The University as a Public Good: Active citizenship and university community engagement

Jason Wood*
Nottingham Trent University, UK

Abstract
Education for active citizenship has been a key development in social policy over the past two decades, leading to a number of initiatives that have sought to strengthen political, social and moral literacy. This paper briefly reviews the UK policy context by situating this within communitarian definitions of citizenship. Despite the growth of initiatives designed to promote active citizenship, there has been comparatively little focus on the role of universities in addressing locally based civic, social and political challenges. Drawing on literature and a case-study of an innovative university community engagement project, this paper investigates to what extent universities can – and should – play a more active role in their local communities. In doing so, the paper argues that a potential 'public good' value of universities can emerge.

Keywords: University community engagement; citizenship; civic education; service learning
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* Jason Wood is the Head of Sociology at Nottingham Trent University. Prior to this he was a Principal Lecturer and Research Director of the Square Mile initiative at De Montfort University.
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Introduction

New Labour's time in UK government marked a 'watershed in political and social education' (Wood, 2010, p.50). Responding to the perceived causes of a 'democratic deficit' and rising concern over anti-social behaviour, the government introduced a number of formal measures to promote young people's active citizenship. Secondary schools were required, for the first time, to teach citizenship education as part of the national curriculum (Crick 2002). Work was also undertaken to identify similar opportunities in post-compulsory education and training (Further Education Funding Council 2000) though this was less formally developed. The aims of this education programme were laudable, best articulated by the original Advisory Group on Citizenship (1998):

> We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and public service, and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves. p 7-8

The themes contained with the education for citizenship agenda could also be found in a number of other social policy initiatives targeted at the general population. Despite waves of reform, higher education remained seemingly immune to challenges that it should provide more by way of a social and civic education experience.

This paper briefly revisits the context of citizenship education in the UK and considers the role of higher education institutions in contributing to local community and civic development. Drawing on a particular case-study of ongoing practice and the wider literature base, it argues that universities are institutes of vital intellectual and resource capital that can make a contribution to the 'public good'.

Communitarian citizenship

What constitutes 'active citizenship' is a question that requires consideration of the political, social and economic context in which the ideal is advocated for. As Lister notes, active citizenship can take both radical and conservative forms, with collectivist and mutual activity on the one hand, and a narrower engagement with work or market-orientated contributions on the other (2003, p. 23-24). The market-orientated model had persisted in the UK for two decades before it was challenged by a number of interlinking factors, resulting in repositioning the active citizen as a contributor to the political, social and moral 'character' of the country.

At the apex of advanced liberalisation in western democracies came the unbridled power of free markets, individualisation and the uncertainties characteristic of the risk society (Beck 1992). Alongside specific concerns around democratic and social engagement, the period in which New Labour governed was characterised by wider and more pervasive qualitative shifts in the relationship between governor and the governed. These were not unique to the UK and reflected global changes in the provision and uptake of welfare as well as the repositioning of individuals as culpable for addressing a wide range of social problems. The nature of welfare states was challenged from above by globalisation and questions about the validity of the state (Johansson and Hvinden 2005). In Europe there was a 'need to shift from 'passive' to 'active' policies, meaning that the primary goal of social protection schemes should be to promote labour market participation' (Johansson and Hvinden 2005: 103).

Pressures also came from below with the observed trend of greater individualisation and a growing rejection of tradition (Giddens 1998; Johansson and Hvinden 2005).

Governments faced a challenge: how to instil moral and social obligatory connections between individuals whilst at the same time trumpeting wealth generation and individual consumerism? For the then UK Prime Minister Blair, the challenges of the new world indicated a need to 'define a new relationship between citizen and community' (Blair 1993, p. 11). The basis for a 'modern notion of citizenship' (Blair 1993, p. 7) was linked to two important threads: economic effectiveness in respect of providing welfare 'opportunities' (Morrison 2004) and new forms of social cohesion in terms of a renewal of civic and civil life.

The social welfare of New Labour was to be realised through the extension of 'conditionality' (Dwyer 2004) and the promotion of the 'active society' (Weatherly 2001). Together they would provide a 'social investment state' (Giddens 1998) instead of a welfare net characterised as 'good enough' welfare provision (Williams 1999). Civic and civil life would be shored up through the implementation of a 'communitarian' definition of active citizenship.

The idea of 'community' proved to be attractive. New Labour in particular was responsible for recasting it as not merely a 'soft and romantic' concept, but as a 'robust and powerful idea' (Mandelson & Liddle 1996, p. 19). Communitarian definitions of citizenship seemed more appropriate in capturing the changing relationship between individuals and their access to social rights and rooted the individual firmly in local, shared connections and obligations. Communitarian thinking emphasised active participation, 'civic spirit, responsibility for self and for the community, mutuality' and that the 'strength of families and the strength of communities are mutually reinforcing' (see Frazer 1999, pp. 35-38). There was also a political consensus on what threatens the community ideal including 'selfishness on the part of individuals, ineptitude and betrayal on the part of bureaucratic government, [and] crime' (Frazer 1999, p. 38).

Communitarianism offered a particular sociological review of the consequences and potential remedies of late modern society (Hale 2004). It was trumpeted as 'a response to practical issues' (Selznick 1998, p. 15) such as 'unbridled capitalism, drug addiction, crime, and citizenship' (Ibid.). At its heart is perhaps the key argument that individuals are 'enlarged as a result of social experience and […] sustained by rootedness' (Selznick 1998, p. 16). Communitarianism, according to North American sociologist Etzioni, offered the necessary 'balance between social forces and the person' (Etzioni 1998). His assertions rested upon a central idea:

> Americans – who have long been concerned with the deterioration of private and public morality, the decline of the family, high crime rates, and the swelling of corruption in government – can now act without fear. We can act without fear that attempts to shore up our values, responsibilities, institutions, and communities will cause us to charge into a dark tunnel or moralism and authoritarianism that leads to a church-dominated state or a right-wing world. (Etzioni 1993, p. 2)

For Etzioni, a conundrum was apparent where a major feature of contemporary American society was 'a strong sense of entitlement' (1993, p. 3) with a weak sense of obligation. Despite recognising that 'the imbalance between rights and responsibilities…is a basic trait of the American character' (1993, p. 4), Etzioni laments the recent developments in politics that had further widened the gulf between government and citizen, where the public can expect of the government solutions to social problems, with little fiscal cost to themselves: literally to 'have their cake and eat it' (p.4). Tam, writing in the UK context,

presents a thesis that is similar in tone and content: a consequence of market individualism is the decline in community ties and moral order, its 'cancerous effect' (1998, p. 3). With concerns ranging from political disengagement, poor parenting as a result of working longer hours, and the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, Tam (1998) concludes that:

> Selfishness becomes a moral creed. Individuals are encouraged at every turn to put their own interests first, and to demand the freedom to make their own choices regardless of the implications for civil order. p.4

Tam (1998) puts forward the communitarian alternative to both individualism and authoritarianism where social and political practices can be reformed, arguing for 'inclusive communities' built upon 'questions about what collective action is to be taken for the common good' (p7). Inclusive communities require:

> "citizens who can take part in co-operative enquiries determining a wide range of issues; who recognize that they share a respect for common values and accept the responsibilities these values imply; and who actively support the transformation of power relations for the common good." (Tam 1998, p. 8)

Communitarianism was thus a philosophical and pragmatic strategy that sought to challenge increasing individualism, seen as a consequence of advanced market economies. Moving beyond a traditional state/individual dichotomy (characteristic of liberal forms of citizenship), communitarians advocated that communities could offer the social connectedness necessary for civil and social order. In this respect, community was positioned not merely as an area of territory; it provided social stability and moral socialisation for the people who lived within it. This position also distinguished citizenship from the richer civic republican tradition but focusing, perhaps narrowly, on communities, at the expense of broader civic engagement.

Our appetite for initiatives that widen and deepen a communitarian version of active citizenship remains unfettered. Social policy continues to frame individual obligations 'towards the local, civil and the grassroots' (Blaug 2002, p. 102). In the new public sphere, citizenship as a responsibility has taken in new strands that extend beyond the political.

The continuation of these ideas is at the centre of the Big Society thesis:

> The Big Society is about a huge culture change, where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace, don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities. (Cameron 2010)

The attraction of a desirable community has enabled those who govern to locate the problems of social order at the local site and within local experience. With this remapping of the problem location, there is a definition 'of the problem of social exclusion as a problem of local origin and of the challenge of local regeneration as a challenge for local actors' (Amin 2005, p. 615). Taken one way, this is the time-honoured approach of localism, the favoured model of community workers who favour local empowerment over centralised directive. Yet, as Amin warns, without critical engagement and the real transfer of resources and power, local citizens become: 'agents for the 'domestication' of local politics, charged to deliver a consensual and responsible citizenry that performs the regeneration expectations of ruling elites' (Amin, 2005, p. 620).

Whither the university?

It has been argued that universities have long had a commitment to contributing to the social and economic development of surrounding communities. The intellectual and resource capital of universities could, in theory, make them valuable partners in challenging the 'most pressing social, civic, economic and moral problems' (Boyer 1996, p. 11) by being 'of and not just in the community' (Watson 2003, p. 16). Yet, when compared to the reforms to schools during New Labour's tenure, questions about the engagement of higher education institutions in promoting active citizenship have been somewhat less pronounced. Most universities would consider themselves as conducting work that has wider benefits, particularly in relation to their immediate surroundings. Studies on the contribution of universities to local and regional economies abound and Schmuecker and Cook (2012) state that by simply being present in an area, universities provide a positive economic effect, though they acknowledge that this is a somewhat passive notion of 'contribution'.

In the UK, the Dearing Report (1997) found evidence of 'patchy' local and regional engagement 'but that it needs to turn to active and systematic engagement' (Para 12.7). However, engagement has too often been focused on the potential commercial opportunities for universities, with little strategic support for work with those on the margins. Consequently 'university-community engagement remains peripheral in terms of universities' organisation, funding, management and strategic control, reducing their benefits for excluded communities' (Down et al 2010, p. 5). The absence of priority is perhaps easy to understand in the context of current higher education policy in the UK which seems on the one hand to emphasise real-world impact of research (and therefore the need to 'engage' but with measures that expect the widest possible 'reach' and 'significance') but on the other, the marketisation of higher education through a primary focus on teaching quality and social mobility.

As a result, where exemplary community engagement exists, it has usually been realised through the expansion of student volunteering initiatives (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010) and the widening of student community placements and internships (Hynie, Jensen, Johnny, Wedlock, & Phipps, 2011) as well as broadening attempts to communicate or apply research more effectively (e.g. through the *Beacons National Centre for Public Engagement*). Whilst these established approaches undoubtedly contribute to the personal and social development of the students and staff involved and can contribute to material economic development, commentators on even the most 'creative and assertive' engaged universities in the USA note the need to 'improve and expand efforts' (Hollander 2011, p. 166) in terms of civic and community development.The extent to which such a role can be realised is somewhat influenced by how a university positions itself in relation to the community that surrounds it.

Powell and Dayson (2011) argue that there is a historically 'unresolved dialectic' within English university systems. A university either occupies a detached, geographically unconstrained position in its pursuit of universal knowledge or it sees itself as a local stakeholder and employer, 'hosting intellectual resources which would appreciable improve the social and economic well-being of its community' (Mulvihill et al 2011, p. 4). This dialectic is not unique to the UK. Hollander's work on research universities and their contribution to civic education, found that where such work is developing, it is 'doing so in the face of faculties with varying degrees of interest in civic education, knowledge of community-based learning methods, and pressures to put their time elsewhere' (Hollander, 2011, p. 174).

Benneworth et al (2008) produced a typology of university community engagement with a particular focus on how higher education institutions engaged with 'harder to reach' groups. In this group, they referred to small businesses and groups within the community and

voluntary sector, hitherto unlikely to have benefited equally from higher education institutions. The authors acknowledged the rise of a 'so-called third mission, external engagement' but that 'there is a need to rebalance universities' societal contributions' (Benneworth, Charles, Humphrey, & Conway, 2008, p. 1).

Their resulting typology somewhat confirms the narrowness of current engagement, features of which have long been common in applied universities:

- Research which involves engagement with external stakeholders as a core element of the knowledge generation process,
- Transferring existing knowledge within the university to external stakeholders,
- Delivering services to external groups which they find useful and/ or demand,
- Involving external stakeholders (small business and community) in teaching activities which meets their needs and improves teaching quality. (Benneworth, Charles, Humphrey, & Conway, 2008, p. 2)

The revival of interest in citizenship described in the first part of this paper may in fact result in changes to the value placed upon active citizenship by universities (O'Connor, Lynch, & Owen, 2011). As Bamber and Hankin observe: 'shifts are said to be occurring in higher education pedagogy, where efforts are being made to expand the social, cultural and human capital of universities and their local communities' (Bamber & Hankin, 2011, p. 190). As a result, there has been increased awareness of 'the social responsibility of universities...third stream work with both employers and community groups is becoming as much a part of the mission of many universities around the world as teaching and research' (Millican & Bourner 2011, p.92).

Rethinking the university community relationship

De Montfort University's Square Mile initiative provides an ongoing case-study that demonstrates an approach to university community engagement that may be classed as innovative. Announced in April 2011 and formally launched six months later, the initiative set out to 'demonstrate how the skills, knowledge and expertise of the university can assist and sustain the development of a community and improve the wellbeing and prospects of the residents'[1]. In practice, this project would connect staff, students, residents and partner organisations in identifying and responding to the needs of a local community.

The initiative was conceived by De Montfort University's Vice Chancellor Dominic Shellard, as part of a wider mission to position the university as a 'public good'. In the context of increasing personal finance of universities through raised tuition fees, initiatives such as the Square Mile were argued to offer an alternative to the discourse of students as 'clients and customers' (Millican and Bourner 2011, p. 92) with universities perhaps perceived as serving only themselves.

Senior management and governing body support was assured by operating the initiative directly from the Vice Chancellor's office, a factor that also enabled the project to maintain a high profile presence both within the university and outside of it. Dedicated staffing resources were allocated to the project including the provision of a project director and team of staff to ensure its delivery. In addition, funding was awarded to redeploy a senior academic post to the initiative and an associated PhD scholarship, to provide the mechanisms for investigating the processes and impacts of the initiative. A formal partnership with Leicester City Council

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[1] See www.dmu.ac.uk/mile2 for a comprehensive overview of the work of the initiative (last accessed 20/06/2012).

was launched in May 2011 when the city's first and newly directly elected Mayor committed to supporting the initiative.

The Square Mile initiative deployed a number of novel approaches to realising its aims. The project sought to work with a particular area of Leicester, thus focusing intensively on one geographically defined urban community. Staff and students undertook a pre-launch community engagement exercise featuring extensive community research. In parallel to this work, university staff submitted over 150 initial ideas for projects that could contribute to the development of a local community. At the point of launching the project in September 2011, the initiative comprised a series of time-bound projects, opportunities for staff, student and resident volunteering and a wider community engagement strategy.

Identifying and engaging the community

De Montfort University sits just outside of the city centre of Leicester. As a result, it could potentially focus its attention on a number of different areas of the city, including the three electoral Wards and two constituencies that directly surround it. The university worked with a number of local stakeholders to identify potential communities to work with assisted by the following criteria: its proximity to the university; the level of need and whether university resources and expertise can 'match'; and the extent to which local government or other agencies are present in the area. The lack of investment was seen as an important factor by the university, with the Project Director noting that:

> We didn't want to go into an area that's had billions of pounds [*sic*] of investment and the local authority have done a lot of work with it already. We wanted to place the project in an area where it could make a measurable impact (Black, 2011).

The process of selection was underpinned by review and analysis of neighbourhood statistics, deprivation index data, public service inputs and informal walkabouts in a number of communities.

The university proposed to work with one urban area notable for inequitable access to resources, with evidence of some entrenched social problems and challenges in terms of cultural and intergenerational cohesion. In many ways the area was typical of similar urban areas in the UK. It comprised large numbers of owned, privately and council rented terraced housing stock and uniquely featured the UK's largest terraced street. It contained around 4000 residencies, several under-used green spaces and a visibly declining industrial area including a disproportionate share of derelict buildings and abandoned factories. The area contained what might be termed three 'distinct' neighbourhoods that account for two Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) and with adjoining neighbourhoods and facilities, crossed two wards and bordered a third.

The area ranked high in aspects of the deprivation index with crime of biggest concern (672 out of 32482 on the 2010 index for two of the neighbourhoods). Negative ratings were also recorded in health, income, education and living environment deprivation indicators. Whilst access to housing and services was rated positively on the index (largely due to less social housing stock), social problems persisted and a city-wide survey showed the lowest levels of public satisfaction and confidence in local services and democratic decision making power (Ipsos Mori 2008). The area is also notable for demographic uncertainty. Census data from 2001 was largely redundant as parts of the neighbourhoods are sites of population flux. Since European Union expansion, migrants have moved into (and out of) the area. Data on this population and the service responses is limited.

An intensive phase of community consultation and engagement followed the selection of the area, designed both to provide in-depth data drawing on the perspectives of residents and to introduce and consult on the Square Mile initiative. This phase of work was based on the Rapid Rural Appraisals (RRA) approach to working with communities in developing countries, which has also used in assessing urban health needs in a UK context (see, for example, Cresswell 1996). University staff and students engaged in a period of orientation and systematic observation of the local community: 'knowing the 'patch' or the 'ground' – where things are and what is going on' (Smith 1994, p. 15), collecting photographs and qualitative field notes to supplement secondary data sources. This familiarisation stage resulted in the development of a number of different engagement strategies, used over the course of a five month period, to better identify the needs of the local area and to consult residents about proposed responses.

Community-based research was seen as a vital component to the engagement work, since it would provide more sophisticated theoretical and practical insights into the complex features of a modern urban community. Too often, policy definitions of community are based on neutral, normative accounts that bear little cognisance to the real experiences of local residents (Staeheli 2008). The work therefore sought to explore the connections between familial, social, spatial and technology based networks (Castells 2009), levels and types of social capital (Boeck 2009), new forms of belonging in transient and established communities (May 2011), power relationships and their capacity to ifluence decision makers (Marcus et al 2011) and the inclusionary and exclusionary practices associated with living in a shared territory (Staeheli 2008). Participative and co-produced accounts of community experience helped to challenge the 'etic/emic' or 'insider/outsider' divide, often an inherent feature of active citizenship programmes where outsiders determine what is 'good' for a community (Wood 2009). This divide is arguably more true of universities where knowledge hierarchies, politics and academic practices can reinforce the distance between academic priviledge and communities (Durose et al 2010).

A number of different community research methods were used, drawing on previous social action and participatory research undertaken by university academics around active citizenship (Wood 2009) and social capital (Boeck 2009). A questionnaire survey was conducted on the doorstep with residents, using Likert-type scales to capture levels of agreement to a number of statements about belonging and connectedness in the local area. Statements focused on whether the community was considered tight knit, friendly, safe and a place where people looked after each. Participants rated the extent to which they felt they could influence decisions made about their local neighbourhoods and provided a satisfaction rating for a range of local services. The survey also captured participant views on the problems or challenges facing the area by capturing ratings and commentary against a number of issues identified as problematic in secondary data. Finally, two open questions invited participants to provide a vision for what could change in the local neighbourhood to make it look or feel differently in one year's time and their perspectives on the university engaging with the local area. A total of 223 residents took part in the survey with each encounter lasting between 15 minutes and 2 hours. Whilst extensive and insightful, the survey cannot claim to be representative of the community as a whole. A non-probability, purposive sampling technique (Blaxter et al 2001) was used, insofar as surveys were completed with those who answered the door and consented to take part. Language proved to be a barrier and on occasions where translators were used, a higher response rate was evident.

Initial analysis of doorstep survey data identified important overarching and interconnected themes[2]. There were low levels of connection and cohesion between individuals living in the local area with poor ratings in response to whether the community

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[2] Based on 195 responses.

was perceived as 'close knit', 'friendly' and a place where 'people look after each other'. People in the area generally felt powerless with the lowest possible rating applied to whether individuals felt that they could 'influence decisions' made about their neighbourhood. People felt safe in their neighbourhood during the daytime but not at night. Crime and anti-social behaviour was one of the biggest concerns for residents and this was connected to feelings of isolation, disconnection and poor ratings of the local living environment.

There were a number of factors that appeared to contribute to these ratings. The area combined transient and established population groups, with individuals often living side by side but unknown to one another. Doorstep data indicated that the majority of people had either lived in the area for a very short time (48%, 2 years or less) with a high turnover in this group, or for a long time (27%, over 11 years) resulting in both groups reporting feelings of disconnection and low levels of belonging, a feeling particularly acute amongst and towards new migrants.

There were acute intergenerational tensions and conflicts. The area is notable for a lack of dedicated youth facilities and young people were cited as the key cause of anti-social behaviour and crime in the community with various measures in place to disperse groups including the regular use of police to move young people on and the presence of the controversial 'Mosquito' device on one of the shop fronts[3]. Young people reported feeling excluded from public spaces and the lack of facilities was their biggest concern, a feeling shared by residents in the doorstep survey. Although crime and anti-social behaviour were rated as one of the biggest concerns, much of what was experienced might be termed 'generalised intimidation and fear' as opposed to direct experiences of harassment or intimation.

All of these issues were situated within the context of a shared living environment characterised by its depreciation and physical decline (which residents rated highest on their concerns). Former industrial areas surrounding one neighbourhood were depreciating quickly with empty factories and physically deteriorating structures abound. In another area, there were a number of incomplete building projects that failed to progress when the economic crisis took hold in 2008. Historically, there were three 'public houses' in a row in the third neighbourhood that served as meeting points for the community: a pub, a church and a cinema. The first closed in 2007 and remains empty at the time of writing, the second was burnt out in 2004 and has been abandoned since, and the third is now a supermarket chain convenience shop. Changes to the landscape, along with issues of litter and general untidiness, contributed to residents feeling the area was significantly 'ignored'. Parks were seen as the most unsafe areas to go to across all age groups and neighbourhood centres were either underused or had been converted into council offices or services with a city-wide remit.

Whilst a large number of people reported a sense of hopelessness in terms of change in the area, almost unanimously residents welcomed the involvement of the university. When asked to imagine what might look or feel differently in one year's time, the most common responses were grouped as follows: changes to the living environment (33%), a reduction in anti-social behaviour and crime (24%), better community facilities (17%) and a better (generalised) sense of neighbourliness or community (14%).

In addition to the doorstep survey, a number of other strategies were used to secure access to different groups of people living or working within the community. Detached, street based consultation work was undertaken with young people, using a modified social capital survey devised and carried out by a team of four young people employed by the university as

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[3] The Mosquito Device emits a high pitched frequency that is generally only heard by people under the age of 25. It is used to disperse groups of young people and has been subject to controversy. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7240653.stm (last accessed 17/04/2012).

'associate research assistants'[4]. This exercise resulted in the positive capture of voices that may otherwise have been excluded from the consultation exercise. Community vision cafe meetings were held at local neighbourhood centres to capture resident views on emerging survey data and the proposed responses by the Square Mile project. Regular meetings were also held with elected politicians, council officers and other local service providers, and the team attended all local Ward Community Meetings.

The resulting datasets were voluminous and provided distinctive insights into the day to day perceptions and experiences of living in a modern urban community. They also enabled the university to identify its response more effectively than if it had relied solely on secondary data alone.

Developing the response

Two distinctive approaches to university community engagement can be determined in the response by the Square Mile project to the needs identified in the local community – direct 'social/community planning' alongside a hybrid of 'community care', 'organisation' and 'development' (Popple 1995). Social/community planning typically featured analysis of social problems and conditions, goal and priority setting, and implementing and evaluating services or programmes. The Square Mile project designed, consulted on and delivered a range of proposed specialist projects around the themes of community cohesion, health and wellbeing, local identity, skills and media. The projects were delivered almost exclusively in situ, meaning that the university effectively created an 'interrupted space' (Bolzan and Gale 2011) through which to engage with residents. As a result of the initial idea generating process within the university and consultation with residents, twenty-one projects were introduced at the point of the initiative's formal launch in September 2011[5]. These were as follows:

1. **Community:** There were a number of projects that emphasised a participative, developmental process, distinguished by their ambition to engage as wide a network of community members as possible, their open-ended nature and their focus on collective and outdoor activity. They included sports, community garden and community café groups. A team of street-based student youth and community workers were deployed to the area to complete their professional practice under the supervision of local authority youth workers and in partnership with local voluntary sector organisations.

2. **Health:** In the first phase of the initiative, a series of short and tightly focused projects were developed to work with targeted population groups who had distinct health needs. Projects included: sexual health work with people who have learning disabilities; support for increasing breastfeeding in an area where uptake is lower than average; equipping pharmacies to deliver creative weight management advice and information; introducing student-led hearing screenings to open up access to health services and; working with parents and carers to develop new approaches to increase communication skills amongst very young children.

3. **Local identity**: Enabling both transient and established groups to access a localised and collective identity was identified as a key ambition. The area was also the site of

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[4] De Montfort University was thought to be the first university to train and employ young people as associate research assistants, ensuring their contribution to all stages of various externally commissioned projects. See: http://www.dmu.ac.uk/faculties/hls/research/applied-social-sciences/csa/associate-research-assistants.jsp

[5] Projects continue to be introduced and a more comprehensive list and descriptions can be found at: www.dmu.ac.uk/mile2 (last accessed 20/06/2012)

important history and retains this through its various landmarks. Projects included: in-depth research investigating feelings of belonging and inclusion on one street in the Mile2 area; a web-based interactive device allowing users to navigate backwards and forwards in time using layered photographs of specific locations and; using architecture to think about areas in new ways.

4. **Media**: The use of media in work with community is an established tool for nurturing creativity, building relationships and for finding innovative ways of connecting individuals with their local communities. The group of media projects aimed to bring together residents, students and academics in journalism and media production together with a citizen journalism partnership with the local newspaper. Two projects focused on training local reporters for presenting their outputs on a regular student radio show broadcast in the Leicester Mercury. Students also produced 10 documentaries on area and projects.

5. **Skills**: This package offered focused educational projects that sought to work directly with targeted groups in the Square Mile community. They were time-limited and focused around key learning objectives and aimed to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in key areas identified as important during the consultation work. These included offering free English lessons to the newer population groups within the area: a direct response to locally identified needs. Other projects provided information on aspects that were high on the local community's agenda (such as the provision of information about laws).

Running parallel to the projects, the university engaged in roles and functions that would be described in Popple's (1995) typology as a mix of 'organizer', 'volunteer' and 'catalyst', concentrating on supporting new and emerging networks, providing support to existing and developing service provision and establishing mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of the interventions in the Square Mile area. Thus, university staff and students continued to provide a consistent community 'presence' in the neighbourhoods, providing a general and responsive community support mechanism outside of the specific, targeted and often time-limited projects. This work aimed to develop, what Holland and Ramaley identify as 'partnerships that ensure a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge between the university and the community' (2008, p. 33) and was informed by the principles of community development work. The work reflected the historical traditions of community action, development and organisation (Smith 1994) with attempts to expand and test new forms of university community co-production and action (Durose et al 2010).

This diffuse community engagement strategy was actualised through a range of different activities, each targeted at overcoming difficulties identified in the doorstep survey and other consultation work. As 'volunteer', the university engaged its staff and students alongside residents and local authority staff in regular volunteering activity. These ranged from a mass volunteering day to launch the project (where over 200 staff and students volunteered) through to regular community cafe sessions with smaller numbers. As 'organizer', the university supported an emerging partnership between residents, the police and the voluntary sector, focused on strengthening and sustaining youth work provision in the area. The university contribution included providing consultation data, identifying potential funding sources and supporting the completion of a funding bid.

As 'catalyst', the university aimed to respond to the low levels of resident confidence in influencing decisions made about the local neighbourhood, a finding that confirmed Mori's (2008) statement that people in the ward were less trusting of the local authority and democratic services than in other areas of the city. The absence of democratic power was compounded by the nonexistence of neighbourhood groups and tenant associations in the

area, a situation inconsistent with the rest of the city. Over a period of four months, staff and students from the university worked with an emerging residents group to initially provide a mechanism through which the Square Mile could regularly consult a core group of residents. This group developed to become a Community First panel[6], tasked with identifying needs and awarding funds to projects that can respond most effectively.

Emerging impact

Initiatives that promote opportunities for active citizenship often seek to promote two forms of impact. Instrumental impacts are defined as experienced by individuals or groups and can be identified as 'personal rewards' (Wood 2009): the acquisition of new skills, knowledge or the opening up of new opportunities for an individual's personal or social development. Generalised impacts concern the 'collective rewards' that emphasise 'the wider reward gain for communities' (Wood 2009, p. 150). At the time of writing, the Square Mile initiative has been in operation for less than twelve months and it would be unwise to prematurely declare lasting impact. Yet, some early data provides interesting insights into how personal and collective reward gains may result from the initiative in the longer term.

Particular projects set out to provide practical experiences or skills development that could result in changes in the aspirations or circumstances of participating residents. For example, the constituency within which the Square Mile sits was noted for a number of secondary schools failing to achieve a 50% standard of GCSEs A-C. The constituency also reported low progression from compulsory to further and higher education when compared with the city, region and nationally. The Faculty of Technology provided a project in one secondary school designed to raise young people's aspirations and add value to the learning experience beyond the classroom. Robot Club provided 25 young people with the opportunity to build working robots. As a result of the project, two school students were flown to Vienna to compete in an international competition. The group of young people also presented their robots to the Duke of Edinburgh when he visited De Montfort University in March 2012. The project leader, an academic in technology, noted that the project had increased the confidence and self-esteem of some of the students. It was also likely that Robot Club would become incorporated into the school curriculum, an indicator of the project become self-sustaining with possible wider impacts beyond the initiative. The provision of free English lessons, delivered by the Centre for English Language, was targeted primarily at residents from the large Polish community and included practical sessions on job searching and interview techniques. The sessions were oversubscribed and had to be moved from the local neighbourhood centre to De Montfort University's city campus. Residents attending the project have reported that they feel more confident and having made new friends, less isolated.

Projects delivered by students were also providing an important connection between the community and existing services. A hearing screening programme set up in community settings for residents resulted in students providing free screening tests for over 25 residents to date, leading to appropriate advice and guidance on how to access existing NHS services.

Critically though these early successes speak strongly to the 'service' component of student and staff engagement in the community. To what extent the initiatives provide students and staff with the opportunity to engage in learning that can enhance their civic and citizenship knowledge and behaviours is yet to be determined.

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[6] Community First is an £80m government-funded initiative that will run for four years, until March 2015. Eligible wards receive funding that must be allocated by local panels against their locally identified priorities. See http://www.cdf.org.uk/content/funding-programmes/community-first (last accessed 17/04/2012).

Conclusion: universities as a public good?

This paper has set out the policy context of active citizenship and community engagement, and has demonstrated one way in which universities can make a contribution to their local social and economic context. The Square Mile initiative both accepts and rejects dominant policy definitions of community engagement, favouring a direct intervention based approach to classical community development work (Popple 1995). Many of the driving values that underpin the initiative could be interpreted as those found within the UK political communitarian discourse of the New Labour years. Similarly, institutions working outside of government to stimulate change within communities could be emblematic of the current Big Society agenda. However, the Square Mile suggests the balance of an eco-system between the state, other institutions and local residents is not yet ready to be realised. The early success of the initiative has depended on resource commitments not usually associated with a university's community engagement strategy and this in turn provides a potential threat to such work. An acute example was in the intensive work required to support an emerging panel of residents who, it is hoped, will go on to contribute to the sustainable development of their neighbourhood. This positive development required intensive staff and resident co-production, the antithesis of a passive role. This suggests that normative accounts of self-directed community organisation found in the Big Society discourse are insufficient for explaining how institutions are often required to stimulate and help sustain activity.

Does the Square Mile initiative indicate a public good contribution? It is certainly evidence of a university engaging in an innovative way with its local community, demonstrating early signs of service, if not yet 'learning', impact. It will also undoubtedly have 'private good' benefits for the university insofar as the initiative has proved to be a good public relations tool. The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) together with the Observer newspaper named the Vice Chancellor as one of Britain's 50 New Radicals for the idea (Observer, 2012). The project featured significantly during a recent visit by The Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Duchess of Cambridge at the start of the Diamond Jubilee Tour, and has attracted regular local media attention. In an era of increased competition, universities that offer a distinctive experience for students will also be more attractive. This in itself can translate into further public good only if part of a wider strategy of civic education. Student community participation is a vital component of the more developed community engaged universities (Millican & Bourner, 2011), and the 'personal reward' benefits for students undertaking such activity are well documented. The value of targeting this work and situating it firmly within a broader community engagement mission cannot be understated:

> As volunteering becomes more mainstream within higher education, not just in the UK but elsewhere, a critical perspective is necessary to ensure that it neither normalises students to social inequalities, nor perpetuates social injustice. (Holdsworth & Quinn 2010, p. 124)

Universities, through their cherished tradition of knowledge generation and access to extensive knowledge production, are arguably amongst the best placed institutions to ensure a critical dialogue about inequality and injustice is part of the student experience (Durose et al 2010). This is why the balance between private and public good is achieved through more than mere volunteering activity. Universities are often positioned within walking distance of excluded communities and have vital capital to offer in addressing the challenges faced by civic society.

Millican and Bourner (2011, p. 91-92) contend that the 'model of universities that dominated during most of the twentieth century no longer seems to fit in a world where universities are seen as more accountable to the societies in which they are located'. Through

working intensively with one community, the Square Mile project shows that a university can actively contribute to the needs of its neighbours. Yet more time is needed to show if the model offers evidence that universities can be leaders, not followers, in promoting meaningful active citizenship (Hollander 2011).

Acknowledgements

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