



## EXPERT JOHN GODDARD ON THE 'CIVIC UNIVERSITY'

# 'Commitment is in the DNA of civic universities'

In developing its civic mission, Hasselt University found inspiration and guidance with Professor Emeritus John Goddard – a leading expert on the civic university. In 2018, Professor Goddard received an honorary degree from UHasselt.

The roots of the civic idea go back to nineteenth-century Britain – to the so-called 'red brick universities'. John Goddard: "The new industrial revolution transformed our economies and communities. In cities like Sheffield, Manchester and Newcastle, new universities were established to address specific challenges and needs. The most important ones being: scientific knowledge and a healthy, educated population to shape new industries and improve well-being.

### *How successful were they?*

At first, the red brick universities fully embraced their civic role. But in the twentieth century, they somewhat turned their backs to their communities. In recent decades questions on the responsibilities and the specific role of universities emerged. At the time,

Newcastle University rediscovered its historical roots and decided to put its civic identity front and centre.

*Nowadays, it seems that the civic university idea has transcended Britain.*

The civic university has become a *global* concept. All over the world, you see how governments, companies and citizens expect that a university takes up responsibilities that go beyond educating people and doing research. And rightfully so, most are publicly funded. Societies are faced with mounting challenges, the need for knowledge is clear. And there is no better partner to create knowledge than a civic university.

### **CIVIC VERSUS 'UN-CIVIC'**

*What, in your view, is the main characteristic of a civic university?*

Civic universities consciously choose to work with civil society. It is central to their long-term mission and purpose. It is in their DNA. In a civic university, engagement with society is deeply embedded in both its teaching and research – and *not* simply a separate, by definition inferior, third mission. They share close links with local companies, civil society organisations and local government to tackle all kinds of issues and challenges. For example, they work with local schools to recruit more students from disadvantaged backgrounds – without lowering the bar. Civic universities still strive for academic excellence, but knowledge is co-created with regional actors in ways that support broadly-based innovation. In other words: there is a soft boundary between the civic university and the community it is supposed to serve.

*What is the difference with 'un-civic' universities?*

I would say that they differ most in their primary focus in education and research. For un-civic universities, the main objective of teaching is to attract the brightest students from across the globe. Enhancing higher education participation in the local community is *not* their first concern. Research at un-civic universities

focuses on academic excellence for its own sake as measured by publications and citations. Research is knowledge supply-driven and not a response to societal demands. There may be a third mission that primarily comes down to technology transfer to business, consultancy services and spin-offs, with the principal aim of earning additional

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income.

Of course, few universities now fit this caricature. Many established universities are seeking to become moreresponsiveto society, especially in the light of global challenges like climate change or rising inequality. But this is a slow process requiring deep-seated institutional change. Responsiveness to society is not

in their nature – at least not in the same way as is the case with civic universities.

*There is some genuine concern that 'civic' comes down to 'local engagement' only. Are civic universities provincial by definition?*

Absolutely not. All public universities have a responsibility to society

study and test new theories and concepts that could be relevant on an international level too.

At Newcastle University, for example, we conduct research into healthy ageing. Across the globe, societies are struggling with the many challenges that come with changing demographics. Our research has a strong medical component, of course. But it is also about developing new housing solutions, reducing inequalities or challenging ageist language, culture and practices. We study these issues through a local prism first. Together with regional partners, we try to transform Newcastle into an age-friendly city. Because we translate our research into actions to be taken at the local level, our city can benefit directly from our findings.

*But what about academic excellence and international appeal?*

During the intense collaboration and cross-pollination with regional partners, you will come across many new questions. More often than not, those questions lead to new research and extraordinary findings. Because of its role in the local community, a civic university can add a very specific but potentially innovative piece of the puzzle and, thus, enhance its



academic profile globally.

#### CO-CREATION

*A civic university goes beyond the more traditional triple helix model, it seems.*

In a triple helix model, universities, governments, and the industry work closely together to drive economic development. A civic university involves citizens as well. And it also widens the focus of the collaboration between those four actors to include social and cultural

challenges. After all: it takes more than a sound economy to turn a region into a liveable place for everyone.

*How exactly does a civic university involve citizens?*

To turn Newcastle into an age-friendly city, we actively engage residents. We visualise urban designs, host expositions and launch questionnaires. We are involved in a constant dialogue with citizens, looking for solutions through co-

creation. It is inspiring to hear their thoughts, concerns and suggestions. An added plus is the increased public support we build for new projects along the way.

The most significant societal challenges imply changes in human behaviour. In my view, we are underestimating citizens – which is strange when you consider that they feel the consequences of shifting tectonic plates in the economy or the environment in day-to-day life. And

## WHO IS JOHN GODDARD?

John Goddard is Professor Emeritus for Regional Development Studies at Newcastle University. He founded the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, an esteemed research institute he led for twenty years. Later, as Vice-Rector, he became one of the most important driving forces behind Newcastle University's city and regional engagement. In 2008, Prof. Goddard wrote the 'provocation' *Re-Inventing the Civic University*. He also co-authored *The University and the City* with Prof. Paul Vallance, in 2013, and contributed to many more articles and books on civic engagement.

Professor Goddard travels the world to advise and support universities and regions in their civic role. He is the leading civic university expert for the OECD, the European Commission and the European University Association. He also serves as Deputy Chair of the UPP Foundation Civic University Commission.



“A civic university provides students with many opportunities to develop employability skills.”

they have some interesting thoughts and ideas worth listening to.

*But it takes time and commitment.*

Indeed. Because this kind of kaleidoscopic interaction with society requires a mind shift and a long-term commitment from everyone involved. You can only be a successful civic university when you are mandated by and enjoy the trust of your local community. I know for a fact that this is the case for Hasselt University. Look at what you are doing to close the education gap and increase higher education participation – through your *Growth Plan* and the *Limburg Talent Academy*. Or think of UHasselt’s role in the aftermath of the closure of the Ford Genk car plant.

*What about fundamental research?*

*Does it have a place at a civic university?*

Of course. To be a successful civic university also means having a wide range of scientific research types and research disciplines. Most of the great breakthroughs in science happen at the intersection of different fields. It is crucial to strike the right

balance, so you need to manage your research portfolio well.

**ADDED VALUE**

*Where is the added value for a University in fully embracing the civic idea?*

Embedding civic engagement into teaching and research offers a sharper view of what a University is ‘good at’ in terms of academic quality and what it is ‘good for’ in terms of contributions to society. So, it provides the University with a clear hold when developing policy and setting priorities relevant to society. This, in turn, is essential to the University’s long-term relevance.

Secondly, there is the enduring connection that a civic university *inherently* enjoys with the local community. A collaboration that is enshrined in the University’s customs and practices leads to a stable and almost natural way of interacting with local stakeholders and partners – irrespective of, for example, changes in university leadership or shifts in the economy. Besides, as I mentioned

before, by using the region as a case study, you can truly add value, create impact, and excel academically on an international level too.

*How can students profit from it?*

A civic university offers nothing but advantages to students. First and foremost, when it comes to developing employability skills. At a civic university, students regularly interact with local companies, civil society organisations, government and citizens. This means that they are provided with many different opportunities to improve communication skills or learn to work in a team. But there is another added value. A civic university teaches its students to become responsible citizens. Inside and outside the curriculum, students are made aware of the challenges and difficulties the community is faced with. In my personal view, this is the most important element of a civic university education. After all: only a society with committed, responsible citizens can fully thrive and overcome its difficulties.

**WHAT A CIVIC UHASSELT MEANS**

In 2018, Hasselt University declared itself a civic university. But what does this mean exactly – and what not?

**WHAT**

- Offering students opportunities to engage with society
- Academics are encouraged to set up civic initiatives
- Civic engagement comes in different forms and degrees
- Civic initiatives are given an important place in education and research
- The region is our living laboratory and source of inspiration for research
- We are rooted in the region and engage with partners from around the world

**WHAT NOT**

- Educating ‘civic students’ only
- All academics need to set up civic initiatives
- Civic engagement happens in the same way and to the same extent everywhere
- Non-civic initiatives in education and research are of less value
- Research is limited to the region – or to what is relevant to the region
- Our civic mission excludes international engagement