institutions will produce a locally distinctive social return. This work has given rise to a series of interventions within the UK higher education sector, in particular the establishment of a Civic University Commission which argued that universities' global outlook risked leaving them disconnected from the places they serve.[10] At a time when politicians are increasingly questioning the value of public investment in higher education, such disconnection leaves universities 'with fewer friends at a time of unprecedented challenge', the commission argued.

Civic universities, their proponents declare, are local leaders.[11] The 'knowledge' they apply is both expertise, in the form of their research findings, methodologies and outputs, and know-how, in the form of ideas that may have direct economic benefit in the form of spin-off enterprises and business formation.[12] But knowledge also consists in the roles and contributions of students, engaged scholars and those who walk the boundaries between academia and other professions, as we explore further below.

A university thus contributes to the wealth of its place in numerous ways – a statement that is at once, however, truism and problematic, raising questions of what kind of wealth, how it is distributed, and with what impacts. Universities' work sits within a context of the marketisation and neoliberalisation of higher education, in which higher education institutions gauge their success in terms of competition to attract students and research funding while also seeking to increase 'impact'.[13] Barnett is among several who note that the rediscovery of the civic university does not proceed solely from an upswell of civic altruism among university leaders.[14] He notes that 'governments are busily shaping higher education … to their own ends' (*Recovering the Civic University*, p25). Neary goes further, highlighting the embeddedness of civic university discourses in neoliberal economics (specifically, the Civic University Commission's links with a company that profits from purpose-built student accommodation), and instead calls for a 'university of the earth' that integrates social and natural sciences with Indigenous knowledges, global social movements and political struggles.[15] For Neary, the neoliberal university is intrinsic to a society that 'cannot be decontaminated, so it must be overcome' (*Civic University or University of the Earth?,* p5).

As academics and practitioners situated within processes of institutional change and engaged scholarship, we recognise the strength of this critique, but also the binary division it draws between capitalism and alternative models, skating over the entanglements of situated practice.[16] We draw on the anthropologist Anna Tsing's notion of life in 'capitalist ruins' as a guide: just as she recognises the ecological ruins within which mushroom foragers find ways of living and maintaining community, so we recognise the institutional ruins of neoliberal higher education as a landscape within which 'pericapitalist economic forms can be sites for rethinking the unquestioned authority of capitalism in our lives'.[17] Within circumstances that we recognise as not of our choosing, we draw in this paper on the resource of the 'civic university' to raise questions about how knowledge is framed and valued – in which forms, from which sources, and to what ends?

These are not abstruse theoretical questions: by design or default, questions of how knowledge is valued inform public policy. In the UK, public policy explicitly locates the value of universities in their ability to assist the quest for the grail of economic growth. In the UK, recent policy discourses focus on positioning the country as a 'science and technology superpower',[18] while the March 2023 Budget promoted 'investment zones' based on partnerships between industry and research institutions. [19] It is a vision that calls to mind stock images of researchers in lab coats and business executives in suits, but which may be a far cry both from the actual exchanges that occur in places that exist under the wings (or shadows) of academic institutions. It also underplays and undermines the value of the arts and humanities and creative education to the UK's vibrant creative economy and sustainable innovation.

The kind of transactional relationships often assumed in policy discourses, where each party enters into an agreement knowing what they give and receive, contrast sharply with the more messy, emergent and even subversive realities of projects established in real life engagements.[20] Despite an increase in collaboration with the private sector, especially in the natural sciences, many of the knowledge exchange (KE) activities undertaken by universities are dominated by engagement with voluntary, charity and public sector organisations.[21] Therefore, in our experience, these engagements are often with precarious organisations where practices of mutuality and making things happen with limited resources are the reality of everyday life. Resources and capacities offered through partnership with universities are often necessarily directed to contingent and pressing issues that will keep activities running and spaces open to allow processes of exchange to continue. On the one hand, it might be said that there emerges a common(s) project of negotiating and learning together what will sustain all partners within the process, what resources can be gleaned, and what concerns need attending to. On the other, however, there is evidence that the KE, impact and public engagement agendas have reinforced rather than dismantled social injustice in universities' partnerships with racialised communities and community groups.[22] Progressive aspirations and the work done through individual projects and praxis cannot, on their own, repair systemic inequity.[23]

This 'science superpower' announcement encapsulates the quandary at the heart of the civic university agenda. The investment zone proposal envisages universities' role (*Investment Zones*, p13) as one of 'nurturing and supporting local talent, building knowledge networks, collaborating on research commercialisation, and supporting scale-up and adoption of promising innovations following spinout to raise the productive potential of the whole area'. Universities and their staff, in short, are viewed as local economic catalysts. While such a

role may well be beneficial, there is no space here for new (or revived) 'imaginaries of the university'.[24] Recent work, informed by the work of the Civic University Network in the UK, takes a broader view.[25] Building on a prototype 'civic impact framework', it explores how universities might generate greater benefits for their localities across seven domains of potential impact. These include creating economic value, but also addressing social inequalities; supporting health and wellbeing; amplifying and nurturing local culture; addressing the climate and biodiversity emergencies; contributing to place-shaping and the local built environment; and, within their own walls, nurturing institutional leadership that puts benefits to multiple and diverse local communities centre stage.

The civic impact framework is work in progress, but suggests a place-based role for universities that extends well beyond policy rhetoric of 'science superpowers'. Underpinning that proposal is an acknowledgement and a question. The acknowledgement is that universities already play a multi-dimensional civic role, as examples from disadvantaged UK communities such as Liverpool[26] and Stoke-on-Trent[27] demonstrate. The question is how we should then understand the processes of knowledge exchange between universities and their localities in the context and performance of this civic role. While universities in the UK increasingly have to justify their work through such benchmarking systems as the Research Excellence Framework, Teaching Excellence Framework and the Knowledge Exchange Framework, these offer an opportunity to reconsider how 'excellence' and 'exchange' are understood, measured and valued, and whose values they relate to, in the context of the pervasive capitalism which inflects academic institutions' prioritisation and decision-making. Such issues have already been discussed in relation to ideas of 'impact'[28] and 'knowledge production'.[29] Here we situate these continuing debates within the specific field of the 'civic university'.

This paper thus draws on a wider concern over how knowledges (and knowledge-related resources) are exchanged, between whom and to what ends – and what powers, agencies, positionalities or resources may be excluded from such exchanges as the reserved domains of the academy. In the civic context, we suggest that the exchange of knowledge is entangled with exchanges or withholding of money, time, learning, facilities and capacity. In the following sections of the paper we consider current developments in the institutionalisation of knowledge exchange and its existence at the intersection of neoliberalisation and emancipation; we reflect on how our own situatedness within the academy has informed our approach to engaged practice; we explore how the 'civic university' may be understood and positioned within its urban context; and we propose that the civic university movement, such as it is, presents an opportunity to generate a more open and inclusive approach to civic engagement and knowledge exchange.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE IN THE UK: OPENNESS OR ENCLOSURE?

Notions of the 'civic university' and 'knowledge exchange' are characterised by often unspoken tensions between different concepts, epistemologies and actors, and an engagement by individuals and institutions with the policy landscape that is variously critical and accommodating, farsighted and opportunistic. As Greenhalgh underlines, there is no straightforward 'pipeline' between research, its publication, and its adoption in practice; this is especially true in the civic realm.[30] Rather, attention should be paid to the networks within which knowledge is exchanged and the contextual understandings drawn on by practitioners. Greenhalgh, drawing on her own experience as a practitioner in primary healthcare, highlights the importance of education as 'preparation for practical, ethical action: what best

to do, how to behave, how to discover enough to warrant taking action, which choice to make'.[31] Knowledge is described as 'the capacity to exercise judgement' (Greenhalgh, p496). Van de Ven and Johnston propose the term 'engaged scholarship' as a bridge between theory and practice, defining it as 'a collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to coproduce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty found in the world'. [32] This echoes the concerns of the civic university debate, which even in its narrower framings is and must be concerned with the interface between academia, students, technicians and real-world trade-offs and complexities.

In these contested spaces, what possibilities does the present concern with the 'civic' open up? In this section we focus on the trends with which a civic orientation at an organisational or institutional scale must engage. As a brief sketch of this landscape, we note five salient features:

- A continuing concern in policy and political circles, supported by many in academia, with the direct economic benefits universities can bring to their localities in terms of innovation, business formation, upskilling and employment.[33] Such concerns often implicitly valorise trickle-down approaches to economic development, assuming the benefits of such work permeate throughout society while ignoring the 'strategic overload' of multiple public policy demands on higher education institutions.[34]

- An acknowledgement among a significant cohort of university leaders that the skills and resources of the academy can be harnessed directly to address social and

economic inequalities, recognising and building on the assets that exist in localities and amplifying the voices of the marginalised and unheard in society.[35]

- The subsuming of much civic activity within the dynamics of inter-university competition and the marketisation of higher education, limiting scope and resourcing for collaboration as universities compete in a rankings-led context to attract students and external funding.[36]

- A continuing struggle to place the work of universities rigorously within the context of a climate and biodiversity emergency (*Universities, Sustainability and Neoliberalism*) despite its likely widespread and unpredictable impacts on economic development, placemaking and social and spatial inequalities.

- A tension between hierarchical and distributed approaches to leadership and knowledge creation,[37] which can lead to incomplete or conflicting understandings of whose civic activity matters and is resourced; which partners are invited into formal relationships; who leads the exchange, governing the prioritisation of objectives, the allocation of resources and the ownership of collaboratively produced knowledge; and whose voice matters in shaping institutional and wider policies.

Current developments in KE in the UK highlight the tensions and opportunities of the present juncture. The introduction of the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) in 2017[38] was

rapidly followed by the Knowledge Exchange Concordat in 2020.[39] The KEF compares higher education institutions' performance relative to their peers across seven perspectives, including 'public and community engagement' and 'working with business'. It aims to offer Higher Education Providers (HEPs) information and data on their knowledge exchange activities, facilitating understanding, benchmarking, and performance improvement. Its objective is to enhance accessibility and comparability of performance data for transparency and public accountability. The KEF relates to assessments and measurements on a larger scale, rather than delving into the intricacies and micro-exchanges of knowledge that are woven into engaged scholarship.

In recognition that quantitative data alone cannot generate useful comparisons, HEIs can submit two narrative statements to inform others of their ambitions and successes. While the inclusion of these narrative statements is welcome, the overall process for measuring KE performance through the KEF is not as comprehensive as it could be and the intricacies of KE will continue to remain poorly understood in some quarters. Nevertheless, the KEF encourages a process of continuous improvement. At the time of writing the KEF is now in its third iteration (KEF3). Research England has indicated that ongoing design and development efforts will persist through additional iterations, up to at least KEF5 in 2025. The continuity in design and methodology enables HEPs to consistently compare their performance across each iteration. Proposals to develop the KEF for funding purposes, including the annual allocation of the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), will be considered when Research England has better data and metrics – although not before 2025/26.

The KE Concordat is a series of eight 'high-level principles' and supporting enablers that aim to cover the range of activities required for effective KE. The concordat seeks to facilitate the development, enhancement and transparency of the wide range of KE activities performed by higher education providers, and to support the partnerships integral to their success. This work is intended as a mechanism to represent the value of KE to government ministers and policymakers, although a recent review of KE funding highlighted the need for better data, metrics and evidence.[40]

The questions raised through initiatives such as the KE Concordat and the Civic University Network drive at the heart of what universities are for. In the UK, KE has its roots in ideas of technology transfer and universities' 'third mission' in supporting business and the economy.[41] In the early 2000s some universities had technology transfer offices to exploit intellectual property (IP) generated by their research and teaching staff. Foss and Gibson highlight the role of universities in providing both 'entrepreneurial education' (offering industry-relevant courses) and 'entrepreneurial activities' such as spin-off companies and academic start-ups.[42] This can represent a one-way function to commercialise academic knowledge, often with a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematical (STEM) disciplines. Technology transfer evolved into the concept of knowledge transfer, with broader applications across the social sciences and the humanities. But the word 'transfer' continued to signal a process beginning within the university and extending to the wider world. The limitations of this view were acknowledged semantically, if not necessarily in actuality, in the more recent use of the term 'knowledge exchange'. Words such as 'place', 'communities', 'civic responsibility' and 'impact' have now entered the KE lexicon.

This links to a broader reconsideration of the relationship between KE, innovation and entrepreneurship. Innovation is applied to help overcome challenges which are not only commercial, but might include, for example, the cost of living (*The City Conversation*) or the climate emergency.[43] KE describes the role that university staff, students and technicians, and universities as corporate entities, play within this activity. Systems and processes can be designed and developed to support innovation and provide structure for KE professionals. The introduction of the KE Concordat challenged universities to ensure that policies are in place for KE to 'institutionalise' and embed this work within universities' core vision and mission. Among teaching staff, such conversations tend to cover issues such as employability and graduate outcomes and opportunities. Engaging employers in the development of the curriculum, or inviting external organisations to offer live projects for students to work on, are ways of delivering 'engaged' and work-based learning. Many academics are already doing this work and seeing the benefits it brings to students. Jones and Columbano, for example, draw on the experience of architectural pedagogy through live projects to formulate local civic engagement as a 'critical, collaborative and dialogical connection between the university and the communities and organisations it seeks to serve'.[44] Crucially, they make a distinction between working 'for' and 'with' place-based institutions and communities.

Such concerns about the place-based impacts of KE extend to the role of students in community-based and civic activities. In 2020, Research England and the Office for Students allocated £10m to twenty HEPs through a competitive call. Through this work the positive impacts of knowledge exchange on graduate outcomes, employability and enterprise, were folded into strategic thinking about the impact of knowledge exchange in place. The University of Sheffield's Transforming and Activating Places project, for example, in the development of which authors ACJ and CB played key roles, created 140 paid placements for

students from underrepresented groups in third-sector and commercial organisations whose business is broadly associated with making more vibrant, prosperous and socially just places to live and work. Grounded in an ethos of co-design and co-creation, Transforming and Activating Places enabled partners and students to work together on (mostly) hyperlocal projects that foregrounded the value to placemaking of diverse positionalities, disciplinary expertise and creative methodologies.

Among research staff, there is a growing focus on embedding routes to impact and public engagement in the research process at the outset of an investigation, to relate research more closely to the lived experiences of participants or beneficiaries and put their needs and challenges at the forefront of collaborative research and KE activities. There is an increasing concern that research should not only be co-produced, but co-designed and co-created from the outset with participants (*Co-Creative Approaches*). At its best, knowledge exchange describes and enshrines the principle of 'nothing about us without us' in the design and delivery of research with intersectionally marginalised groups and communities. However, this is a contested space. Cassie Kill has cogently argued that 'co-production', a comfortable byword for equity in collaborative working, is a 'relational fantasy' to which its proponents remain unhelpfully attached in the face of the political and social realities in which institutions such as galleries and universities perform and position their work.[45]

We thus view KE as occupying a liminal space that can be at once commodifying and emancipatory. It can open up opportunities for equitable exchange, or reinforce existing inequities and even erect new fences and boundaries. KE professionals and engaged scholars of all descriptions and disciplines can act as boundary spanners, creating favourable conditions within academic and local networks for a broader engagement between

universities and the wider societies within which they operate. Williams highlights three key skills of boundary spanners: they are networkers, innovators and cultural brokers who can translate between different groups.[46] However, universities must also engage brokers, mediators and boundary spanners from beyond academia and within communities to dismantle unilateral vectors of engagement and move beyond the hub and spoke model that university-led KE can reproduce in place (*Civic Universities and Culture*). Exchanges are multidirectional operations; yet prevailing logics focus universities' attention on the impacts they might claim on places, policy and communities. If exchanges are to become more equitable, then universities also need to proactively address and be held accountable for the systemic changes required of them by citizens and communities. The civic impact framework points in this direction.

SITUATED PRACTICE: A REFLECTION ON THE AUTHORS' POSITIONS

Knowledge exchange is a description of the work of individuals as well as institutions. So we pause here to consider our own positionality and praxis in this space. This article stems from our work, individually and collectively, as practitioners and academics, and the blurring of boundaries between these roles; and from our concern to act ethically within and beyond the academy to support various communities of place or interest. We acknowledge from the beginning our inevitable complicity in systems that entrench power relationships that may reinforce disadvantage and inequality,[47] and our aim here is to reflect on that experience to illustrate and examine the opportunities the current concern with the 'civic' offers alongside the challenges it poses.

In collaborating to write this article we draw on discursive and situated practices over a number of years, centred mainly on our common geography of Sheffield, UK – a place where we have worked but which we also call home. As citizens we exchange our local knowledge with the institutions that have employed us, while we also draw on the knowledge of those institutions to inform how we live within our city and neighbourhoods. This process is iterative and experimental, and has involved shifting workplaces and institutional affiliations. In repeated conversations and interactions we have found consistent threads of shared and overlapping beliefs and attitudes. We therefore understand authorship in this context as a distributed and provisional process that in itself challenges linear, unidirectional views of 'knowledge exchange'.

A brief look at our own situations demonstrates the multiplicity of journeys outside and into academia, and multiple forms of knowledge, that have brought us to a common concern with the 'civic'. JD's work centres on place-based public policy and public interventions in disadvantaged communities in the UK. Until relatively recently, most of this work was undertaken outside the academy, through journalism and consultancy. This generated an interest in the role of 'anchor institutions' in influencing place-based change, with a particular focus on town centres and traditional high streets as sites of tension and possibility.[48] Since 2020 he has been closely involved in work on civic universities, considering how academic institutions can understand their impacts beyond a concern with economic value and support for businesses. In this role he helped to develop a prototype framework for assessing civic impact[49] and is involved in work with academic institutions across England to better understand and support their civic work. This has highlighted that even what could be described as 'knowledge of knowledge' is patchy and foggy both among universities' local partners (in, for example, healthcare or local government) and, perhaps

more surprisingly, within universities themselves. Conversations along the lines of 'what do we mean by civic?' are constant and it is telling that the Civic University Network itself does not offer a clear definition. In his current work to gather learning from universities that self-identify as civic, JD has found himself seeking to fill gaps in defining terms and developing an embryonic theory of civic change, while respecting the multiplicity and diversity of perspectives on civic activity. This could be described as an attempt to clarify the terms of knowledge exchange at an institutional scale: an early observation would be that many organisations have an inbuilt resistance to clarity, perhaps not least because a degree of fuzziness also permits some creative, 'under-the-radar' initiatives that might not otherwise progress.

JU is an educator, researcher and practitioner in architecture, whose work explores commoning, design activism and multispecies justice. Her research is transdisciplinary and feminist, employing eco-social design tools to convene constituencies around topics of concern. Over the past fifteen years, she has worked to develop infrastructures, relationships and pedagogical tools to enable academics to come together with civic, cultural and community actors and institutions both locally and globally, in ways that aim to be collaborative rather than extractive. This work, which implies a commitment to particular sites and concerns over many years, has led her to an interest in organisational and institutional structures, governance and diverse economies that support more distributed agencies and equitable practices. She is a Senior Lecturer in Architecture and a director of social enterprise architectural practice Studio Polpo.

In her previous, simultaneous and multiple roles as a community architectural researcher at a community forum, a PhD candidate, director of an architectural practice, local resident and

design tutor of an M.Arch architecture studio (and later director of a community benefit society), JU led a campaign to support a community of metalworkers, musicians and artists in their battle against displacement. This led to 500 people buying a cutlery factory through a community share issue, with an asset lock to counter gentrification. The factory is now being run for community benefit by tenants and residents, and remains host to a variety of makers. JU's shifting between roles and institutions was a deliberate strategy to support KE in ways that enabled her to draw upon and understand the particular needs, capacities, and relationships that each context offered in relation to knowledge production. It playfully decentred the university as the dominant force, offering plural perspectives, voices to be taken into account and demands to be heard. Thousands of hours of work and dedication to being present across these contexts built trust and understanding, which was essential in building a space for genuine and useful exchange. While making a connection in this way can seed broader and more durable partnership working with HEIs, such labour is not directly transferable to other people, projects or parts of the institution without similar levels of personal commitment.

ACJ has worked in knowledge exchange leadership roles at the University of Sheffield and University of the Arts London, London College of Communication, where she has developed and managed frameworks to support both research-driven and student-led KE. Her academic research focuses on the representation of place and space in Francophone literature, philosophy and contemporary visual arts. Since 2006, as a KE practitioner, she has worked with artists, NGOs, museums and galleries, in the UK and internationally, to explore the creative interface between her research, theory and engaged artistic practice. She is particularly interested in how KE can open up new and more ethical ways of occupying and activating, transforming and sustaining, representing and repairing places. ACJ's approach to

KE was forged through *occursus*, a loose, shape-shifting coalition of academics, students and practitioners from both of Sheffield's universities, artists, scientists, poets, publishers, musicians and filmmakers. In its first iteration, *occursus* met as a weekly reading group in loaned and rented studio spaces. The group went on to host artistic residencies and curate exhibitions, as well as organising public events including talks, creative workshops and walks around Sheffield's post-industrial edgelands. *occursus* takes its name from the Latin word for an encounter, a coming-together. The word also enfolds the sense of occurrence – to appear or to happen, perhaps unexpectedly. In this work, exchanges relate not only to measurable impacts but to the 'possibilities of co-existence' (*The Mushroom at the End of the World*, p4) within a specific locale. In the example of *occursus*, projects stemmed from two years of reading, discussing and walking together, for the most part in non-university settings. The focus of *occursus* was less on products or outputs, than on the processes of reading, thinking, learning, discussing, sharing and iterating together. In another, more recent collaboration with partners in Kosovo, *Landscapes of Repair,* ACJ has worked with Korab Krasniqi and Alexander Vojvoda from NGO forumZFD to explore and foreground the value of 'slow' knowledge exchange as a means of creating more equitable, transparent and high-trust partnerships. Slowness is performed as a counter-gesture to the productivism of UK HEI-led metrics and the time-bound, output-focused relationalities fostered by current funding and finance frameworks. Initially funded by the University of Sheffield in 2020, Landscapes of Repair, the first iteration of which comprised an online exhibition of works by Kosovan artists and a two-day online international symposium, has developed into a rhizomic, transnational collaboration between multiple actors, civil society, research centres and organisations. It has become a kind of holding space in which multiple strands of activity have coalesced, sometimes – though not always – with university partners in both the UK and Kosovo. Self-reflection and collaborative writing play a key role in the patient work of

growing mutuality and understanding, as the initial project continues to mature into a sustainable, more socially just community of practice.

CB works within academic institutions, but is not formally recognised as a teacher or researcher. Yet his professional role is to teach and train colleagues, and create new knowledge through research that manifests as systems and processes designed to facilitate 'knowledge exchange'. He has worked for over two decades as a KE professional, but it is a role without a clear definition or professional pathway. The role of a KE professional remains in its infancy, even as pressures to measure effectiveness mount through the formalisation in the UK of the Knowledge Exchange Framework, the Teaching Excellence Framework and the Research Excellence Framework.

SITUATED KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE: QUESTIONS OF ETHICS, POWER AND PRACTICE

This consideration of our own situatedness highlights how different forms of engaged praxis within the academy become entangled in questions of power and privilege; the ethical challenges of developing and maintaining relationships with communities and citizens; and the possibilities of enacting and enabling change within (and sometimes against) the framework of educational institutions and public policy. In particular, we would highlight the tension between knowledge exchange as a profession and (increasingly) regulated practice managed at an organisational scale, and knowledge exchange as the 'slow work' of relationship-building, cooperation and mutuality, often initiated by engaged scholars through specific and situated entanglements with local, hyperlocal but also transnational communities.

While universities undoubtedly bring significant capabilities, energies and value to their places, it is also true that as institutions with powerful social, cultural and political capital, they can create and reproduce inequities in local and regional ecosystems.[50] Locked into metrics-based systems that measure and rank their production and performance, universities – in their proximity to government – are stretched across priorities that are congruent only insofar as they are dictated by prevailing policy landscapes and, more broadly, the logics of productivism and capital. 'However', as William Bruce Cameron pithily notes, 'not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted'.[51]

While evidence from those involved in the 'civic' agenda frequently demonstrates a genuine concern to become more inclusive and break down barriers, at an institutional level the desire for civic partners to connect to the university could be equally motivated by the impacts of neoliberalism more generally. These include reductions in public services, the roll-back of the welfare state and the quest for other sources of income, resources, and support structures.[52] Non-university partners potentially engage in the civic agenda from a position of dispossession and greater precarity,[53] which risks amplifying power differentials in a context of transactional, boundaried and extractive encounters. While the authors have direct and indirect experience of working with individuals who are aware of such risks and actively seek to counter them, this awareness remains partial among senior institutional leaders.

In this context, it is pertinent to consider what forms of collaboration and connection count within spaces of knowledge exchange that are becoming more enclosed. Historically, universities have tended to separate themselves from their civic context;[54] however, they are now becoming involved in newly emerging forms of enclosure that are associated with the

neoliberal turn.[55] Groups such as the Midnight Notes Collective[56] have challenged the notion that enclosure of the commons was a historical and singularly land-based phenomenon, and argue that enclosure is a continuous and permanent process key to the sustainability of capitalism. In HEIs' existential need to demonstrate value as 'producers of knowledge' and drivers of economic production, they experience a constant push to claim ownership of knowledge creation and place-based transformation that often has much deeper roots than the latest partnership between the HEI and its civic partners, and much wider and more distributed forms of production. This is a question of justice. A push for 'civicness' risks contributing to and exacerbating this enclosure process by offering new territories of expansion and extraction, where peoples' day-to-day lives become part of academic and institutional logics and metrics. The civic university builds knowledge from the understandings, time, motivations and resources of people and organisations that it does not employ, or necessarily have a formal relationship with, and this commonly built knowledge risks becoming subject to paywalls, surveillance regimes, translations, claims, value systems, exclusions and otherings.

We argue that the civic university should neither be romanticised as unproblematically 'doing good', nor written off as irredeemably tainted by neoliberalism. If we acknowledge that the university is constituted through processes of common production, we also problematise considering it as an abstract and homogenous 'resource for the taking'. Instead, in any process of redistribution, it is crucial to acknowledge the university's uneven social production. Its wealth and power are of course generated through its inherited capital, status and financial instruments, but also through diverse personal and collective labours and networks, which are driven by the plurality of motivations and practices of those who continually reconstitute it and reimagine what may be possible and desirable. Historical

accounts of the commons foreground an ecological understanding of place,[57] requiring an

ethic of care, and attention to an evolving shared understanding of what makes life possible.

In historic commons, liveability depended upon knowing how much to harvest, fish, and

graze pasture, in ways that understood the complex interrelations of climate, weather, and

uneven and changing needs of a shifting community.[58] Recent experiments in commoning

also emphasise the need to embed continual processes of maintenance and repair into any

process of production.[59] They do so as a challenge to ideas of immaterial commons, because

all (knowledge) production relies upon other(s') social reproduction work.[60]

There are many already within HEIs who recognise and practise care labours as an essential

ground for knowledge production, and who seek to actively redistribute resources, both

within and beyond university walls. In acknowledging these institutionally located practices

of care, we must simultaneously pay attention to longstanding and patchy practices of

knowledge production, and diverse and emergent forms of association and exchange that

already exist in the city and offer a ground for future knowledge production. Academics must

understand their role as one of taking part, sharing resources and, where invited, contributing

to the repair and replenishment of those existing community ecologies, in ways that may not

always be definable as impact, or may become blurred in terms of how their contribution is

assessed or acknowledged. This requires a delicate balancing act between a strategic 'civic'

orientation and allowing space and resources for situated, unstructured and unplanned

relationships to develop that might not fit with the needs of the university.

This implies at the very least, that 'use' of the universities' resources and attention should be

understood as requiring a careful and shared speculation about what might be desirable and

possible, and a commitment to projects between academics and civic partners that require

continual reappraisal in terms of their resourcing, dynamics and aims. Commons thinking is useful here, because it offers the notion of the soft boundary, where new subjectivities and practices of care must be mutually negotiated and established to become part of the community of sharing (*Omnia sunt communia*)**.** Therefore, each process of knowledge exchange requires porous boundaries and shifts in subjectivity to unlearn logics associated with capitalist forms of dispossession and enclosure that not only seek to enclose goods and resources but also '[...] obstruct commoning practices of openness'.[61]

The open source movement also offers useful concepts that can be operationalised to engage in questions of use of commonly produced resources and knowledge. The GNU manifesto, written by Richard Stallman in 1985, sets out principles of open source as a challenge to the processes of centralisation, enclosure and ossification he observed in the context of software development.[62] He argued that genuine openness requires the possibility of plurality, with change distributed among multiple authors, appropriate to use. Stallman's three main tenets of 'use as you wish; change it to suit your needs; and distribute altered versions' offer ways to conceive of civic partnerships that adapt to better meet their specific contextual needs and understandings. While changing code is very different to changing working practices and the distribution of finite resources (pragmatically, economically and ethically), this metaphor offers an important shift from the vantage point of the university as outwith the city, to thinking of the development and use of the systems of knowledge production as interdependent. The implication is not only that the university needs to relinquish some control, but that through each collectively conceived project of the civic university, the university should learn and evolve to acknowledge modes of production beyond its existing logics, processes and understandings.

The prevailing logic of impact and KEF measures the positive transformations brought about by the academy, beyond the academy, through the work of KE. Any efforts to modify the university to suit particular and situated needs of a community challenge universities' approaches to procedures, temporalities and concerns within and beyond their walls. Attention should be paid to the lack of synchronicity between the urgencies of a community wishing to attend to the needs and concerns of its people in times of crisis, and the seemingly immovable rationale and rhythms of universities' modules, REF and KEF cycles, bureaucratic and risk management processes, and funding regimes which seldom align with local needs for resources, financial or intellectual. This demands effort to address the political question of whose needs are given precedence, and how they are collectively constituted, known and expressed at different scales. Finally, any acknowledgement that those who collaborate with the civic university should be able to alter it presents an almost existential challenge to universities, because this is ultimately a call to relinquish ownership and control. This could be perceived as a threat to be resisted by institutions, because it could dilute the 'brand' that many have striven to build in a marketised context, and by academics because of the risk of undermining academic quality, coherence, autonomy and collegiality. Yet a more positive and possible picture emerges if we can think beyond the concerns of a single institution, to a heterogeneous and interconnected landscape of (parts of) institutions, attuned to and made with and by the histories, temporalities, geographies and concerns of place.[63]

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS FORMS OF OPENING

What, then, does the current moment offer KE specialists, engaged academics, community partners and more? While it is too early to describe the civic university movement as

coherent and coordinated, a coalescence can be detected around points of shared interest, with varying degrees of formality and institutional legitimation.

We write from the UK context, where, at a national policy level, a continued interest in notions of 'levelling up' or reducing spatial inequalities (in discourse, if not in practice) has enabled universities to keep making the case in policy circles for investment in research capacity. The acknowledgement of universities' key role in proposed investment zones mooted in the UK government's 2023 Budget marks a shift from previous administrations that, according to one landmark report, 'have largely ignored the civic role over a long period and in some cases, actively worked against it' (*Truly Civic*).

To pin hopes and ambitions on the vagaries of national policy, however, risks subjecting civic ambitions to short-term political agendas. Wider global trends, including the economic and social impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss, make it less likely that universities will operate in a stable socioeconomic context in the foreseeable future. In this context of fluidity and uncertainty, institutions and their staff need to be comfortable with working at varying scales, convening and brokering rather than directing. This has particular implications for the notion of the civic university: in the context of unpredictable change, it needs to provide an umbrella for a range of activities and interventions rather than a box within which all 'civic' activities must fit. Universities, and the civic actors within and around them, must therefore be alert to opportunities to participate in change while resisting the attractions of clear definitional boundaries. The civic impact framework,[64] for all the caveats that attach to it as a work in progress, attempts to catalyse such open thinking. While it does not draw directly on the open-source notions of 'use as you wish; change it to suit your needs; and distribute altered versions', it has been devised to foster variety and

multiplicity rather than to limit universities and the actors within them to rigid metrics. The civic university is not yet open-source and is far from being a conscious move towards commoning, but it provides openings and can be used to open institutions further.

At a formal level, there is evidence that the domains of activity proposed in the civic impact framework are gaining some acceptance and legitimacy. The framework underpins activity in an action research project, the National Civic Impact Accelerator, currently funded by Research England until 2026. A core strand of this project is to work with leaders at different levels within a cohort of twelve higher education institutions (or groups of institutions) to test how civic activity is being enabled. This work, which is now in progress, has the potential to inform wider practice and learning.

But it is perhaps beyond the formal world of policy and partnership that the greatest potential, and the most interesting existing activities, lie. This is where culture change can underpin institutional change, enabling shifts in institutional logics[65] and building the unseen meshwork of connections and conversations that facilitate the 'institutional work' of maintaining, changing or dismantling the institutions themselves.[66] There is no simple route towards culture change, although many university leaders purport to lead such a process. Rather, as Lawrence et al. highlight, it is something that happens organically and is non-linear, but can be enabled by changes in overarching conditions. Such processes are messy, iterative, unpredictable and often below the radar, but – both in our experience as authors and in relevant literature – offer what Tsing describes as 'possibilities of life in capitalist ruins' (*The Mushroom at the End of the World*).

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