

# Civic Mission and Innovation


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## Innovation Strategies for Wales

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The Learned Society of Wales is currently convening a programme of activities to help inform and improve innovation policies and practices in Wales.

This is a timely programme given the publication of the BEIS [Innovation Strategy for the UK](#), the [Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill](#), and the increasing importance of a place-based agenda. The [HM Treasury's Comprehensive Spending Review 2021](#) makes a strong commitment to increasing R&D funding to £20 billion by 2024-25, a 35% increase on current funding levels.

The forthcoming UK Government White Paper on Levelling Up will also outline a plan to ensure that an increased proportion of government spending on R&D over the next three years is invested outside the Greater South East of the UK. If achieved, this will see several billions of additional funding outside the golden triangle and go a long way to addressing the previously identified deficit, as noted in Thomas Forth and Richard A.L. Jones's [The Missing 4 Billion: Making R&D work for the whole UK](#) report for Nesta, 2020. The [Nurse Review of the research, development and innovation organisational landscape](#) will also likely prompt further shifts in BEIS policy.

At the same time, the Welsh Government is reviewing its innovation policies and is currently developing a new integrated cross-governmental strategy for innovation. The [Tertiary Education and Research Bill \(Wales\)](#) is progressing through the Senedd, proposing reforms to the regulation and funding of post-16 education and research under a new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (C-TER), which would supersede the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

Wales is also adapting to a funding landscape without European Structural Funds, which had been significant in developing Wales's research and innovation capacity and collaborative potential. The new Wales Innovation Network (WIN) will work to leverage the diversity of Welsh institutions through collaborative activity.

In April the Society hosted the fifth in the series of roundtable discussions, which explored higher education civic mission and its intersections with innovation.

All roundtable sessions are conducted under Chatham House rules, and this is the anonymised and unattributed report of key points from the fourth discussion.

The formalisation of the ‘third mission’ of universities alongside teaching and research took shape in UK policy in the late 1990s but has been largely sidelined (particularly the social or civic dimension) for much of the subsequent period. The rising importance placed on research impact has gone some way to encouraging universities to reflect more widely on their societal responsibilities and their engagement with local communities though this remains an uneven terrain. At the most advanced level, ‘civic universities’ represent a normative model of universities as institutions with a responsibility to contribute to the public good and in driving positive societal change.

In the latest Learned Society of Wales roundtable, discussions centred on the nature of civic mission and its place in the contemporary strategy and objectives of universities, examples of how universities are reflecting these priorities in particular activities, and how these might contribute to the wider innovation ecosystem.

### **What is civic mission?**

The idea of civic mission emphasizes the role of higher education institutions in fostering positive changes in social, economic, environmental, and cultural aspects of the cities/towns they are part of.

In England, the civic mission idea was formalised by establishing the Network for the Civic University and Civic Fund, which was one of the key recommendations of the 2018 Civic University Commission led by Lord Kerslake. The report stressed that the key feature of a civic university is having a clear strategy rooted in the analysis of how and why its activities contribute to a civic role.

### **The Wales context**

Development of the understanding of civic mission in Wales has been informed by national policies where it is defined by the Welsh government as

action for the purpose of promoting or improving the economic, social, environmental or cultural well-being of Wales and beyond, including action that may achieve any of the well-being goals in section 4 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

The Tertiary Education and Research (TER) Wales Bill establishes civic mission as a strategic priority for the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and builds on HEFCW’s work in this area. In 2016, the then Cabinet Minister for Education Kirsty Williams challenged universities to ‘[re-capture and re-invent](#)’ a civic mission, and since then HEFCW has provided funding to support the cultivation of connections between universities and their communities. In 2020, Universities Wales established a Civic Mission network, which has developed a civic mission framework for the HE sector in Wales.

The framework is structured around five themes:

- Leading place – engaging with other key civic leaders at a national and community level
- Contributing to raising educational standards by developing links with schools, colleges and other learning environments
- Developing active citizenship
- Acting as the engine of social enterprise, business skills and employability
- Responding to global issues

The civic mission space provides opportunities for innovation in its broadest sense, as the case studies illustrated, and is an increasingly significant aspect of local innovation ecosystems.

## **Manchester University and Civic University Agreement for GMCA**

The University of Manchester is actively engaged in promoting the ethos of civic mission at both national and the regional level. At the UK level for example, it played a key role in setting up the UK-wide Civic University Network, whilst at the regional level it led the establishment of [the Civic University Agreement for the area of Greater Manchester \(GM\)](#) – the joint action plan between five regional universities (University of Manchester, University of Bolton, University of Salford, Manchester Metropolitan University, Royal Northern College of Music), and the office of the mayor of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. The ambition of the agreement is to break down barriers and improve the lives of residents of the area.

Prior to establishing a formal regional civic mission agreement, the University and its partners conducted extensive research to decide about the priority areas that the civic mission should focus on in the GM area. For example, the citizens survey of ten boroughs sought to understand the key socio-economic concerns of the GM residents, as well as whether and how they value the universities in the region. The development of the approach has been informed by recognition of the uneven economic geography and disparities in life expectancy within GM region with the more prosperous and higher productivity areas in the south-west counterbalanced by low productivity town centres that have yet to recover from deindustrialisation. The Agreement recognises that poor health leads to poor productivity, and that public health and economic inequalities issues cannot be uncoupled and need to be addressed together.

The agreement has catalysed the development of [Innovation Greater Manchester](#). This has identified six priority areas of action: reducing

inequalities, education and skills, jobs and growth, the digital economy, net zero, and the creative and cultural economy. In [evidence to the](#) House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee's inquiry on *The role of technology, research and innovation in the COVID-19 recovery* in March 2021, Greater Manchester Combined Authority outlined that the R&D Place strategy and the Innovation Strategy created "an opportunity for an innovation deal with places like Greater Manchester to align local and national priorities around people, places, and assets, and to ensure city-regions can play an active role in Global Britain and Levelling Up". The sustainable model recognises that innovation ecosystems cannot be led by a top-down model, and that new arrangements, supported by and designed with businesses, investors, R&D organisations, and local and UK government will help to ensure that investment is targeted in the right places.

Innovation GM is the city-region's offer to work with UK Government to boost research and development. It has received a share of the UK government's £100 million [Innovation Accelerator](#) pilot scheme and offers a potential model that can be adopted by other regions to drive economic recovery through collaborative innovation.

## **Wrexham Glyndwr University and Civic Mission Partnership Strategy**

The approach to civic mission taken by Wrexham Glyndwr University reflects the policy context in Wales and the specificity of the University and its locality. The university puts more emphasis on widening participation and engagement across region, and the activities bore some contrasts with those being led in Greater Manchester by a research-intensive university.

The main aim of the civic mission of Wrexham Glyndwr University and its partners is to contribute to ending social inequalities in north Wales by 2030. This goal was informed by consultations with thirty leaders from public, private and third sector across north Wales region. This ambitious goal is to be reached by exploring, co-creating, testing and delivering new approaches in the following three core areas: leadership and governance, building community resilience and keeping well. The University sees itself primarily as an enabler of collective action in the region, mainly through creating connections between partners, researching, developing and delivering solutions.

For example, in the core area of leadership and governance, the university created a [North Wales Public Service Lab](#) project, through which they offer expertise around whole system thinking and space for conversations, peer support and mutual encouragement for leaders. Another example is the creation of a Well-being Insight Partnership across all public service boards in North Wales to work together on well-being assessments required by the law in Wales. In the area of building community resilience, the project called [North Wales Social Care and Well-being Improvement Collaborative](#) was created to enable six local authorities in North Wales, as well as other partners, to improve the efficiency of the social care system.

It was noted that one of the main positive outcomes of this highly collaborative approach was the visible increase of trust between various institutions and leaders across north Wales. This is one of the ways in which engaging under a civic mission banner can develop resources which have wider value across the ecosystem.

## Drivers of civic mission activities

The discussion recognised that it can be a challenge for universities to simultaneously foreground REF excellence and civic impact. It was noted that the UK funding councils' consultation on Future Assessment Research Programmes provided the opportunity to reflect on definitions of excellence, and to consider how a broader range of activities which demonstrate the public value of higher education could be captured in future. The question of whether, and if so, how social responsibility and civic activity might be quantified in a context that often places considerable weight on performance indicators was also raised.

It was suggested that the culture of HE better needs to accommodate civic mission as part of academic careers, and consideration was given to the career pathway that could support the activity. There were some concerns that absorbing civic mission into institutional mechanisms may potentially alter the altruistic and organic nature of some existing activities, and that the next step in the progression of a nationwide HE civic mission will need to see a shift in institutional approach. Experience was shared of the difficulties in navigating the space between the altruistic intentions of staff delivering civic mission projects, and the university management view of what such projects should achieve.

The role of research funders to incentivise researchers to work with communities and partners to explore what research would be most valued and is most needed was noted, as this has potential to contribute to public value and public good. The increasing awareness of the importance of place and the (science) policy discourses of levelling up and rebalancing research and innovation funding may help to encourage a more locally attuned

approach by universities. However, while project funding for civic mission activity is welcome, the nature of project funding can curtail long-lasting impacts, and it does not necessarily support civic mission career pathways.

The discussion recognised that progress has been made in terms of funding arrangements for civic mission in Wales, in particular via the Research Wales Innovation Fund, but that there is more to do. The TER Bill's positioning of civic mission as a strategic priority was seen as an exciting opportunity that will hopefully see the further investment in civic mission activities across the HE sector in Wales. It was suggested that core funding for civic mission would function to recognise the value of the work and position it at the same level as teaching and research, would provide further stability, and that it would serve to better sustain the relationships and connections that are critical to successful civic mission activity.

### **Civic Mission and the Innovation Ecosystem**

Civic mission activities can help to support stronger innovation ecosystems, but in order to maximise this potential it was felt that universities may need to change their approach, and potentially invert usual practice. The intersection of civic mission and innovation is a space to identify problems and work to develop solutions.

There was an awareness that universities can at times seem to exist in a parallel universe, removed from their locality. The two case studies that framed the discussion, although starting from different positions, both stressed the importance of assessing the landscape, actively asking communities and organisations what is needed, and listening to the responses to build trust and develop programmes of work. Civic mission relies on a

dialogue and an exchange of information and knowledge. In the further discussion, the approach of Swansea University was highlighted; here a newly established Civic Mission and Culture Board has been developing a process for co-creating a new civic mission strategy with staff, students and citizens.

Universities may need to be proactive and flexible in working to develop and deliver civic mission strategies, and potentially be prepared to engage with communities that they have not connected with previously – communities with low levels of HE participation, or local SMEs who do not interact with universities or development agencies. Universities have an important role as enablers, conveners and catalysts within their locales, and civic mission activities will benefit from being grounded in co-production with a range of communities and audiences – local, regional, national and international. Initial benefits of this approach may often initially be indirect, but direct benefits emerge in the longer term. It was also noted that impacts are not limited to the economic, but that socio-cultural benefits are also significant.

### **Pooling strengths**

The five universities involved in the GM Civic University Agreement include the large and research intensive University of Manchester as well as both smaller and much less research intensive institutions with important distinctive strengths of their own. The agreement is the foundation of a partnership which it is hoped will facilitate the pooling of strengths and resources to achieve the shared goals.

The Welsh HE sector also has a range of different types of institutions – nine HEIs ranging from Russell Group research



intensive, to smaller and less research intensive organisations. While the Wales Civic Mission Network has played an important role in the initial phase of developing more impactful civic mission activity, there is scope for more pooling and sharing of knowledge, 'what works', and resources, and smaller institutions in particular have much to offer from their partnership working models. There are also parts of Wales that do not have a HEI presence, and it is important that civic mission activities extend to these areas to ensure a nationwide approach, and that potentially the role of FE colleges within civic mission is explored further.

While civic mission is often conceptualised as a contribution to a university's immediate locality, there is also potential for universities to contribute to broader civic agendas at regional, national (Wales and UK) and international levels.

### **Mission Challenges for Wales?**

The discussion concluded with a consideration of the next steps for civic mission's role in the future of innovation in Wales. There was broad agreement that civic mission deserves a higher profile to better showcase what it can achieve, and to promote opportunities to potential partners. It was suggested that the term itself might benefit from being unpacked. There has been increasing interest in a Mission Approach to innovation and it is interesting to consider further how this might be applied to civic mission concerns. Doing so potentially takes the civic mission agenda into spaces that are complementary to other areas of the innovation ecosystem, for example public service innovation, and this may help to extrapolate its potential.

The roundtable concluded with consideration of one specific potential mission that would embrace civic and wider concerns. Reflecting

on the ambitions of the new school curriculum for Wales, and the developments that will flow from the TER Bill, it was posited that there could be scope for universities to actively support the work of schools. The long-term ambitions of the curriculum, and the seven wellbeing goals of the Future Generations legislation could provide a framework for developing a specific 'Wales grand challenge' scheme to support civic mission activity, which could prompt a nationwide commitment to collaboration and partnership to develop creative and innovative solutions for Wales. This broader and more holistic thinking will be valuable in ensuring that Wales works to deliver on its aspirations as an innovative nation.

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