

Lecture 3 - 24/10/2024 - Julian Dobson, Sheffield Hallam University

Title: An institutional civics of care: engagement in sustainability transitions as expressions of universities' care for place

Abstract:

As actors in and advocates of sustainability transitions, universities have a clear role to play in fostering innovation. Within their localities they also have a 'civic' or 'anchor' role, which highlights some of the dilemmas of transitions in a local context: who are the apparent winners and losers, what trade-offs must be made, and how can universities play a part in ensuring transitions are equitable?

Drawing on the literature on ethics and practices of care and repair (Mattern, 2018; Traill et al., 2024; Trogal, 2017; Tronto, 1993) this lecture will present universities' civic role as a form of care that requires attentiveness to the overlooked and unintended consequences of their activities as well as examination of their goals and objectives. The lecture will draw on resources developed for the National Civic Impact Accelerator programme in England to interrogate and address the complexity, institutional dilemmas and trade-offs inherent in sustainability transitions (Geels et al., 2017; Gibbs and Krueger, 2012), and consider how learning from the programme may inform universities' work of building local partnerships. These resources include a Civic Impact Framework (Dobson and Ferrari, 2021) which considers how universities can make a difference within their localities across seven domains of activity, and a theory of change which sets out a rationale for civic activity and the outcomes that may be expected.

The learning from the programme includes considerations of communication and storytelling; institutional leadership; resources; navigating power dynamics; and translating intentions into action. Taken together, they highlight the need for ongoing 'institutional work' (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) of reconstruction and deconstruction within the university alongside universities' public role of place leadership.

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