THE POST 18 PROJECT

CIVIC AT THE CROSSROADS:

WHO OWNS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND THEIR PLACES?

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ABOUT THE POST-18 PROJECT

The Post-18 Project provides fresh thinking around higher learning for adult lives, seeking to shape the policy environment around universities and colleges and provide practical solutions for anyone with a stake in the success of post-18 education in the UK.

We seek to help shape the policy environment with practical ideas, helpful research, big thoughts and new ways to think about how post-18 education can be funded, the system configured, and how institutions relate to the outside world as well as their own staff and students.

The system needs reform. Our aim is to provide the foundations for change, and capacity within the sector itself to have the conversation about the how, what, when and why of it.

The Post-18 Project is part of **Thesis** – *a house of higher education ideas*, alongside

- **Wonkhe** the home of the UK higher education debate
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DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

Every university changes the place it sits in. Its students rent the houses and fill the pubs; its staff spend their wages in the high street; its graduates stay, or leave. Most of that impact nobody planned. It is an output nobody authored – the by-product of a system that tells universities to compete for students and research income, and counts the local consequences after the fact.

The civic university movement has spent the best part of a decade trying to turn that into something intentional: a contribution a university chooses to make, to a place it has taken the trouble to understand. Richard Brabner has been at the heart of that work since the Civic University Commission, and this Policy Signal draws on his interviews with the people who lead it. What they describe is a movement that has won the moral argument and is losing ground anyway. Civic survives on individual leaders acting against the grain – and the system penalises them for it. That is not a system failing to do what it says. It is a system actually doing the opposite.

Richard's diagnosis is one The Post-18 Project keeps arriving at from different directions. Every lever he describes is set sensibly for another purpose, by someone with no responsibility for place. The OfS regulates for competition, because the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 told it to.[1] The REF pays out in a currency the outside world doesn't trade in. Nobody is empowered to join universities up with local workforce needs. Every part of the system is doing its job; nobody's job is the whole. We found the same pattern in Whitehall in *A Ministry for Manchesterism*,[2] and across the system as a whole in *Blood, Debt, Toil and Arrears*.[3]

So the question this paper asks is not "how do we incentivise civic?" but "who owns the relationship between a university and its place?" – and why the answer, at the moment, is nobody. Its answer is a constitution-in-embryo for place: a statutory duty on the OfS as the anchor, Civic University Agreements as the instrument, local and regional government as the counterparty, and regional networks as the actor.

This is an education question, not just an economic one. Place is where the system's unowned outputs land: whether graduates stay, whether good tertiary provision is within reach of home, whether skills and the labour market ever meet. None of it comes free, and some of it will sit uncomfortably with institutions that prize their autonomy and with a regulator built for something else. But goodwill alone won't wash. Universities cannot be asked to do more for place while the system rewards the opposite – and *Rewiring the State* gives the government both the reason and the moment to fix that.[4]

Professor John Blake
Director, The Post-18 Project

[1] Higher Education and Research Act 2017, c. 29, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents
[2] John Blake, *A Ministry for Manchesterism* (The Post-18 Project, 29 June 2026), post18.co.uk/ministry-for-manchesterism/
[3] John Blake, *Blood, Debt, Toil and Arrears* (The Post-18 Project, 20 April 2026), post18.co.uk/blood-debt-toil-and-arrears/
[4] *Rewiring the State: Statement from the Cabinet* (31 July 2026), assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a6c7acf0ddb7e4831c62abd/REWIRING_THE_STATE_-_CABINET_STATEMENT.pdf

MESSAGE IN A MINUTE

The top line

Universities' civic role has had plenty of warm words from government and very little structural support. Every lever that shapes how universities behave – regulation, the REF, funding – was built for a different job, by people who answer for something other than place. No one owns the relationship between a university and its place, so civic work depends on goodwill, and it is the first thing to go when money is tight.

What should be done

Give the relationship an owner: a new statutory duty for the Office for Students to have regard to place, mandatory Civic University Agreements co-signed by local and regional government, and catalyst support for regional university networks. In the meantime, fix the incentives: tie the Strategic Priorities Grant and a larger, civic-linked HEIF to those agreements. For the longer term, make place a term of reference for any tertiary review, and bring higher education, skills and research into a single department.

The bottom line

Universities cannot be asked to do more for place while operating within a system that too often rewards the opposite. If civic is to become a core expectation, it must be treated as a core priority.

Civic 2.0

Civic 2.0 is a programme to engage national and regional policymakers in the economic and social role higher education institutions play in their towns, cities and regions. The programme aims to help politicians and policymakers come up with policies and incentives which enable this positive role to expand, helping the social and economic development of towns and cities up and down the country.

The partners of the programme include the Invest in UK University R&D Campaign hosted by Midlands Innovation, some of the founding university partners from the Civic University Network, including Birmingham, Newcastle and Queen Mary, and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE).

Methodology

The Policy Signal is based on research conducted by the author for Civic 2.0. Twenty recorded semi-structured interviews and two semi-structured meetings were held between January and March 2026 with higher education leaders and policymakers. Ten were with current or former vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors; the others were with executives of sector bodies and thought leaders on the place/civic agenda. The themes that emerged from the interviews form the basis of this Policy Signal, and all quotes are unattributed under the Chatham House Rule. The Policy Signal also draws on the author's experience of leading and shaping the civic university movement over the past eight years.

INTRODUCTION

In the opening months of Keir Starmer's Government there was renewed hope for the civic university movement. Not only did Bridget Phillipson's letter to Vice-Chancellors in the autumn of 2024 include the civic role as one of the Government's five priorities for higher education, but the Government's other key priorities – supporting economic growth and the access and opportunity agenda – had clear 'place' dimensions to them too.[5] It seemed as though the civic agenda might be given a new lease of life after the Covid years and the previous Government's failure to deliver on levelling-up. Yet, as one university leader said in a rather understated fashion: *"I'm a bit disappointed in government...I thought there was that sense in Bridget's letter that civic was one of the five things. I struggled to see how that's come drawn through to the white paper. Can't really see it there."* The same interviewee then offered a sage piece of advice: *"As ever, look at what they do, not what they say."*

This critique was prevalent amongst many of the university leaders, academics and policy makers interviewed as part of the Civic 2.0 initiative. These interviews were run primarily to help shape a strategy for Civic 2.0 – a programme to engage national and regional policymakers in the economic and social role higher education institutions play in their towns, cities and regions. The interviews also provide fascinating insights into the future of the civic agenda: what is working, what needs to improve, the barriers to civic engagement, the opportunities, and the policy ideas that could strengthen it.

There was a strong perception from the interviewees that civic is at a crossroads. The optimistic view, according to participants, is that the Civic University Commission and successor initiatives such as the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) have helped to revitalise the agenda. These national programmes "moved the dial" on how universities think about place. The main recommendation from the Commission – the establishment of Civic University Agreements, co-produced with local actors such as local authorities – was adopted by large swathes of the sector and has led to meaningful cultural change, as universities no longer see engagement with their city or region as a peripheral activity, but as core. Most significant of all was the perception that a moral consensus has taken root. Several participants said that they do 'civic' because it is the right thing to do, even if the financial climate makes delivery harder.

Having said that, most interviewees described a sector in survival mode, where inflation, the falling unit of resource, and the aftershocks of the pandemic and geopolitics have forced institutions to prioritise solvency over their place role. The university leader's critique of government – that rhetoric about place has not been matched by coherent policy or funding mechanisms – was common. Universities operate within regulatory systems that reward competition over collaboration, and civic work therefore remains largely voluntary – a "nice to have" when budgets allow, rather than a core expectation.

The interviews therefore highlighted a paradox at the heart of the civic agenda: it is a moral mission which is central to the future of higher education, while also in danger of

[5] Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education, letter to higher education leaders, 4 November 2024, https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2024/11/Letter-from-the-Education-Secretary-4.11.24.pdf

losing momentum because of the lack of incentives in the system. It is this paradox that has paralysed the place/civic agenda for some time. Successive governments have spoken positively about the role of universities in their places but have treated delivery as the universities' job, because a moral mission shouldn't require an incentive. Much of the university sector, meanwhile, recognises the importance of its civic role, but the fear of losing out in a market system which rewards institutions that follow the incentives is paramount, particularly when universities are in survival mode.

Compounding the moral/incentive paradox, the system has been designed with no independent agency responsible for the relationship between the university and its place. This has meant that the quality of partnerships is overly dependent on local leadership and relationships, rather than a structure or system which is embedded. As a result, partnerships and practice can be inconsistent across (and within) different regions. The ad hoc nature of devolution in the country also contributes to a broader system where regional partnerships are structurally more important in some places than others. Giving the relationship an owner is therefore the starting point for the recommendations in this paper.

On paper, at least, Andy Burnham's government offers something different. Someone who has not only spoken positively about the civic agenda but 'lived' it as Mayor of Greater Manchester. An advocate for devolution and local placemaking, when he gave oral evidence to the Civic University Commission several years ago, he called for a partnership between devolved government and universities to offer 'golden handcuffs' to students going into public sector careers as a way to enable graduate retention in regions outside of London.[6] Not then someone who relies on the 'invisible hand' or what we might regard today as the automatic benefit of universities in their places stimulating local economic growth through their presence and spending power, but someone who sees the value of intervention to enhance that role further. Someone who believes in an 'intentional' civic role. Someone who may be interested in creating the frameworks for a system which works for every region.

It is with this in mind that this Policy Signal for The Post-18 Project asks who should own the relationship between universities and their places, and what incentives should flow from that design change to enable universities and government to work in effective partnership, so that civic can, as the Secretary of State's letter in 2024 put it, 'form a core part of a renewed vision for the sector.'[7]

[6] UPP Foundation Civic University Commission, *Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places* (UPP Foundation, 2019), recommendation 8, www.upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf

[7] Phillipson, letter to higher education leaders, 4 November 2024.

THE DEFINITION CHALLENGE

Before we get to the barriers holding the civic university movement back, it is worth noting that the civic university agenda has long suffered from definitional ambiguity. For many it is synonymous with local community and place, though its geographic boundaries are often porous. For others, place is too restrictive – they build on the view of civic as citizenship, and have a 'social value' view of civic, which is less about geography than about the university's contribution to society. Civic is also seen by some as linked to cities, particularly if we hark back to the original 'civic universities' in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Does that mean that universities in towns or rural settings can't be 'civic'? And then there is the question about what civic universities do; with parts of the civic movement emphasising public and community engagement, and others focusing on economic impact.

The broad and varied definition of a civic university is a challenge. If it can mean almost anything, it can mean almost nothing. The lack of clarity often encourages a PR-led approach to being civic, where almost anything can be described as civic, and weakens the case to government and policy makers to incentivise this role. This challenge was also picked up by some of the interviewees who were critical of the framing of civic, which they claim can be confusing to external stakeholders not versed in the language of higher education.

It is therefore important to be upfront about the definition this paper uses when it discusses the civic role, and subsequently the type of incentives required to stimulate the civic role. First, this paper uses a geographically rooted concept of civic. It is about a university's local place and not a broader social value definition. The majority of participants viewed civic and place in almost synonymous terms and this paper agrees with them. While the geographic boundaries are porous and depend on the specific issue, the civic partnership and the nature of local or regional government in any particular area, the civic role can essentially be hyper-local (town-gown), town or city-wide, or regional. What it is not, for example, is a university in London running a widening participation initiative in the North West of England, nor a university in the UK running projects in other countries. They may have immense value, but they are not what this paper considers to be civic.

Intentional vs incidental

The other definitional theme common throughout the interviews was the concept of *intentionality*. Every university has an economic, social, environmental and cultural impact on its place, whether or not it regards 'civic' as a core principle or mission for the institution. Often universities look to measure and publicise this impact. This type of impact – the spending power of its students and staff, the amount spent by the institution on its supply chain and so on – is the incidental impact of a university on its place. Incidental or 'automatic', because it is not based on the needs of the place but simply a result of the institution having a physical presence. The irony of our unplanned system is that universities' impact on their place can be, and is often, unrelated to civic intent. It is the case that several universities that have less mature civic missions have a

big impact on their place because they have grown student numbers, and others that are strategically embedded in their places have less of an automatic impact because they have been the institutional losers in a market-based system. This has been felt particularly acutely since the removal of the cap on UK undergraduate numbers. One by-product of this system is that local economies and societies are affected by a system where no entity – national, regional or local – can steer it in a way that supports any particular place or the priorities of the day.

This lack of levers is core to the barriers set out below, but it also means that the civic role based on strategic intent is even more important. The participants consistently spoke about civic engagement needing to be woven through institutional strategy and decision-making, not a patchwork of well-meant initiatives. *"A civic university is about having a clearly articulated civic intent strategy, which is where you go beyond the kind of incidental civic aspects... and you go, this is our priority. So it's about making choices about how your institution best delivers for the place and the institutions and the communities that it's there."* This view was at the heart of the original Civic University Commission's recommendation to establish Civic University Agreements in partnership with other civic actors such as local authorities. The purpose of these agreements was to analyse the needs of a place, including engagement with stakeholders and all parts of the local community, and then shape a strategy and plan off the back of this analysis. Putting the needs of the place first rather than what the institution had always done.

While the quality of delivery inevitably varies – more than 70 universities have publicly committed to having such agreements, and 59 CUAs are already extant[8] – it was clear from the interviews that participants agreed with a definition of the civic role focused on the university being intentionally rather than incidentally civic. In short, the civic role is the intentional contribution a university makes to the economic, social, cultural, and environmental wellbeing of its town, city, or region. As a result, this paper looks at the barriers and levers to unlock the intentional civic role, rather than simply the general local impact of the institution.

[8] Author's own count of published Civic University Agreements, and of universities that have published or publicly committed to one, November 2026.

THE BARRIERS

With this paper's definition of the civic university clear, what then, as expressed by the interviewees, is holding the civic university back at a time when the external environment has got harder?

According to the participants, there are three main barriers to universities playing a more substantive role in their places.

- Lack of resources and bandwidth for the civic role
- Regulatory architecture and incentives which prioritise other things and ultimately undermine the civic role
- Civic as a victim of the machinery of government

Resources and bandwidth

Given the financial state of the sector, it almost goes without saying that resourcing civic activity is a key challenge. However, it is worth noting a few particular aspects of how the financial crisis in universities impacts the civic agenda beyond the higher education equivalent of Liam Byrne's 'there's no money left' letter.

First, participants reported a disconnect between what universities are expected to deliver in civic terms and the financial incentives available. Given the sector's finances it is very difficult to prioritise anything which doesn't offer a financial return in the short-term, and without dedicated funding, civic activity competes poorly against activities with a clearer financial return. From a pure financial perspective, universities face an 'opportunity cost' when they prioritise and deliver civic activity.

Second, a key word used time and time again by the interviewees was 'bandwidth'. With the majority of the university sector going through some form of restructuring as a result of the financial crisis, there is a lack of time and capacity for colleagues – academic and professional – to prioritise civic and place. As one sector expert said: "People are doing more work with less resources. It just means that keeping something going becomes harder". Many of the respondents also focussed on the bandwidth of partners across the public and private sectors who are themselves going through similar financial challenges, and the difficulty they have with the capacity to partner effectively with universities. One described an MOU where only a single person remained from either the university or partner organisation three years later, with the loss of institutional memory that implies.

Third, as concerns about bandwidth imply, civic engagement requires sustained relationship-building, yet a further complication is that, even when projects are funded with a place-dimension, project-based funding programmes operate on compressed timescales. One participant noted that funding cycles of three years, with 18 months lost to recruitment and setup, leave insufficient time for genuine partnership

development. The lack of structural funding incentivises a transactional approach to civic engagement rather than one which is embedded.

Regulatory architecture and incentives

As important as funding are the regulatory incentives in the system. Despite warm words, successive governments have provided no coherent framework signalling that civic engagement matters. Multiple respondents noted that without either regulatory requirement or dedicated 'carrot and stick' incentives, civic activity becomes *"charisma-driven and entirely optional"* – vulnerable to being cut when financial pressure mounts.

The interviewees picked out several inter-linking factors which contribute to this. First, there is no universal definition or expectation of what civic engagement means, and no system for assessing whether institutions are meeting civic obligations. Participants suggested a framework distinguishing between "must do," "should do," and "may do" activities, with corresponding enforcement mechanisms. Currently, civic engagement sits entirely in the voluntary "may do" category.

Second, and more specifically, respondents noted that the Office for Students was designed as a market regulator focused on competition, not collaboration or civic outcomes. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 emphasises competition, providing no incentive for inter-institutional collaboration or partnership with FE colleges. Several participants noted that while there are signs of the OfS beginning to consider place and growth, the fundamental design works against civic objectives.

Third, the Research Excellence Framework emerged as a major barrier, with its disciplinary focus actively discouraging the interdisciplinary, place-based research that civic engagement requires. Academics operate on long-term REF cycles, and anything not contributing to four-star papers or impact case studies struggles for attention. One participant noted that academics *"have a different currency to the outside world"* – if civic work cannot be translated into REF impact, engagement drops dramatically. The participants also acknowledged that other academic reward systems such as the Teaching Excellence Framework and to a lesser extent the Knowledge Exchange Framework were also discouraging civic engagement. The overall system effect is that career progression rewards global publications over local impact; and rankings systems drive behaviours that maximise international citations rather than regional benefit.

Fourth, participants regularly highlighted a disconnect between skills policy and university incentives. Until the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) is properly implemented, there is little financial incentive for universities to serve local adult populations outside traditional degree programmes. Skills England, local skills improvement plans, and mayoral ambitions for skills devolution create a complex landscape where nobody is clearly incentivised or empowered to coordinate universities with local workforce needs.

None of the levers described above was built with place in mind, and each is working as designed. The REF is doing its job; so are the OfS, Skills England and the other ways universities are measured (the KEF, the TEF and so on). In their own right, each causes significant problems for the civic and place role. That is bad enough, but combine a regulator which prioritises competition to the exclusion of place, a reward system like

the REF which discourages interdisciplinary place-based research, and the lack of any entity coordinating universities with local workforce needs, and the result is an atomised system with few, if any, levers to enact change quickly. That no one is responsible for how the system collectively affects place is a significant problem not only for higher education in England, but a missed opportunity for places up and down the country where universities could play a bigger and more positive role.

Machinery of government

The civic university agenda also falls victim to failures within the machinery of government. Respondents were highly critical of the Department for Education, saying that it had no or little concept of place. But they also recognised that higher education sits across multiple departments: DfE for teaching, DSIT (when the interviews took place, now DBIST) for research. This fragmentation makes coherent place-based policy difficult for ministers and civil servants alike as there is no government department looking at the system as a whole.

Participants raised several other concerns about the machinery of government that hold back the civic agenda. In the non-HE and research government departments, respondents often said there was a lack of cut through and understanding of how the civic/place role of universities could help them deliver their priorities. The Pride in Place strategy was cited as the classic example: it does not mention universities once, which compares unfavourably to a range of sectors including health, sport, culture, policing, FE and schools. Beyond Pride in Place, multiple respondents cited MHCLG as difficult to engage with on questions of universities' role in place.

Outside of Whitehall, respondents often lamented the demise of Regional Development Agencies (despite this occurring well over a decade ago). One interviewee described it as *"one of the most stupid pieces of policy making"*. The RDAs provided funding, coordination, and incentives for universities to engage regionally. Their replacements have not matched the RDAs' scale, responsibility, and resources. Linked to this there were mixed views amongst the participants about devolution. While it was seen as by far the biggest opportunity for the civic agenda, particularly for universities in areas that have or are developing mayoral combined authorities with growing capacity, participants from universities outside of these areas ('devo deserts') were concerned about a two-tier approach to policy making, where they would lose out because of a slower pace to devolution in their region.

THE WAY AHEAD

Given the environment universities are working in and the barriers identified by the interviewees, the civic and place role of universities is increasingly reliant on a community of senior university leaders and practitioners who see it as the right thing to do – progressive colleagues in the sector who prioritise the civic despite incentives pointing in other directions. But however strong the argument that this is correct – that it is a moral imperative and universities should just get on with it – the effect is to penalise the universities which focus on civic and place, because any activity done despite the incentives carries a clear opportunity cost for the university. With the sector facing severe financial constraints, those who are able to prioritise the civic will over time become fewer and fewer. With the Government saying that civic and place is one of its five priorities, this is a key example of the system working against the stated aims of the government. If civic *really is* a priority, this does not seem to be a sensible or sustainable way forward.

Instead, we need to shift the system towards what Lord Kerslake would always refer to as 'enlightened self-interest': a true long-term partnership between universities and their places, enabled by a system which recognises the holistic role of universities in their towns, cities and regions, and which benefits local communities and universities alike. But self-interest can only be enlightened if someone owns the system that defines it – which is why ownership comes first in what follows.

By the very nature of universities and their places, the full answer to shifting the system in a more civic direction cuts across Whitehall, spans local, regional, national and international policymaking, and touches several government priorities. Indeed, the collection of recommendations below align particularly well with the Government's *Rewiring the State* agenda, which aims to strengthen local and regional institutions, devolve decision making and provide stronger local accountability.[9]

There is much to be said for how government could enable universities in partnership with other sectors to play a bigger role in supporting local economic growth, healthy communities and improving people's quality of life in a range of different ways, and the intention of the Civic 2.0 campaign is to unlock some of these ideas. But, as the interviews clearly express, there are barriers and blockages within the higher education and research policy landscape – the 'bread and butter' of university policy – which are the focus of this Policy Signal.

We also need to factor in that higher education is not at the top of the government's agenda at the moment, and with significant economic and geopolitical challenges deepening, that is unlikely to change in the near future. We continue to be in a period of scarcity and any pragmatic approach to enhancing the civic role has to reflect reality, rather than promote wishful thinking.

Having said that, whether the sector should advocate for fiscally neutral policies to support civic and place was a bone of contention amongst the interviewees. For example, one said *"I don't think one should encourage people to think that things are free",*

[9] *Rewiring the State.*

whereas others thought it was the right, pragmatic approach. Some of the respondents also emphasised that additional regulatory or data requirements would put financial burdens on HEIs and would be unwelcome, whereas others thought it was the best way to change institutions. Many interviewees also noted that universities are very adept at responding to small pots of funding or even ministerial direction, whereas others said the whole system needed to change, or that only a small number of system-wide incentives would make a real difference.

With that in mind, the way ahead needs to look at both incremental changes and systemic reforms. This is not a deliberate fudge. Given the current fiscal environment, it is wise to consider incremental incentives which government could adopt to support the civic role in the short term. That may mean some additional resource for the civic role – ideally a small amount of new money, but if necessary created through efficiencies elsewhere in the system – reflecting the fact that there is little financial headroom.

But we should not lose sight of the fact that meaningful change requires strategic system-wide reform. With the rapidly changing political weather (in particular the change to a multi-party system, with populist parties on the left and right), and the growing importance of the 'graduate voter' who is typically not best pleased with the repayment system, there is a possibility that higher education could rapidly move up the political agenda in the future. If this creates the space for the higher or tertiary system to be reshaped, civic must be at the heart of this change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are focussed on supporting universities' place role in the short and longer-term. They are limited to the higher education and research policy arenas and are directed at tackling who has responsibility for the civic role, system changes required to elevate the positive impact on place, and the three main barriers and blockages to universities being civic (the way they are funded, regulated and measured).

The recommendations are grouped by what they do:

- Ownership of civic – who is responsible for the relationship between a university and its place
- Interim incentives – fixes to funding and measurement while ownership beds in
- System change – place as one of the terms of any future settlement

In isolation the recommendations provide incremental change and help – in a limited way – to incentivise the civic role. Collectively, they offer a strategic and systemic approach to helping universities have a bigger positive economic and social impact on the places they are part of.

Further reports will be published looking at how universities' place role can be enhanced through policy outside of HE and Research.

A. Ownership of civic

These recommendations focus on the gap in responsibility for the civic place agenda, and detail ways to enable regulatory and institutional ownership of the agenda. Taken together, they amount to a constitution-in-embryo for place: an owner, a binding agreement, a counterparty with a seat at the table, and a collective regional voice.

1. OfS to become responsible body for civic/place

The OfS would become the responsible body for civic/place, and would give the university-place relationship an owner for the first time.

To do this, the government should introduce legislation so that the OfS is given a new statutory duty to have regard to place. This would formally promote collaboration between higher education providers and Further Education to ensure the right skills provision within each region, promote collaboration with other key public and private sectors in the university's region, promote student choice and opportunity in each region, promote the efficient use of resources and value for money through collaborative working and services. As part of this, the OfS would become the responsible body ensuring each university has an effective partnership with its place. This must not become prescriptive, as each place is different, but would ensure each university adheres to an appropriate process in formalising effective relationships with stakeholders in their region.

2. Mandatory Civic University Agreements

Many universities have co-produced Civic University Agreements over the last seven years. These Agreements – locally developed – have made a tangible difference by putting the strategic needs of the place at the heart of a university's approach. These agreements also recognise that each place has its own challenges and opportunities and any national programme which prescribed what should be in each Agreement would fail. However, as this is an entirely voluntary approach by universities there is little incentive to measure progress, and the quality and delivery of the Agreements are patchy across the country. In that regard, the Office for Students and UKRI should make this a mandatory exercise and require universities to submit a civic strategy and plan (this could be a reformed Civic University Agreement) for their civic area (this could be as a single university, or an Agreement which covers multiple universities in a place). The reformed agreements would include a plan for the skills and innovation provision for their region, alongside other priorities co-produced and co-signed with local and regional government. Each reformed Agreement would include long-term goals and annual milestones. There would be an expectation that the signatories of the Agreement would report annually on progress. For universities that wish to have access to government funding for civic activity (see recommendations on incentives), a Civic Agreement / Strategy would be required.

3. Local and/or regional government on the board of Civic University Agreements

Alongside local and/or regional government shaping Civic University Agreements, there would be a requirement for them to be represented on any Civic Agreement Board which would not only produce the civic plan for the region, but also report annually on progress. This would ensure local and/or regional government has a stake in the civic priorities and how any funding for place is spent.

4. Catalyst support for regional networks

With increasing devolution and the need for universities to work together in their regions to speak as a collective voice to mayors, business and national government; the Office for Students and Research England should work with the sector to help to catalyse and foster regional networks of universities, like Midlands Innovation, London Higher, Yorkshire Universities, the newly formed West of England Universities and Universities North East. While universities should fund these networks, there could be a small amount of catalyst support (up to £5m) to develop new regional networks where required, to support the skills provision within these networks, and to form a national voice so that these emerging networks can themselves speak as one to national government. There should also be an expectation from the OfS and Research England that when collaborative bidding opportunities arise, they are directed via the regional networks.

B. Interim incentives

While the policy will to support the civic agenda should follow once the agenda has an owner, there is an urgent need in the meantime to fix the incentives that shape universities' civic role.

5. Strategic Priorities Grant and Strategic Priorities Funding

Access to certain funding opportunities would be open to universities that have a Civic Agreement. This would include a larger Strategic Priorities Grant from the OfS and any future Strategic Priorities Funding from UKRI, ensuring that universities, government and agencies incentivise and prioritise the impact a university has on its place.

6. HEIF and KEF

There is currently a significant debate about who has control of HEIF funding, whether it should be controlled centrally or devolved. As per recommendation 3, the reformed Civic Agreements could provide a way for regional government to shape the priorities for how the funding is spent, even if the funding pot remains within Research England.

Beyond the current debate, the Government could look to review its longer-term approach to HEIF. In particular, the Office for Students and Research England could be directed to evaluate whether HEIF should be linked formally with the Knowledge Exchange Framework. The purpose would be to provide credibility to the KEF and simultaneously have an additional mechanism to measure the impact of HEIF funding. They should also evaluate the feasibility of reforming the KEF so that it becomes a CKEF (Civic and Knowledge Exchange Framework), ensuring there is an evaluation on the economic and social impact on a university's town, city and region that goes beyond KE activity so it is providing a holistic picture. Following the formal link between CKEF and HEIF the Government should look to increase the allocation of HEIF from £284m in 2026–27 to at least £500m annually.

7. Reweighting existing measurement criteria

As part of or following on from the wider Tertiary/HE Review (see below), the Treasury alongside Research England and the OfS should review the feasibility of redirecting and/or reweighting existing funding mechanisms – QR, REF, HEIF, and R&D tax credits. The emphasis would be on changing criteria, weightings, and conditions to incentivise place impact, including a cost/benefit analysis for any proposed change.

C. Civic at the centre of system change

Alongside the issue of ownership and interim incentives, it is vital that the civic/place agenda is front and centre of any wider change to the higher education system: place should be one of the terms of any future settlement, not an afterthought.

8. Place and the tertiary review

If and when the Government launches a major review (a new Dearing, for example) of the higher education or broader tertiary system, it must include 'place' as a key part of its terms of reference for that review, so that the system's impact on place is a major feature of whatever settlement the review reaches. In other words, that review would need to consider the full impact of the reforms and system on local places, including skills and discipline provision, innovation and business as well as cultural engagement.

9. Single department for HE, skills and research

Building on the recommendation set out in The Post-18 Project's report *A Ministry for Manchesterism*[10] and the ambitions set out in the Government's *Rewiring the State* statement, the Government should remove higher education from the Department for Education and create a single department for HE, Skills, Innovation, Science, Research and Business. This department would, among several priorities, be tasked to ensure the broad HE and Research system contributes to economic and social wellbeing in 'every postcode'.

[10] Blake, *A Ministry for Manchesterism*.

CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, important progress has been made in embedding the language of place, partnership, and civic responsibility across the sector. Many institutions now see their local and regional role not as peripheral to their mission, but as central to it. Yet moral commitment alone will not sustain momentum. If civic engagement continues to depend on the goodwill of individual leaders and institutions acting against the grain of the wider system, it will remain vulnerable – especially in a period of financial constraint.

These recommendations offer a way forward to government. Aligned to its mission to devolve power and enable local accountability, they give the relationship between a university and its place an owner who will, over time and through both incentives and expectations, help the sector to have a bigger impact on its towns, cities and regions. This is vital for the economic, social, and cultural outcomes of a place. But, critically for The Post-18 Project, it matters for the educational outcomes of places too. Indeed, civic is where the sector's outputs land – graduate mobility in places, local access to high quality tertiary provision, and how skills and the labour market meet.

Beyond sector and institutional ownership, what is now required is a better alignment between aspiration and policy. If government genuinely wants universities to contribute more intentionally to local growth, skills, public service, and community wellbeing, then civic purpose must also be reflected in funding, regulation, and institutional incentives. Some of that change can be incremental; some will require deeper reform. But the central point is clear: universities cannot be asked to do more for place while operating within a system that too often rewards the opposite. If civic is to become a core expectation, it must be treated as a core priority.