National Centre for Academic and Cultural Exchange

Greater than the Sum of Parts: realising universities in Cultural Compacts

Dr Cara Courage

Greater than the Sum of Parts: realising universities in Cultural Compacts

Dr Cara Courage

Contents

Magic has been sprinkled across the UK in the form of Cultural Compacts; a magic that is both responsive to and shaping of place, that has brought together major local players in new and sustained conversations, and that is forging new ways of thinking, working and delivering on local economic development.

What we know, and what we need to know

The need for a step-change in (at least, urban) cultural leadership was evidenced in the Cultural Cities Enquiry (CoCities UK, 2019) report. This called for the forming of cross-sector partnerships – herein understood as a 'wider'-than-extant coalition of partners - in a collaborative process and a leadership model that was engaged in cross-sector codesigning of new goal-driven visions and delivery. In response to this, Cultural Compacts were initiated in 2019 with Arts Council England and DCMS funding. The initiative's key objectives were, in the common endeavour of economic development; to increase connectivity and capacity, facilitate a shared ambition, strengthen planning, and secure partnership commitment, with universities one of the partners.

To put some substance in front of our opening hyperbole, while the subsequent pandemic affected its rollout, initial findings from the BOP (2020) Cultural Compacts review show that, in the main, Cultural Compacts have: leveraged new value to local cultural ecologies through partnership working; created new ambitions for culture; positioned culture more prominently in local agendas and built a wider support base for culture in regional economic development. In the rollout of Cultural Compacts, the forming of such coalitions has variously enabled completely new gatherings of partners, generated new types of conversations, facilitated the continuation of established wide-base partnerships cultural and developmental conversations and planning. Far from being a talking shop, the Cultural Compacts conversation has been acknowledged as needed, meaningful and rigorous – and, where and when ready, has been translated into action to the ends of culture-led regional development.

This think-piece considers the potential unique offer of the university in the context of Cultural Compacts. Where evaluation and reflexivity on Cultural Compacts has approached this in the round, understandably so as a collaborative effort, here we are asking what can universities offer that no other partner can, to this unique table at this unique time? And, as the future of Cultural Compacts is determined, what is the potential of universities in this mix? What follows surfaces from talking with some of the university Cultural Compacts

stakeholders and probing some of its presentational, strategic and reporting literature. It closes with questions posed to Cultural Compact stakeholders and this quandary is returned to there.

Anchoring the university in Compacts

In the Cultural Compact literature reviewed, the cultural role and the cultural offer of universities has been mentioned generally and specifically. Generally, as involved in placemaking (as animating place and of landmark buildings), as facilitating and/or providing sector hubs (as local density of creative skills to homing social enterprises), contributing to priority education agendas, talent attraction and retention, and providing and sharing learning opportunities. Specifically, providing high value research, investment, knowledge exchange/sharing, innovation, research and development in the creative industries, skills-based creative career pathways, continuing professional development, and cultural education partnerships and by contributing to the pool of artists and creatives. But does this perception of the university offer in Cultural Compacts truly reflect the university of today? Put simply, do Cultural Compacts understand their university partners and are they making the most of them?

In teaching and learning for example, universities can offer learning outcomes that are geared toward a broader contextualization of the arts in society and that leverage arts for social practice and community engagement, with a focus on experiential learning, including internships, service learning, and studios connected with external partners. Across its estates, universities are putting their resources and infrastructure to the service of neighbourhood revitalisation and equitable development, opening their doors to community members and organisations to provide access to equipment, materials, and audiences for subsidized rates. They are supporting arts faculty and students to collaborate with community members and organizations to design, produce, and share work. Arts students and faculty are, in turn, recognised as creative drivers in regional creative sector economic development, the artist understood as innovator and problem solver that creates outcomes and outputs for civic and cultural ends.

This whistle-stop and purely illustrative tour of the contemporary university form shows a university culture that takes on a greater variation of activities and a more intentional approach to its role as neighbour, as agent for social practice

and community engagement and convener of different ideas, interests, expertise, and motivations. This university is a site of collaboration, partnerships, policy innovation, social action and economic evolution and with experience of building new local to global partnerships and frameworks that are mutually transformative and redefining of experiences and of to place.

Axis-pivot-place

What has been a clear message in my own tour of Cultural Compacts is that it has (or is beginning to, let's not forget that some Compacts are in their infancy, others more mature) been successful in putting culture at the decision-making table as equal partner, and demanded those partners to be always thinking about how they can collectively make a difference to the problems of their place. This purview is also a success of Cultural Compacts – the place-specific challenge comes first, with partnerships formed in response to and around that. This is seen as signalling a positive axis shift in the intention behind partnership forming. But what is also mentioned is the need for an axis shift in all partners in understanding each other, entering this conversation without assumption or with preconceived notions of each other's offer. I am left with two questions at this point: how can this more expansive understanding of the university – as site - be brought into Cultural Compacts? And how can this assumption-busting conversation take place in the first place? Questions beget questions and such as that is, I am left with more questions at the end of my time thus far with Cultural Compacts than at its beginning.

The need for a further axis shift within Cultural Compacts is with regards to knowledge exchange: with such variety of scope, aims, places and depth and breadth of partnerships, and of skills and experience across Cultural Compacts, the need for a formal and sustained sharing of knowledge was voiced repeatedly. How to do this exactly? The capacity to knowledge exchange and to galvanise networks of people was one of the drivers that formed Cultural Compacts and the reviews to date have highlighted the need to further share learning from experience so far, at a national level. The university Cultural Compact partners have a natural aptitude to frame and direct such learning and with this comes the need for the Cultural Compacts evidence base to continue to grow. There is a clear role for universities in building this.

A question of communication also arises. Cultural Compacts are setting up the conditions to dispel assumptions held of partners by partners, with the roles

attributed to universities thus far, one has to question also how universities are communicating their full value as cultural anchors. It should be said now that it was somewhat of a challenge to garner a comprehensive picture of the specificities of universities' place in Cultural Compacts, due in part to Compacts being at different stages of delivery with differing models, and in part to the nature of the collaborative presentation. In this struggle to find university-specific Cultural Compacts evidence, I had to ask - was this as it was too early to call, or because Compacts operate in the round? Or was it because university partners had not found their offer, or their partners didn't understand it? Perhaps the traditional view of the university as detached from the community, not of local site but of global place, is more pervasive than some university professionals think it is. How can university leaders generally, and specifically those at the Cultural Compacts table, be helped in communicating the ways that universities can act as anchors and how their specific institution performs in that role? The answer might lie in the question itself – Cultural Compacts have the potential to be that framework that moves thinking of the university on.

A loud and clear message in the BOP reporting of Cultural Compacts is the need for their leadership and stakeholder base to be more diverse; and talking to those involved in Cultural Compacts, diversity and inclusion in Cultural Compacts is an even wider issue than that report suggests. For example, the narrow age and class range found in Cultural Compacts composition has resulted in those involved not necessarily representing 'new' leaders but a number of the 'obvious' ones, drawn from a narrower cross-section of the sector than the foundational aims of Cultural Compacts would aspire to. This means that Cultural Compacts leadership comes almost exclusively from an institutional and professional constituency and new leadership is not being fostered. How can Cultural Compacts leadership be opened up, how can it foster leadership development? All stakeholders have a responsibility when it comes to diversity and inclusion, but what is the specific one of universities?

As Cultural Compacts are seen as a means of placemaking, mention of this sector's leadership is prudent here. Placemaking differs from other place-based design and development sectors in that it is truly community-led, the 'professional' partner needing to work in relative expertism with the community and co-manage or concede sole authority in a project. In such a process, one becomes aware of who is excluded as well as included. Both the university and the arts sector have a depth of experience in working with, and in the service of, communities in place. How can this learning and model be brought into Cultural Compacts to not only diversify its leadership, but also its wider stakeholders?

One priority of culture that seems to be absent from Cultural Compacts, at least in great depth or with due explicit focus, is that of the role of culture in climate and ecological emergency and the general post-COVID condition of cultural sector organisations and workers. Rather, the narrative is that of unspecified 'growth.' A blanket growth mindset has to be questioned in our climate emergency, post-COVID and cost of living crisis times. Is reset, renewal, recovery, sustain and thrive a more nuanced appreciation for Cultural Compacts to have of our creative and cultural sectors? Is now the time to include Sustainable Development Goals in Cultural Compacts? Research and development will be crucial in such contexts, and universities have a role to play here to support culture and communities to survive post-pandemic, with the cost-of-living crisis and with sustainable community development.

Moving forward

Through the pandemic, the function of culture to connect people to place through participation has been reaffirmed. Often hand in hand with a notion of creativity and open to interpretive flexibility, culture has become a tenet of regional development to spur economic growth and social change, asked to deliver on creative skills and training, workforce resiliency, net zero and climate emergency understanding, health and wellbeing, from public health to individual mental health, and High Street and heritage (re)development.

Cultural Compacts need to continue to go where the need is, heat seeking the problem first and co-creating its response as place-based, culturally anchored, and collaborative. What is the Cultural Compact response to social prescribing, to the cost-of-living crisis, and to localised impacts of climate and ecological emergency? At this time of progression for Cultural Compacts universities need to truly find, take and communicate their role at the table, hand in hand with taking action on what they can uniquely offer Cultural Compacts' known need of knowledge sharing and widening diversity.

The nature of Cultural Compacts is of course collaborative – and it is a collaborative approach that is needed across our regions to not only grow audiences for culture, but for culture to realise its offer to the issues of our contemporary experience. For the university, this offers the opportunity to not only frame or reframe its links to communities but also to open up a new sense of shared public culture across all partners.

Reading

Arts Council England (2020). *Our strategy 2020-2030*, 27 January 2020 (online). Available at: https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/our-strategy-2020-2030#:~:text=By%202030%2C%20we%20want%20England,of%20high%2Dquality%20cultural%20experiences. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Ashley, A. & Durham, L. (2021). 'Universities as Arts and Cultural Anchors: Moving Beyond Bricks and Mortar to Entrepreneurship, Workforce, and Community Development Approaches' in *Artivate*, Volume 10, Issue 2, Fall 2021. Available at: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/845794/pdf. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Chatterton, P. (2000). 'The Cultural Role of Universities in the Community: Revisiting the University—Community Debate' in *Environment and Planning A* 32(1):165-181. Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23538856_The_Cultural_Role_of_Universities_in_the_Community_Revisiting_the_University-Community_Debate. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Cinar, R. & Coenen, L. (2022). 'Universities' contribution to culture and creativity-led regional development: Conflicting institutional demands and hybrid organizational responses' in *Industry and Higher Education* 0(0), 152–156. Available at:
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/09504222221119736. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

CoCities UK (2019). *Cultural Cities Enquiry Report*. (online). Available at: https://www.corecities.com/cultural-cities-enquiry/read-report. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Markusen, A. & Gadwa, A. (2010). *Creative Placemaking – Executive Summary: A White Paper for The Mayors' Institute on City Design, a leadership initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the United States Conference of Mayors and American Architectural Foundation*. National Endowment for the Arts (online). Available at:
https://www.arts.gov/about/publications/creative-placemaking. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Moreton, S. (2016). 'Rethinking "knowledge exchange": new approaches to collaborative work in the arts and humanities' in *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 22(1), 100-115. Available at:
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10286632.2015.1101081. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Moreton, S. (2018). 'Contributing to the creative economy imaginary: universities and the creative sector' in *Cultural Trends*, 27(5), 327 -338. Available at:

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09548963.2018.1534575. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Moretto, M., Owens, P. & Kuhn, R. (2020). *Review of the Cultural Compacts Initiative: Final report*, BOP Consulting (for Arts Council England). 30 October 2020 (online). Available at:

https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/review-cultural-compacts-initiative. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Shiel, C., Leal Filho, W., do Paçoc, A. & Brandli, L. (2016). 'Evaluating the engagement of universities in capacity building for sustainable development in local communities' in *Evaluation and Program Planning*, Volume 54, February 2016, Pages 123-134. Available at:

https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0149718915000804. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Virani, T. (2021). 'Investment into R&D will be vital for the recovery of creative and cultural organisations' in *Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre* (8 October 2021) [online] Available: https://pec.ac.uk/blog/investment-into-r-d-will-be-vital-for-the-recovery-of-creative-and-cultural-organisations-from-covid-19. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]

Williams, A. Dovey, J. Cronin, B. Garside, P. Flintham, M. Smith, M. Barrett, D. Brooks, R. Boddington, A. & Taylor, F. (2017). *The Hidden Story: understanding knowledge exchange partnerships with the creative economy*. (Project Report) Kingston upon Thames, U.K.: Kingston University. Available at:

https://creativeeconomies.co.uk/publications/the-hidden-story/. [Accessed: 10 September 2022]