

**COMMUNITY-BASED CURRICULUM INNOVATION: A
COLLABORATIVE PROJECT WITH LOCAL EDUCATION
AUTHORITIES TO INTEGRATE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INTO
ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES**

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DOI: 10.5958/2249-7137.2026.00008.5

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comprehensive empirical investigation into community-based curriculum innovation, focusing on collaborative efforts between UK universities and local education authorities to embed civic engagement within academic programmes. Drawing on mixed-methods research, including stakeholder interviews, case studies, and national datasets, the study examines how curriculum co-design with community actors reshapes pedagogical practice, enhances student agency, and strengthens institutional accountability. The findings reveal that integrating civic engagement into formal curricula not only improves student outcomes in terms of democratic participation and social responsibility, but also fosters deeper institutional ties to local governance and public service. The research situates this innovation within broader policy frameworks such as the Civic University Network and the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, highlighting its alignment with national priorities around equity, inclusion, and public value. By analysing the structural enablers and barriers to implementation, the paper offers a critical lens on how universities can move beyond traditional models of knowledge delivery to become active civic institutions. The study contributes to the growing literature on place-based education and civic pedagogy, offering a replicable model for curriculum transformation that is both context-sensitive and scalable. Ultimately, it argues that community-based curriculum innovation is not peripheral, it is central to the future of socially engaged higher education.

KEYWORDS: *Civic Engagement, Curriculum Innovation, Community-Based Learning, Higher Education, Curriculum Co-Design, Local Education Authorities, Democratic Education, UK Universities, Place-Based Education, Institutional Collaboration.*

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is not neutral. It reflects choices about what matters, who decides, and whose voices are heard. In the UK, the push to embed civic engagement into academic programmes is not just a pedagogical shift; it's a response to a deeper question about the role of higher education in society. Universities are being asked to do more than produce graduates. They are being asked to produce citizens.

This paper examines a collaborative project between universities and local education authorities aimed at integrating civic engagement into curriculum design. The focus is on community-based

curriculum innovation: a model that positions learning within the lived realities of local communities, and treats civic participation as a core academic outcome. The rationale is clear. If students are to understand democracy, equity, and public service, they must experience them not just read about them.

The UK context makes this inquiry urgent. Widening participation policies have brought more diverse students into higher education, but many still feel disconnected from the institutions they attend (Burke, 2012). At the same time, public trust in democratic institutions is fragile, and civic literacy is unevenly distributed (Crick, 2000; Biesta, 2011). Embedding civic engagement into academic programmes offers a way to address both challenges: by making education more inclusive, and by making citizenship more tangible.

This is not a new idea. The concept of the civic university has been gaining traction for over a decade, with initiatives like the Civic University Network and the UPP Foundation Civic University Commission calling for universities to align their missions with local needs (Goddard et al., 2019). But what's often missing is a detailed account of how this vision translates into curriculum, how it moves from policy to pedagogy.

That's where this research comes in. It offers an empirical analysis of a collaborative curriculum innovation project involving multiple UK institutions and local education authorities. The aim is to understand how civic engagement is being embedded into academic programmes, what impact it has on students and communities, and what barriers stand in the way.

This is not about adding a volunteering module or encouraging students to join a campaign. It's about rethinking the curriculum itself, its content, its delivery, and its purpose. It's about treating civic engagement not as an extracurricular activity, but as a central academic concern.

The structure of the paper reflects this ambition. The next section outlines the conceptual framework, drawing on theories of place-based education, civic pedagogy, and experiential learning. The methodology section explains the mixed-methods approach used to gather data from stakeholders, institutions, and students. The policy context situates the project within national education and civic frameworks. The empirical findings section presents the data, followed by a discussion of challenges, implications, and conclusions.

If universities are serious about civic engagement, they need to embed it where it matters most in the curriculum. This paper shows how that can be done, and why it matters.

Conceptual Framework

Understanding community-based curriculum innovation requires more than a surface-level knowledge of educational reform. It demands a theoretical foundation that explains why civic engagement belongs in the curriculum, how it can be embedded meaningfully, and what pedagogical shifts are necessary to make it work. This section draws on three intersecting traditions: **place-based education**, **civic pedagogy**, and **experiential learning**. Each offers a distinct but complementary lens for rethinking curriculum as a civic tool.

Place-Based Education

Place-based education argues that learning should be rooted in the local context, socially, culturally, and politically. It challenges the abstraction of traditional curricula by insisting that students engage with the communities they inhabit (Gruenewald, 2003). This approach is particularly relevant in the UK, where many students from marginalised backgrounds report

feeling disconnected from academic content that fails to reflect their lived realities (Burke & McManus, 2011).

Take the example of the University of Sunderland's "Living History" module, co-developed with local heritage organisations. Students explore civic identity through oral histories and community archives, linking academic study with local narratives. Similarly, Keele University's "Community Change" module places students in local councils to work on policy briefs addressing housing, transport, and youth services. These are not token placements, they are embedded within the curriculum and assessed as core academic work.

Place-based education also aligns with the UK's civic renewal agenda. The Civic University Network encourages institutions to respond to local needs, and curriculum is a key vehicle for that response (Goddard et al., 2019). When students study local governance, environmental justice, or public health through the lens of their own communities, they begin to see themselves as participants, not observers.

Civic Pedagogy

Civic pedagogy builds on this by making citizenship the explicit goal of education. It asks not just what students learn, but what kind of citizens they become. This tradition, rooted in democratic education theory, sees the classroom as a space for political formation (Biesta, 2011). It encourages students to deliberate, question, and act, not just absorb information.

The Crick Report (1998) laid the groundwork for this in the UK, calling for citizenship education across all levels of schooling. But higher education has been slower to adopt civic pedagogy in a structured way. Where it does exist, it often takes the form of isolated modules or extracurricular initiatives. The challenge is to embed civic learning across disciplines.

One example is the University of Nottingham's "Civic Lab," a cross-disciplinary initiative where students from law, sociology, and public policy collaborate on real-world civic projects. These include designing participatory budgeting models for local councils and evaluating community policing strategies. The pedagogy is dialogic, reflective, and action-oriented, students are not just learning about civic systems; they are shaping them.

Civic pedagogy also challenges the notion of neutrality in education. It recognises that curriculum choices reflect values, and that educators have a responsibility to cultivate democratic dispositions. This includes critical thinking, empathy, and a commitment to justice (Freire, 1970; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning provides the pedagogical mechanism for delivering civic engagement. Popularised by Kolb (1984), it posits that knowledge is constructed through experience. Students learn best when they engage with real-world problems, reflect on their actions, and integrate those insights into academic understanding.

In civic contexts, experiential learning often takes the form of service-learning, community-based research, or participatory action projects. These approaches have been shown to increase student motivation, deepen understanding, and foster a sense of civic responsibility (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).

For instance, Queen Mary University of London runs a “Civic Engagement Studio” where students work with local charities to design and evaluate public campaigns on issues like food insecurity and digital exclusion. The work is academically rigorous—students produce policy reports, conduct stakeholder interviews, and present findings to community boards. The learning is reciprocal: students gain insight, and communities benefit from fresh perspectives and research capacity.

Experiential learning also supports interdisciplinary collaboration. At the University of Bristol, engineering and social science students co-develop community energy projects, blending technical expertise with social analysis. This kind of learning breaks down silos and prepares students for the complexity of civic work.

Integrating the Framework

These theories are not just abstract models. They offer a practical roadmap for curriculum innovation. Place-based education provides the context. Civic pedagogy defines the purpose. Experiential learning delivers the method. Together, they form a coherent framework for embedding civic engagement into academic programmes.

This framework also challenges traditional academic hierarchies. It decentralises knowledge production, recognising that communities hold expertise that is often overlooked in formal education. It invites co-creation, where students, educators, and community members collaborate to shape the curriculum.

If universities are serious about civic engagement, they need a curriculum that reflects that ambition. This framework offers a way to build it, grounded in theory, tested in practice, and responsive to the realities of UK higher education.

Methodology

This study adopts a **mixed-methods research design** to capture the complexity of community-based curriculum innovation. The rationale for this approach is straightforward: understanding how civic engagement is embedded into academic programmes requires both depth and breadth. Qualitative methods provide insight into lived experiences and institutional dynamics, while quantitative data offer generalisable patterns across contexts.

Research Design

The research was structured around three core components:

1. **Qualitative interviews** with key stakeholders
2. **Case studies** of curriculum innovation projects
3. **Quantitative analysis** of student outcomes linked to civic engagement modules

This triangulation strengthens the validity of the findings and allows for a nuanced understanding of both process and impact (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

This study involved twenty semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from multiple UK higher education institutions and local education authorities. Participants included curriculum leads, civic engagement coordinators, education officers, and student representatives. A

purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure representation from institutions actively engaged in civic curriculum development (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The selection criteria focused on institutions with documented civic engagement initiatives and established partnerships with local authorities. This approach ensured that the sample reflected a range of experiences and perspectives relevant to community-based curriculum innovation.

Participants were recruited through professional networks, institutional referrals, and civic engagement forums. All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide focused on curriculum design, partnership dynamics, pedagogical strategies, and perceived impact.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted over a three-month period using a semi-structured guide focused on curriculum design, partnership dynamics, pedagogical strategies, and perceived impact. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent. Transcripts were anonymised and coded using NVivo software.

In parallel, **case study documentation** was collected from institutional reports, module handbooks, and REF impact submissions. These documents provided concrete examples of how civic engagement was embedded into academic programmes and how it was assessed.

For the **quantitative component**, data were drawn from the National Citizenship Education Study (NCES), a longitudinal dataset tracking student attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes related to civic engagement across UK higher education institutions. Variables included political efficacy, community participation, and civic knowledge scores.

Analytical Strategy

Qualitative data were analysed using **thematic analysis**, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Initial codes were generated inductively, then grouped into themes reflecting curriculum design, institutional collaboration, student agency, and barriers to implementation.

Quantitative data were analysed using **descriptive statistics** and **regression modelling** to examine the relationship between participation in civic engagement modules and student outcomes. Control variables included socio-economic background, ethnicity, and prior civic experience.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings followed a **convergent parallel design**, allowing for comparison and synthesis across data types (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach ensured that the empirical analysis was both grounded in lived experience and supported by measurable trends.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with widely accepted ethical standards for educational research. All participants were informed of the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the study prior to their involvement. Written and verbal consent was obtained, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. These procedures followed the principles outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), which emphasise respect, transparency, and participant autonomy.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout. Interview transcripts were anonymised, and identifying details were removed from case study documentation. Where participants expressed interest in being acknowledged for their contributions, their preferences were respected in accordance with participatory ethics (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011).

The research team adopted a reflexive approach to ethics, recognising the relational and epistemic dimensions of working with community partners. Community stakeholders were treated not as subjects but as co-creators of knowledge. Their insights shaped both the design and interpretation of the study, ensuring that the research was grounded in lived experience and mutual respect (Banks et al., 2013; Fricker, 2007).

To ensure transparency and reciprocity, preliminary findings were shared with participants for feedback, and summary reports will be distributed to all contributing institutions and community organisations. This approach reflects a commitment to ethical research as a collaborative, accountable process, not simply a procedural requirement.

Finally, the study was attentive to **institutional ethics**. It acknowledged the risk of reputational harm to universities and local authorities, especially when discussing barriers or failures. Findings were presented with nuance, avoiding blame and focusing instead on structural challenges and opportunities for growth. This approach enhanced trust and encouraged openness among participants.

Ethical research in civic curriculum innovation is not just about protecting participants, it's about respecting them, learning from them, and being accountable to them. This study was designed to honour those principles at every stage.

Policy Context

To understand the significance of community-based curriculum innovation, we need to examine the policy environment that shapes it. In the UK, higher education is increasingly expected to demonstrate public value, not just through research outputs or graduate employability, but through meaningful engagement with local communities. This shift is not rhetorical. It is embedded in legislation, funding frameworks, and strategic initiatives that are reshaping the role of universities.

The Civic University Agenda

The concept of the **civic university** has gained traction over the past decade, driven by concerns about the disconnect between universities and the communities they serve. The **UPP Foundation Civic University Commission** (2019) argued that universities must reorient their missions to address local challenges, promote social cohesion, and support democratic participation. This vision was operationalised through the **Civic University Network**, which now includes over 60 UK institutions committed to civic engagement as a strategic priority (Goddard et al., 2019).

Curriculum is central to this agenda. The Commission's report made it clear that civic engagement should not be confined to outreach or volunteering, it must be embedded in teaching and learning. This requires universities to rethink how they design programmes, assess learning, and collaborate with external partners.

Higher Education and Research Act 2017

The **Higher Education and Research Act 2017** formalised the expectation that universities contribute to public engagement. It established the **Office for Students (OfS)** as the regulator for higher education in England, with a remit that includes promoting student choice, widening participation, and ensuring value for money (Department for Education, 2017). While the Act does not mandate civic curriculum, it creates the conditions for it by linking institutional funding and reputation to demonstrable public impact.

The OfS has since launched initiatives to support civic engagement, including the **Challenge Competition for Student Engagement in Civic Life**, which funds projects that integrate democratic education into academic programmes. These initiatives signal a policy shift: civic engagement is no longer an optional extra, it is part of the accountability framework.

Curriculum Reform and Citizenship Education

The UK's broader education policy also supports civic curriculum innovation. The **Crick Report** (1998) laid the foundation for citizenship education in schools, arguing that democratic literacy should be a core educational outcome. While its implementation in higher education has been uneven, the principles remain influential.

More recently, the **Electoral Commission** and the **Department for Education** have called for renewed efforts to promote civic understanding among young people, particularly in light of declining voter turnout and rising political disengagement (Electoral Commission, 2022). These concerns have prompted universities to explore how academic programmes can foster civic knowledge, critical thinking, and public participation.

Local Government and Devolution

Local education authorities also play a role in shaping civic curriculum. The UK's devolution agenda has given local councils greater responsibility for education, skills, and community development. This creates opportunities for universities to collaborate with local authorities on curriculum design that reflects regional priorities.

For example, the **Greater Manchester Combined Authority** has partnered with local universities to develop modules on urban governance, climate resilience, and inclusive growth. These modules are co-designed with council officers and embedded into undergraduate programmes, demonstrating how policy alignment can drive curriculum innovation (GMCA, 2023).

Funding and Accountability

Funding mechanisms are increasingly tied to civic outcomes. The **Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)**, introduced by Research England, evaluates universities based on their engagement with external partners, including local communities. While KEF focuses primarily on research and enterprise, its metrics encourage institutions to consider how teaching and curriculum contribute to civic goals (Research England, 2021).

Similarly, the **Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)** now includes criteria related to student engagement and societal impact. Institutions that demonstrate innovative civic curriculum design may be rewarded with higher TEF ratings, which influence funding and student recruitment.

The policy context is clear: UK universities are being asked to do more than educate, they are being asked to engage. Civic curriculum innovation is not just a pedagogical choice; it is a strategic response to national priorities around equity, inclusion, and democratic renewal. This research sits squarely within that context, offering empirical insight into how policy aspirations are being translated into academic practice.

Empirical Findings

This section presents the empirical evidence gathered through qualitative interviews, institutional case studies, and quantitative analysis of student outcomes. The findings are organised into four thematic areas: institutional collaboration, curriculum design, student outcomes, and community impact. Together, they offer a detailed picture of how civic engagement is being embedded into academic programmes across UK higher education.

Institutional Collaboration

One of the clearest patterns to emerge from the data is the importance of sustained collaboration between universities and local education authorities. These partnerships are not incidental, they are foundational to curriculum innovation. Interviewees consistently emphasised that civic curriculum design requires trust, shared goals, and long-term engagement (Goddard et al., 2019).

At Keele University, for example, the “Civic Curriculum Compact” was developed jointly with Staffordshire County Council. This agreement outlines shared priorities, such as youth participation, environmental justice, and digital inclusion, and commits both parties to co-designing modules that reflect these themes. The compact is reviewed annually and includes joint evaluation metrics, ensuring accountability on both sides.

Similarly, the University of Nottingham has embedded civic engagement into its strategic plan through the “Local Impact Framework,” which includes curriculum targets linked to community needs. Local education officers are invited to curriculum planning meetings, and students participate in community consultations as part of their coursework.

These examples show that institutional collaboration is not just a logistical arrangement, it’s a pedagogical strategy. It ensures that civic engagement is not abstract, but grounded in the realities of local governance and public service.

Curriculum Design and Pedagogy

The second theme concerns how civic engagement is embedded into curriculum content and pedagogy. Across the case studies, three dominant models emerged:

1. **Embedded Modules:** Civic themes are integrated into existing modules. For example, Queen Mary University’s “Public Policy and Participation” module includes a civic placement where students work with local councils to analyse policy documents and propose reforms.
2. **Co-Created Modules:** New modules are developed in partnership with community organisations. At the University of Bristol, the “Civic Innovation Lab” module was co-designed with local charities and includes project-based learning focused on housing, transport, and health equity.

3. **Cross-Disciplinary Initiatives:** Civic engagement is used to bridge disciplines. Keele's "Community Change" module brings together students from sociology, politics, and environmental science to work on local sustainability projects.

Pedagogically, these modules rely heavily on experiential learning. Students engage in fieldwork, conduct interviews, attend council meetings, and produce outputs that are assessed both academically and civically. Reflection is a core component, students are required to critically analyse their role, impact, and learning process (Kolb, 1984; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Importantly, these modules are credit-bearing and embedded within degree programmes. They are not extracurricular or optional. This signals a shift in institutional priorities: civic engagement is being treated as a legitimate academic outcome.

Student Outcomes

Quantitative data from the **National Citizenship Education Study (NCES)** support the qualitative findings. Students who participated in civic engagement modules scored significantly higher on measures of political efficacy, civic knowledge, and community participation compared to peers in traditional programmes (ACT, 2025).

Regression analysis controlling for socio-economic background, ethnicity, and prior civic experience showed that participation in civic modules was a strong predictor of increased civic confidence and likelihood of future engagement. These effects were particularly pronounced among students from underrepresented groups, suggesting that civic curriculum can help close participation gaps (Biesta, 2011; Burke, 2012).

Student testimonials reinforce these findings:

"I didn't just learn about democracy, I practised it. Sitting in council meetings, drafting policy briefs, and seeing my work actually influence decisions was transformative."
- Final-year Politics student, University of Nottingham

"Before this module, I never saw myself as someone who could make change. Now I'm volunteering with a local housing charity and thinking about a career in public service."
- Sociology student, University of Bristol

"The civic engagement module was the first time I felt my degree connected to the real world. It made me feel like my education mattered, not just to me, but to my community."
- Law student, Queen Mary University of London

"I come from a working-class background and always felt out of place at university. This module helped me see that my experience is valid, and that I can use it to contribute to something bigger."
- Education student, University of Sunderland

These voices illustrate the transformative potential of civic curriculum. Students are not just acquiring knowledge, they are developing agency, purpose, and a sense of belonging.

Community Impact

The final theme concerns the impact on communities. While this study focused primarily on academic outcomes, interviews with local education officers and community partners revealed tangible benefits.

Community organisations reported increased capacity, better access to research, and stronger relationships with universities. Local councils noted that student projects often provided fresh perspectives and practical recommendations that informed policy decisions.

For example, in Nottingham, student-led research on youth homelessness was used by the local authority to revise its outreach strategy. In Bristol, students working on transport equity produced a report that was cited in a council planning document.

One council officer remarked:

“These students brought energy, insight, and diligence. Their work didn’t just tick a box, it made a difference.”

Challenges

While the empirical findings demonstrate the potential of community-based curriculum innovation, they also reveal a set of persistent challenges. These are not minor obstacles, they are structural tensions that shape how civic engagement is understood, implemented, and sustained within UK higher education. This section outlines five key challenges: time and resource constraints, curricular rigidity, staff capacity, institutional culture, and student scepticism.

Time and Resource Constraints

The most frequently cited barrier by both academic staff and local education officers was the lack of time and resources to support meaningful collaboration. Co-designing modules with community partners requires sustained engagement, iterative planning, and logistical coordination, all of which demand time that many educators simply do not have (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998).

One curriculum lead at Queen Mary University noted:

“We’re expected to build these partnerships, redesign modules, and assess civic outcomes, but we’re doing it on top of everything else. There’s no dedicated time or funding.”

This challenge is compounded by the fact that community organisations often operate with limited capacity. While they are eager to collaborate, they may lack the infrastructure to engage consistently with universities. Without institutional support, such as civic engagement coordinators or partnership grants, these collaborations risk becoming superficial or unsustainable.

Curricular Rigidity

Another major barrier is the rigidity of existing curriculum structures. Many academic programmes are tightly bound by disciplinary norms, accreditation requirements, and assessment frameworks that leave little room for civic innovation (Yemini et al., 2022). Embedding experiential, community-based learning often requires changes to learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and module formats, changes that can be difficult to push through institutional approval processes.

At the University of Bristol, a proposed civic module was delayed for over a year due to concerns about “academic coherence” and “assessment validity.” These concerns reflect a broader tension: civic engagement challenges traditional notions of academic rigour, and institutions are still grappling with how to evaluate it fairly.

Staff Capacity and Training

Even where institutional support exists, staff capacity remains a challenge. Many educators lack the training or confidence to design and deliver civic modules. They may be experts in their discipline but unfamiliar with community-based pedagogy, participatory research methods, or civic assessment tools (Rafferty, 2025).

This gap is not just technical, it's philosophical. Civic pedagogy requires a shift in mindset from content delivery to co-creation, from authority to facilitation. Without professional development and peer support, staff may struggle to make this transition.

One lecturer at Keele University reflected:

“I wanted to do more civic work, but I didn't know where to start. I wasn't trained for this kind of teaching, and I didn't want to do it badly.”

This highlights the need for structured training programmes, communities of practice, and institutional recognition of civic teaching as a legitimate academic endeavour.

Institutional Culture

Beyond individual capacity, institutional culture can be a barrier. In some universities, civic engagement is still seen as peripheral, a nice-to-have rather than a core academic concern. This marginalisation affects funding decisions, promotion criteria, and strategic priorities.

Several interviewees described a “two-tier” system where research and traditional teaching are valued more highly than civic work. This creates disincentives for staff to invest in civic curriculum, especially when it does not contribute directly to REF outputs or student satisfaction scores.

As one senior lecturer put it:

“You're told civic engagement matters, but when it comes to promotion or funding, it's nowhere to be seen.”

Changing this culture requires leadership. Universities must embed civic engagement into their strategic plans, reward civic teaching in promotion frameworks, and allocate resources to support curriculum innovation.

Student Scepticism and Uneven Engagement

Finally, student engagement is not guaranteed. While many students embrace civic modules, others are sceptical. They may see civic work as irrelevant to their career goals, or feel uncomfortable engaging with unfamiliar communities. This is particularly true in disciplines where civic engagement is not traditionally emphasised, such as STEM or finance.

Moreover, engagement is uneven across student groups. Students from underrepresented backgrounds often show strong interest in civic modules, seeing them as a way to connect their lived experience with academic study. But others may lack the motivation or confidence to participate fully.

One student from a business programme remarked:

“I signed up for the civic module because it was compulsory. I didn't really see the point, it felt like a distraction from my core studies.”

This highlights the need for thoughtful module design, clear communication of purpose, and inclusive pedagogical strategies that support all students.

The major fact is that, these challenges are real, but they are not insurmountable. They reflect the growing pains of a sector in transition, from knowledge transmission to civic transformation. Addressing them requires institutional commitment, policy alignment, and a willingness to rethink what education is for.

Solutions to Challenges

While the potential of community-based curriculum innovation is clear, its implementation is constrained by several structural and pedagogical challenges. Addressing these barriers requires targeted, practical solutions that are both scalable and context-sensitive.

1. Time and Resource Constraints

Challenge: Co-designing civic modules demands time, funding, and sustained engagement, resources that are often scarce in both universities and community organisations (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998).

Solution: Institutions should establish dedicated civic engagement units or coordinators whose role is to manage partnerships, support curriculum development, and facilitate logistics. Funding streams such as the Office for Students' civic engagement grants can be leveraged to support these roles (Office for Students, 2023). Embedding civic work into workload models and recognising it in performance reviews would also legitimise the time investment.

2. Curricular Rigidity

Challenge: Existing programme structures often resist change, especially when civic modules challenge disciplinary norms or assessment conventions (Yemini et al., 2022).

Solution: Universities should revise curriculum approval processes to allow for greater flexibility in module design. Pilot schemes and temporary accreditation pathways can be used to trial civic modules before full integration. Cross-institutional working groups can help share templates and evaluation frameworks that meet both academic and civic standards.

3. Staff Capacity and Training

Challenge: Many educators lack the pedagogical tools or confidence to deliver civic content effectively (Rafferty, 2025).

Solution: Professional development programmes focused on civic pedagogy, experiential learning, and community-based research should be offered regularly. Peer mentoring and communities of practice can support staff in adapting their teaching. Institutions should also include civic engagement competencies in teaching qualifications and CPD frameworks.

4. Institutional Culture

Challenge: Civic engagement is often marginalised within university cultures that prioritise research outputs and traditional teaching metrics.

Solution: Senior leadership must embed civic engagement into strategic plans, promotion criteria, and funding decisions. Recognition schemes, such as civic teaching awards or impact fellowships, can help elevate the status of civic work. Aligning civic curriculum with institutional missions and national frameworks like the KEF and TEF reinforces its legitimacy (Research England, 2021).

5. Student Scepticism and Uneven Engagement

Challenge: Not all students see the relevance of civic modules, and engagement varies across disciplines and demographics.

Solution: Civic modules should be clearly framed in terms of transferable skills, employability, and social relevance. Assessment should reflect both academic rigour and civic impact. Inclusive pedagogical strategies, such as scaffolded reflection, peer collaboration, and community storytelling, can help engage diverse learners. Where possible, students should have choice in how they engage, allowing for differentiated pathways.

Discussion

Here's what matters: community-based curriculum innovation is not just a pedagogical experiment, it's a redefinition of what higher education is for. The findings of this study show that when universities embed civic engagement into academic programmes, they do more than improve student outcomes. They reposition themselves as civic institutions, accountable to the communities they serve. This shift is both philosophical and practical. Philosophically, it challenges the idea of the university as a detached producer of knowledge. Instead, it embraces a model where knowledge is co-created, situated, and socially responsive (Biesta, 2011; Freire, 1970). Practically, it requires changes in curriculum design, institutional structures, and pedagogical practice.

The integration of civic engagement into curriculum is not without tension. It disrupts traditional hierarchies, blurs disciplinary boundaries, and demands new forms of collaboration. But these tensions are productive. They force institutions to confront questions of relevance, equity, and impact.

One of the most striking findings is the transformative effect on students. Civic modules do not just teach content, they cultivate agency. Students learn to navigate complexity, engage with difference, and act with purpose. For many, these modules are the first time they see their education as connected to the world beyond the university.

This is especially important in the UK context, where higher education faces growing scrutiny over its social value. Civic curriculum innovation offers a concrete response. It shows how universities can contribute to democratic renewal, social cohesion, and local resilience, not through abstract commitments, but through the everyday work of teaching and learning.

The study also highlights the importance of institutional collaboration. When universities work with local education authorities, they gain access to community knowledge, policy insight, and practical expertise. These partnerships enrich the curriculum and ensure that civic engagement is grounded in real-world challenges.

However, the challenges are real. Time constraints, curricular rigidity, and institutional inertia can undermine even the most promising initiatives. Addressing these barriers requires leadership, investment, and a willingness to rethink entrenched practices.

In submission, civic curriculum innovation is not a niche concern. It is central to the future of higher education. It offers a model that is inclusive, engaged, and impactful. This study provides evidence that such a model is not only desirable, it is achievable.

Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for policy, practice, and pedagogy in UK higher education. Community-based curriculum innovation is not just a promising idea, it is a viable model for transforming how universities engage with society. But for it to move from the margins to the mainstream, several strategic shifts are required.

For Universities

Institutions must treat civic engagement as a core academic concern, not an extracurricular add-on. This means embedding civic modules across disciplines, allocating resources to support partnership development, and recognising civic teaching in promotion and workload models. Universities should also invest in infrastructure, such as civic engagement offices, community liaison roles, and digital platforms for collaboration, that make sustained partnerships possible (Goddard et al., 2019).

Strategically, civic curriculum should be aligned with institutional missions and national frameworks like the **Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)** and **Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)**. Doing so not only legitimises civic work but positions it as a contributor to institutional reputation and funding (Research England, 2021).

For Educators

Educators need support to design and deliver civic modules. This includes professional development in civic pedagogy, experiential learning, and community-based research. Institutions should create communities of practice where staff can share resources, reflect on challenges, and co-develop teaching strategies. Importantly, civic teaching should be recognised as intellectually rigorous and pedagogically complex, not as a soft or secondary form of academic labour (Rafferty, 2025).

Educators also need space to experiment. Pilot modules, flexible assessment frameworks, and iterative design processes can help staff build confidence and refine their approach. Civic curriculum is not one-size-fits-all, it must be responsive to local context, student demographics, and disciplinary norms.

For Students

Students must be positioned not just as learners but as civic actors. This requires curriculum that is inclusive, relevant, and empowering. Civic modules should be framed in terms of transferable skills, critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving as well as social impact. Assessment should reflect both academic rigour and civic contribution, allowing students to see the value of their work beyond the classroom (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Institutions should also provide differentiated pathways for engagement. Not all students will want to work directly with communities, but all should have the opportunity to explore civic themes in ways that suit their interests and strengths. This might include policy analysis, digital activism, or creative storytelling.

For Policymakers

Policymakers must create conditions that support civic curriculum innovation. This includes funding mechanisms that reward collaboration, regulatory frameworks that allow curricular flexibility, and accountability systems that recognise civic impact. The **Office for**

Students, Department for Education, and Electoral Commission all have roles to play in promoting civic literacy and democratic education across the sector (Electoral Commission, 2022).

Policy should also support partnerships between universities and local authorities. Devolution has created opportunities for regional collaboration, but these need to be formalised and resourced. Civic curriculum can be a powerful tool for local development, but only if supported by coherent policy.

Summary of Implications

Community-based curriculum innovation has wide-reaching implications for universities, educators, students, and policymakers. For universities, it demands structural commitment, embedding civic modules across disciplines, aligning them with national frameworks like TEF and KEF, and investing in infrastructure to support sustained partnerships. Educators need targeted training in civic pedagogy and experiential learning, along with institutional recognition of civic teaching as rigorous academic work. For students, civic modules must be inclusive, relevant, and framed around both social impact and transferable skills. Policymakers must create enabling conditions through funding, flexible regulation, and support for university–local authority collaboration. Civic curriculum is not a peripheral concern, it’s a strategic lever for transforming higher education into a socially engaged, democratically responsive sector.

Role of Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

The **TEF** is a national scheme run by the **Office for Students (OfS)** that assesses the quality of teaching, learning, and student outcomes in higher education institutions across England. It’s designed to help students make informed choices and to encourage universities to improve the quality of their teaching.

TEF evaluates institutions based on:

- **Student experience:** including teaching quality, academic support, and learning resources.
- **Student outcomes:** such as progression to employment or further study.
- **Evidence submissions:** where universities explain how they support teaching excellence and student success.

Institutions are rated as **Gold, Silver, or Bronze**, with higher ratings often influencing reputation, recruitment, and funding. While TEF doesn’t explicitly require civic engagement, it increasingly values **student agency, real-world learning, and inclusive pedagogy**, all of which are central to civic curriculum innovation (Office for Students, 2023).

Role of Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)

The **KEF**, managed by **Research England**, measures how effectively universities engage with external partners, businesses, charities, local authorities, and the wider public. It’s part of a broader push to ensure that publicly funded research delivers tangible benefits to society.

KEF evaluates performance across seven key areas:

- **Public and community engagement**
- **Research partnerships**

- **Working with business**
- **Skills, enterprise, and entrepreneurship**
- **Local growth and regeneration**
- **Intellectual property and commercialisation**
- **Continuing professional development and consultancy**

For civic curriculum innovation, **KEF's public and community engagement strand is especially relevant**. It encourages universities to collaborate with local stakeholders, share knowledge beyond academia, and contribute to regional development. Civic modules that involve students in community-based research or policy work directly support KEF goals (Research England, 2021).

TEF and KEF are not just bureaucratic frameworks, they're levers for change. They reward institutions that prioritise teaching quality, community engagement, and societal impact. Civic curriculum innovation aligns with both, making it not only pedagogically valuable but strategically smart.

CONCLUSION

Community-based curriculum innovation is not a peripheral experiment, it is a strategic reimagining of higher education's civic role. This study has shown that when universities collaborate with local education authorities to embed civic engagement into academic programmes, they do more than enhance teaching, they transform the relationship between institutions and society.

The evidence is clear. Civic modules improve student outcomes, enhance democratic participation, and strengthen community ties. Students report increased agency, relevance, and belonging. Community partners gain access to research, capacity, and fresh perspectives. Universities become more accountable, more responsive, and more embedded in the public realm.

But this transformation is not automatic. It requires institutional commitment, pedagogical courage, and policy alignment. Challenges such as time constraints, curricular rigidity, and uneven engagement must be addressed through strategic investment, flexible frameworks, and inclusive design. Solutions exist and they are already being tested in universities across the UK.

The policy context supports this shift. Frameworks like the **Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)** and **Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)** reward institutions that prioritise public value and civic impact (Office for Students, 2023; Research England, 2021). Civic curriculum innovation aligns with these priorities, offering a model that is both academically rigorous and socially relevant.

If higher education is to remain relevant in a changing society, it must embrace its civic mission. That mission begins in the curriculum. This study offers a roadmap for how it can be realised, through collaboration, co-creation, and a commitment to education as a public good.

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