Addressing Questions 1, 5 and 7:

- What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century?
- What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship?
- How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

1. Summary

‘The primary aim of the learning society is to help people learn to love learning – a culture of learning – and regard it as their civic responsibility to continue to learn’ (Jarvis, 2008, p. 215).

1.1 For most of their history, British universities have had a strong local civic role, educating the adult public in their communities. This had a highly beneficial effect on democracy and citizenship. Since the 1980s, however, this role has declined, as higher education has increasingly focussed on economic objectives and on young people of school leaving age.

1.2 This paper argues we should recapture and reimagine universities as vital centres of local citizenship and civic activity. A key element will be to strengthen their role in the informal education of adults in their communities. To achieve this, universities must be encouraged to devote resources to public educational activities, and to ensure these are fairly allocated among different social groups and across people’s entire lifespans.

2. Background

2.1 During the 19th and 20th centuries, universities in England were seen as having a profound role to play in civic life. This can be seen particularly in the development of civic universities (Birmingham, Manchester, etc.) and the creation of polytechnics and colleges of technology, in the university “extension” movement, and in extra-mural adult education through most of the 20th century. This civic life included embeddedness in local regional economies in the broader European technical tradition. Since the 1990s, however, although higher education has expanded massively, taking in a far larger proportion of UK school-leavers, teaching many students from overseas, and even developing campuses abroad, universities’ wider role in strengthening citizenship and civic engagement in their own localities has much diminished.

2.2 There are several reasons for this. For example:

- the intensifying focus of public educational policy since the 1980s on economic and narrowly-defined vocational outcomes and on young people (some “lifelong learning” rhetoric notwithstanding);
- the removal of polytechnics from local control and their rebranding as universities, diminishing their distinct regional industrial and educational mission;
• universities’ (especially older “civic” universities’) becoming internationally recognised “brands” (through the globalisation of higher education), and incentivised to recruit greater numbers of students from overseas;
• the trend to “accountability” and the growth of an “audit culture”, which tend to emphasise centrally-set targets, focus on “what works”, and discourage local initiative and experimentation;
• the well-known difficulties faced in developing quantifiable indicators for “measuring” citizenship and forms of civic engagement, and their impact (Holford 2008);
• the narrowing of universities’ regional responsibilities to distinct forms of economic aim, for example as part of global innovation ecosystems;
• the “academic drift” of the former polytechnics away from their distinct regional and technical education missions;
• the recent reimagining of social inclusion in terms of social mobility and individual “success”, resulting in an emphasis on using higher education to move young people out of their communities of origin;
• The emphasis on ‘corporate social responsibility’ within universities, as opposed to concepts of ‘public’, ‘civic’ or ‘community’ engagement in which we, ‘the public’, are recognised as being part of many different communities and active producers of knowledge.

3. Universities as Integrative Civic Spaces

3.1 We argue that public policy should encourage and enable universities to develop stronger forms of democratic partnership with their local communities through genuine community and civic engagement. Universities can be profoundly important contributors to their local civic environments and to such debates. This is partly because of their history and “embeddedness”: unlike many businesses, they tend to “stay put” in their locality. They can also be ‘anchor institutions’ in the sense of integrative civic spaces which have a particular engagement with their surrounding community (Axelroth and Dubb, 2010).

4. Building Trust in Community/University Relationships

4.1 Good community and civic engagement are long-term, ongoing and cumulative in nature, enabling relationships and trust to build and strengthen over time. Trust building is particularly important among disenfranchised and disadvantaged communities. Deep knowledge of the community and its locality is essential. Historically, such intensive forms of engagement have fostered a heightened sense of responsibility in people for their own community/ies, helped engender civic sensitivity and involvement in democratic processes, and increased likelihood of voting. This, in turn, fosters citizens who have a more equal chance of participating in society:
By participating in elections and other civic engagement citizens are able to influence politics; the involvement of all citizens in democratic processes and the extent to which they are enabled to be involved are crucial for ensuring that all citizens have an equal chance of participation and political integration (Salter et al, 2017, p. 152).

4.2 Civil society is a complex, shifting and uncompromising space. Little emphasises this more than post-Brexit Britain, where divisions are very evident. ‘Wicked’ issues can seem utterly intractable. These include the schisms of poverty and financial inequality; health and an ageing population, with more people living with disabilities and mental health issues; ecological change; and ever-faster technological innovation.

4.3 Community-university engagement is by necessity complex and requires a long-term commitment. Universities have a role in helping us work out what we want community and ‘good
citizenship’ to mean. Does our ‘community’ encompass where we live, our shared interests and passions, our allegiances and affiliations? What is ‘good citizenship’? What gives us the range of skills, attitudes and activities which enable us to become “agents of positive social change for a more democratic world” (Jacoby, 2009, p.9).

4.4  The late Sir David Watson, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Brighton and Principal of Green Templeton College, Oxford, called for a re-imagining of universities’ social role: there should be “dialogue across the boundary between the University and its community which is open-ended, fluid and experimental” (Watson 2003, p. 16), a “thoughtful, argumentative interaction with the non-university world” (Watson, 2007, p. 3), bringing community members, community/voluntary sector practitioners and university teachers and researchers together as citizens and neighbours.

4.5  In fact, however, ‘public engagement’ and ‘knowledge transfer’, as developed recently, have been imagined as the one-directional transmission of knowledge from universities to others - driven by the call for research to be “publicly accountable and impactful” (Mahony and Stephansen, 2016, p. 585). On this approach, the ‘public’ has been little more than “the target of engagement activities” such as marketing and research dissemination (ibid, p. 590). Without a genuine exchange of knowledge, involving hard-won trust between universities and their local citizens and communities, the ‘public’ become recipients only.

4.6  Universities’ engagement with civil society has also been damaged by the crisis in the voluntary sector. Faced with a £2.3 billion fall in income from government contracts and grants (NCVO, 2015, cited in Hemmings, 2017, p. 41), the voluntary sector’s capacity to act in an ambassadorial or campaigning vein with universities, to share community knowledge and expertise and to offer a voice to the most marginalised in society, has been severely curtailed.

5. Universities and Part-time Mature Students

5.1  Many universities (especially those in the Russell Group) do not routinely draw students from their local area. At the same time, participation in higher education, as measured by socio-economic disadvantage, is strongly unequal. A particular problem is the extra barriers mature learners have in attending university (intensified recently by the upsurge in fees), and the paucity of widening participation measures aimed at their needs. As a recent report points out, “most current WP outreach activity focuses on interventions in schools, partly because policymakers can appear infatuated with getting 18 year-olds from under-represented groups into selective universities” (Open University, 2017, p.4). Les Ebdon, Director of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), has argued that the dramatic (61%) decline in the numbers of mature part-time and full-time learners in Higher Education since 2010 – which shows no sign of levelling off – directly conflicts with the drive to greater social mobility.

5.2  For obvious reasons, part-time, mature students are most likely to remain embedded in their localities, to provide continuing leadership in their communities and voluntary networks, and to be able to give “voice” to their excluded and “invisible” friends and neighbours. Universities’ large-scale abandonment of their mission to such people damages democracy and community. Part-time, mature students were central to university and community-based adult education and provided a space for understanding communities and fostering long-term collaboration. Such spaces also offered opportunities for dialogue and debate, enabling people to critically reflect on civil society from their current positions (“beyond the lecture hall”) and generating research based on people’s real and self-identified needs.

5.3  Research shows that adult learning, across the lifespan, strengthens democratic engagement and is “associated with higher levels of interpersonal and social trust, social connections and community engagement” (Schuller, 2017, p. 7). This is particularly true of
“liberal” education, aimed at teaching the whole person. It enables us to “see the world as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts, so that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us” (A.N. Whitehead, quoted in Mescle, 2009, p.9). This is very different from universities’ current focus on skills and vocational/employer-based needs. Recent comparative research shows that academic or mixed academic/vocational education is much more effective than vocational education alone in developing a lasting interest in politics, in voting, and in being civically engaged – effectively, in making ‘good citizens’ (Salter et al 2017). Yet “current policy in England presages the eradication of large swathes of publicly funded adult education” (Tuckett, 2017, p. 230).

6. The Challenge
6.1 Relatively speaking, universities are privileged and resource-rich institutions. They should form a crucial part of our shared associational life. They must again be encouraged and enabled to play a vital role in supporting the development of a knowledge democracy. They need to become places in which we collectively re-shape, re-think and re-frame what civil society should look like.

6.2 To do so, they must be prepared to learn from the communities of which they are part. They have much to learn from patterns and traditions of learning which fall outside the standard and enter the realms of the “all-too invisible” groups in society and the messiness of real community life.

6.3 In recent years, however, incentivized by policy initiatives to “deliver measurable impact” in the short-term, university leaders have generally been unable, or unwilling, to devote resources and time to building long-term relationships with their local communities.

7. Recommendations
7.1 We call for a serious rethink of the “policy drivers” that have, since the 1990s driven universities away from interacting with their local communities on a deeper basis than one-directional “public engagement” and “knowledge transfer”. This requires not only the removal of damaging policy drivers, but new policies to encourage sustained democratic engagement, at a local, civic level.

7.2 Widening participation needs to embrace people failed by initial schooling, those furthest from the labour market – the part-time and mature learners who are being lost to the system of higher education.

7.3 Post-compulsory education must not be merely “a subsidiary contributor to wider economic policy” (Tuckett, 2017, p. 234). “Lifewide learning” is needed. Its benefits include developing engaged and impassioned communities who feel able to shape the world around them. A “life-wide” learning strategy is needed, “locally shaped”, and able “to respond effectively to adults’ appetite for learning, however unexpected” (Tuckett, 2017, p. 244).

7.4 We recommend in particular the following:
(a) Universities should be encouraged and incentivised to work with civil society organisations to provide more non-formal training for citizens involved in voluntary organisations. This is a route through which many people find their way back into the formal education system after previous failure.
(b) Policies should encourage universities to develop and maintain educational relationships with communities in the regions they serve. These should include non-formal courses and informal learning, especially in forms relevant to strengthening citizenship in the community.
Universities should create opportunities for individuals to learn citizenship skills through practice and participation in activities relevant to them across a range of contexts, and by supporting the development of learning resources. Such learning is likely to foster transferable citizenship skills from one area to another and could create disproportionate benefits.

Formal education needs to engender a critical dimension, enabling people to challenge and question normative assumptions about who are active citizens, and how they learned to be so. Higher education, can be a way of empowering people to think differently about what they may have learned elsewhere. Models of student engagement which link undergraduate teaching with the potential for developing civil society-based research initiatives, such as the Student as Producer model have proved very effective in facilitating university/community engagement.

The Learning City model is gaining traction, with a number of British cities (e.g. Bristol) assuming Learning City status. This is an important prospective model for developing civic engagement across a range of partnerships, and with universities at the core.

Adult education at its best developed comprehensive links with its communities. Universities need to “redevelop our outreach work, building alliances with community bodies, faith organisations and workplaces of all sorts. It is possible to make learning accessible, and it is possible to build alliances across the breadth of our communities to create vibrant learning cultures, where everyone can feel at home” (Tuckett, 2017, p. 243).

Policy should support non-traditional spaces of adult education, such as the four remaining independent residential adult education colleges – Hillcroft College, Surbiton, Fircroft College, Selly Oak, Birmingham, Ruskin College, Oxford and Northern College, Barnsley. Their success rates with mature students from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds show that Access to Higher Education courses, leading to vocational qualifications in areas such as Health and Social Sciences, Social Work, Youth Work, etc., open up access to the job market, even for older learners.

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2 A Learning City is “a city which effectively mobilizes its resources in every sector to promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education; revitalize learning in families and communities; facilitate learning for and in the workplace; extend the use of modern learning technologies; enhance quality and excellence in learning; and foster a culture of learning throughout life. In so doing it will create and reinforce individual empowerment and social cohesion, economic and cultural prosperity, and sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2015, p.9).
References

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