

Universities as Engines of Inclusive Innovation

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Abstract

In a postdigital society, understood as characterised by rapid sociomaterial and technological change, AI solutionism amid complex geopolitics, pervasive uncertainty, and deepening inequalities, the civic role of universities is being re-examined. This chapter explores how universities can become engines of inclusive innovation by acting as architects, bridgers, and catalysts for ethical and responsible innovation and new avenues of collaborative networked learning. This requires disruption of many assumptions made within universities and in government policies regarding Knowledge Exchange (KE) policies and practices, civic agendas, and a reconsideration of the language that is routinely used to describe potential business, research and cross-sector partners in the community. Drawing on the complementary research and practice of the four co-authors, the paper integrates theoretical and practical insights from recent academic publications and community focused projects. We demonstrate how seed-funded co-designed listening events, catalyst conversations, and community innovation hubs create enabling infrastructures to confront digital and data disadvantage, amplify youth and community voices, and foster trust-based, equitable partnerships. Through a synthesis of theory and practice, we argue that universities, when acting ethically and relationally, can reimagine innovation and KE as a civic good in partnership with diverse community stakeholders. In so doing, there is an opportunity to critically reposition narrow understandings of KE, as instigated and enacted by universities, and reimagine these as co-created civic forms of networked learning. This reframing positions the university, not as an extractive ivory tower, but as a receptive, living ecosystem of inclusive innovation capable of co-shaping equitable futures in uncertain postdigital times.

Keywords

Inclusive innovation; postdigital positionality; ethical research; community engagement; civic universities, knowledge exchange, co-created networked learning.

Introduction: Universities and the Postdigital Condition

Across Europe and beyond, universities are operating within an increasingly unstable sociotechnical and sociomaterial landscape (Peters et al., 2025) that we refer to as ‘postdigital’ in nature. By this we observe that the digital, biological and social have become increasingly inseparable. Whilst technological infrastructures underpin everyday life for many people, they can also be seen to be amplifying inequality and precarity (Peters et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed both the reach of digital connectivity and the persistence of exclusion, leading to calls for a reconceptualisation of postdigital Higher Education (HE) and a challenge to the notion that static principles of inclusive practice can simply be embedded and measured in universities (Hayes, 2021; Matthews, 2025).

Knowledge exchange or ‘being civic’

In the UK in particular, Knowledge Exchange (KE) - understood as collaborative processes bringing universities together with external partners in the private, public, and third sectors (Research England 2025) - has increasingly been promoted as a way to innovate and achieve positive change. However, based on findings from our co-created ‘listening events’ and ‘catalyst conversations’ that this chapter discusses, more dynamic and ecologically sustainable inclusivity policies are needed within this KE context, including developing a shared understanding of what it means to be ‘civic’. A thriving civic university is based on trust, legitimacy, network building, respect and funding (Dobson & Owolade, 2025), but financial challenges in the university sector now threaten existing meaningful civic strategies that can strengthen inclusive forms of KE. Genuine civic dialogue requires not only interdisciplinary collaboration but also cross-sector insights (Hayes et al., 2023) and input into how universities might become engines of inclusive innovation in their regions and beyond. The challenge is no longer whether

universities engage with digital technologies, but how they do so ethically, inclusively, and responsibly (Eth-Tech, 2025) with their local and global partners, whilst exploring new civic avenues of KE as collaborative networked learning.

Inclusive Innovation and co-created networked learning

Innovation has also become a dominant discourse in HE policy and articles. See, for example, the Springer *Innovative Higher Education* journal. Yet much of this activity is university-focused on commercialisation, policy and faculty, and lacks attention to country contexts outside the UK and US, or on community actions for social justice, resulting in a lack of inclusive voices (O’Dea, 2024). Inclusive innovation reframes this agenda by aligning knowledge production with civic responsibility and equitable participation (Hayes et al., 2025; Jopling et al., 2025). This has implications for meaningful research in collaboration with communities that can address evolving core challenges and inconvenient problems, rather than generating articles that reflect bandwagonism and hype (Schmidt et al., 2025; Jandrić 2024). For universities to become engines of inclusive innovation, they must build infrastructures that enable participation by those who are historically excluded from innovation systems—particularly disabled, Black and minoritised, and socio-economically disadvantaged communities. According to the Networked Learning Editorial Collective, Networked Learning is distinguished as a field of research and practice by its insistent attention to three sets of phenomena and their intertwinement in practice:

- 1 Human/inter-personal relationships
 - 2 Technology (especially digital communications technologies)
 - 3 Collaborative engagement in valued activity (joint inquiry, knowledgeable action, etc).
- Networked Learning Editorial Collective (2021, p. 314)

This chapter contributes to all aspects of this research program, with an accent on how inclusive innovation and university KE activities might be reimagined as more equitable, co-created forms of networked learning. We draw on the interwoven research programmes of the four authors and their collaborators to propose a new framework of knowledge exchange for universities, as architects, bridgers, and catalysts of inclusive innovation. We examine how these roles manifest in practice through participatory research, community listening events, and innovation hubs that operate as civic infrastructures. The analysis situates this work within the broader field of postdigital scholarship, ethical research, and networked learning.

Ethical and Responsible Innovation in Postdigital Contexts

Ethical and responsible innovation requires recognition that technologies and innovation processes are never neutral (Peters et al., 2021). Data infrastructures both reveal and reproduce inequality, particularly for those whose lives are rendered invisible within dominant metrics (Hayes et al., 2023). Responsible innovation therefore entails reflexivity—acknowledging the situated nature of research and the power relations embedded in knowledge production.

The postdigital condition reflects the entanglement of the digital, social, political, biological, and material (Jandrić et al., 2023). Hayes (2021) develops the concept of postdigital positionality to describe how individuals navigate and negotiate these entanglements within educational and research systems shaped by datafication. Positionality foregrounds power, privilege, and responsibility: who can speak, who is represented in data, and whose experiences are excluded. Raffaghelli et al. (2025) have worked on a practical construction of postdigital positionality by developing ‘slow’ technological practices that prioritise communal deliberation, contextual situatedness, and ecological awareness over speed and efficiency. Sergio Carvajal-Leoni (2025) has extended the concept of postdigital positionality through media and film, locating himself and his artwork in this emerging reality where humans confront many environmental challenges. He develops spaces beyond academic texts alone, to enable interdisciplinary and community voices to help instructors to prompt ethical discussions in the classroom.

In this framing, inclusive innovation emerges as an extension of what Jandrić et al. (2023) term postdigital citizen science: participatory forms of inquiry that democratise knowledge and challenge epistemic hierarchies. Universities, as stewards of research and learning, hold ethical obligations to ensure that innovation systems serve public as well as private interests. They must therefore reimagine themselves as civic platforms where ethical experimentation, co-creation, and deliberation are normalised.

Methodology: Listening Events and Co-Created Inquiry

Our co-developed methodology emphasised these creative forms of co-production, sharing of stories, and rights-based approaches towards inclusion. Postdigital research principles are participatory and dialogic (Hayes, 2023; Jandrić et al., 2023), positioning young people as co-researchers rather than subjects of study. Our listening and catalyst events detailed below were co-designed with our hosts and participants, based on citizen research theory and practices (Hayes, et. al., 2025, Jopling, et. al., 2025). By this, we refer to avoiding the frequently extractive approach that university research can enact by simply drawing data from participants on a pre-determined topic. As such, these activities were more akin to inclusive conceptions of ‘innovation ecosystems’, involving diverse actors, positionalities, activities, artefacts, institutions and relations’ (Granstrand & Holgersson, 2020: 90).

AHRC Impact Accelerator seed-funded project at Bath Spa University (2024-2025)

The first of our insights into ways to grow universities as engines of inclusive innovation is derived from an AHRC Impact Accelerator seed-funded project at Bath Spa University (2024): ‘Listening to young people and families from minority or disadvantaged groups on the skills barriers they encounter in postdigital society’. This co-created KE project explored barriers to participation for disabled, Black and minority ethnic, and otherwise disadvantaged young people from low-income areas, using these questions as an initial prompt:

Research questions: to help guide the dialogue

- Do young people in marginalised or minority groups feel empowered to access the education, skills and employment they seek?
- If not, where are the barriers and what would better support their needs?

As these were ‘listening events’, following ethical approval and informed consent signed by all present, we simply brought these questions along as a starting point. We also brought pizza and drinks to each gathering to support a relaxed atmosphere and a relational approach. The aim was to encourage these young participants to guide the dialogue themselves by raising their contextual and personal experiences, hopes, wishes and ideas. Three listening events were conducted in partnership with The Wiltshire Centre for Independent Living (Wilts CIL), Devizes, Brighton Aldridge Community Academy, and The Mercian Trust (Walsall). Participants were asked broad questions about their hopes for the future and how they might achieve them. They co-produced artefacts—digital stories, community maps, and policy statements—that expressed their experiences of exclusion and aspirations for inclusion in work. These artefacts served as boundary objects enabling conversation between young people, educators, community leaders, and policy-makers.

Findings from the listening events

These events revealed a complex picture of intersectional disadvantage. Digital access remained uneven, but so too did trust in institutions. Many participants described a sense of invisibility and being underestimated or stereotyped within both educational and civic systems (Stern & Robertson, 2025). Most had creative, innovative ambitions but also wanted help to interact with confidence at in-person interviews. They recognised they lacked soft skills from spending too much time on their phones. Even as workplaces may be rapidly changing, still these young people had very limited knowledge or experience of work and their related anxieties linked to this uncertainty were apparent. However, the events also illuminated the transformative potential of dialogic spaces where lived experience informs policy and design. These insights directly informed the subsequent Catalyst Conversations we held a few months later.

NCCPE funded Cross-Sector Catalyst Conversations

These cross-sector ‘catalyst conversations’ were funded by the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) to explore how universities can better act as civic partners in inclusive innovation ecosystems. This is closely linked to aspects of the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) agenda (Research England, 2025) that seeks to unlock the knowledge and expertise in universities for the benefit of the world outside of universities. However, we have been seeking to tip this university-led approach on its head and listen carefully instead to what the world outside of universities really needs from their local institutions in order then to respond to what we learn. We convened two conversations between business, arts, charity, health, and university leaders and wrote these up to feed into a wider NCCPE led movement for change in how universities connect with their communities (NCCPE, 2025). Our cross-sector catalyst conversations took place over dinner in Bath (July 2025)

and in London (August 2025). Those who participated were invited on the basis of their leadership in areas of racial equity. The same question was raised at each meeting as a prompt for conversation:

Research question: to help guide the catalyst conversations

- How do we centre the interests of black and minoritised/disadvantaged communities in what they want and need from their regional universities and businesses, to support their innovative ambitions and related investment opportunities?"

Participants fed back on certain challenges in their work with universities, including institutions not appreciating what it means to be genuinely civic and suggesting ways to co-build more equitable KE partnerships for growth.

Findings from the catalyst conversations

The findings summarised here also tend to reinforce and extend our earlier citizen research conversations (Jandrić et al., 2023, 2025; Hayes et al., 2025; Jopling et al., 2025).

- Colleagues in universities talk about 'research' and 'researching' but often do not realise they mean different things to those of us researching out in the community.
- Universities need to consider more carefully the objectives of the research it undertakes in partnership and who is intended to benefit from it, as well as the metrics used to measure impact.
- Academics are still focused on the benefits for themselves as individuals. They need to think less transactionally and more relationally to build more authentic research partnerships in the wider community.
- Universities need to understand better what it means to be genuinely 'civic' and community-focused, aspiring towards a 'building a cathedral' approach, rather than temporary, short-term structures.
- Academia remains a bubble. It is good at collating and archiving data, but not at sharing knowledge. This model needs to be disrupted.
- Roughly 88% of all investment funding for entrepreneurship still goes to white males.

Building a shared vision for an engaged and inclusive future

Create universities that work with and serve their communities through strategies such as:

- Targeting disadvantaged communities where minority groups often think of universities or entrepreneurship: 'it's not for me', or 'I don't fit'.
- Supporting and enabling Ethnic Minority Businesses (EMBs) through mentorship and role models.
- Co-creating variable short courses to enable EMBs and other forms of business to progress and scale up.
- Encouraging people to *make* their own business, rather than just learning *about* business in general.
- Learning from practices in other parts of the world where innovation is a key part of survival.
- Building a shared vision including cross-sector hubs/communities of practitioners/institutions to apply research knowledge together for impact.

In summary, it was agreed that a university re-imagined as a civic Institute of Possibilities could better support people to move forward in creative and innovative ways amid rapid technological change.

Universities as Architects: Designing Enabling Infrastructures

If re-envisioned as architects, universities can collaboratively design physical, digital, and relational infrastructures that enable inclusive innovation. Cole (2023, 2025) has advanced a model of community innovation hubs as boundary-spanning infrastructures connecting universities, local authorities, and community organisations. These hubs function as living laboratories for co-creation and experimentation, providing spaces where marginalised voices shape innovation agendas (Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce 2025).

The Inclusive Innovation Catalyst initiative (Tin Ventures, 2025) in the West Midlands exemplifies this architectural role. Led by TIN Ventures in collaboration with The Open University and regional partners, the Catalyst integrates venture studio methodologies with inclusive innovation principles (The Real Preneur, 2025). The venture studio process combines three currently siloed phases and activities into a single support pathway for early-stage founders:

- 1 Operators (who run the venture studio and engage, validate, onboard, and scale each venture);
- 2 Founders (those who have created the concept, and others who are sector and process experts who provide mentoring and fractional leadership);

- 3 Investors (pre/seed/venture capital funding to provide the required financial means for launch, traction, and growth).

It seeks to unlock £30 million in co-investment and support over 50 start-ups while embedding equity and social value at the core of innovation processes (Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, 2025). Architectural responsibility extends beyond the physical hub to include ethical design of data and governance infrastructures. Universities must ensure that participation is supported by transparent data practices and equitable access to digital tools (Hayes, 2021). Design becomes an ethical act—creating the conditions for diverse participation rather than imposing predetermined outcomes. In this way, architectural practice aligns with the postdigital ethos of entanglement and reflexivity: infrastructures are never neutral but co-produced within social relations.

Universities as Bridgers: Building Trust and Cross-Sector Partnerships

The second role, that of bridger, involves cultivating trust-based partnerships across boundaries of sector, discipline, and identity. Jopling’s (2023, 2025) scholarship on youth voice and social justice offers valuable insights here. His research emphasises the need to move beyond tokenistic consultation towards relational participation—where young people are able to influence decision-making processes and outcomes. Such approaches resonate with the NCCPE’s emphasis on engaged research and with Jandrić et al.’s (2023) notion of postdigital citizen science as collaborative knowledge production.

Trust is the currency of inclusive innovation. Universities often occupy positions of privilege within local ecosystems, which can inhibit authentic partnership. Acting as bridgers therefore requires humility and recognition of power asymmetries. The Bath Spa led listening events demonstrated that partnerships grounded in listening and reciprocity can reconfigure institutional relationships. For instance, collaboration with youth-led organisations transformed conventional research hierarchies by allowing community partners to set agendas.

Universities as Catalysts: Experimentation and Collective Impact

As catalysts and convenors, universities can spark collective action and experimentation that extends beyond the institution. The NCCPE-funded Catalyst Conversations (2025–2026) operationalise this catalytic function. These dialogues convene researchers, policy-makers, and community actors to interrogate how universities can act as civic innovation partners. Early findings indicate that progress occurs when universities create safe spaces for iterative forms of networked learning—where failure is reframed as part of collective experimentation.

Jandrić et al. (2023) argue that postdigital citizen research requires constant negotiation of ethics, expertise, and agency. Similarly, catalytic universities embrace uncertainty, recognising that innovation emerges from relational processes rather than linear planning. In the listening events, young participants identified local barriers to opportunity (transport, digital exclusion, mental health) and co-designed prototypes for change and mutual learning, such as peer-led wellbeing platforms. The university acted as facilitator rather than director—providing legitimacy, methodological support, and channels to policy audiences.

Catalysis also involves the scaling of local insights into broader systems, as shown through the findings from the cross-sector conversations in Bath and London. The Inclusive Innovation Catalyst’s approach to portfolio innovation—supporting multiple small experiments rather than single large projects—mirrors the distributed logic of postdigital networked learning. Through iterative cycles of reflection and action, universities can cultivate a culture of ethical experimentation that sustains community trust and fosters systemic impact.

Discussion: Re-imagining Responsibility and Impact

The architectural, bridging, and catalytic roles outlined above reposition universities as dynamic participants in complex civic ecosystems. Together, they function as potentially replicable examples of what Hayes (2023) describes as positional reflexivity: the continuous awareness of how institutional actions shape, and are shaped by, wider socio-technical assemblages. Ethical innovation, in this sense, is not an outcome but a practice of ongoing negotiation.

The findings from the listening events and Catalyst Conversations suggest three key implications:

1 Ethics as relational practice

Responsible innovation must be grounded in relationships of care, trust, and reciprocity. This reframes ethics away from compliance towards relational accountability (Hayes, 2021) and anchoring ethical technology in educational practices and innovation (Eth-Tech, 2025).

2 Infrastructure as inclusion

Physical and digital infrastructures are not merely enablers but embodiments of values. Universities that design inclusive infrastructures—data systems, spaces, funding mechanisms—operationalise social justice.

3 Impact as collective transformation

Traditional monitoring and evaluation impact metrics often undervalue process-based and relational outcomes. Hence, we propose that inclusive innovation establishes a transformation-based approach that extends more traditional knowledge exchange practices, through iterative collaboration and mutual networked learning. Civic universities undertaking architectural, bridging, and catalytic roles could advocate for evaluation frameworks that capture such collective impact.

Conclusion: Towards an Ecosystem of Inclusive Innovation

In an age marked by volatility, complexity, and digital saturation, universities hold both privilege and responsibility. They are among the few institutions capable of convening diverse actors, generating new knowledge, and legitimising alternative futures. Yet to fulfil this civic potential, universities must transform themselves—from hierarchical organisations into relational ecosystems for more equitable knowledge exchange. Our experiences indicate that universities can become engines of inclusive innovation when they act as:

- Architects, designing infrastructures that make participation possible and equitable.
- Bridgers, cultivating trust-based partnerships that redistribute power and knowledge.
- Catalysts, fostering experimentation and collective impact that extend beyond institutional boundaries.

The empirical and conceptual insights drawn from the AHRC Impact Accelerator seed-funded project at Bath Spa University and the NCCPE Catalyst Conversations illustrate that ethical and responsible innovation is inseparable from inclusion. When universities align their research and engagement practices with the lived realities of diverse communities, they embody key elements of the postdigital ethos: entanglement, reflexivity, positionality and relationality. Importantly, these practices work both ‘in the network and with the network’ of universities and their external partners in the private, public, and third sectors (Networked Learning Editorial Collective et al., 2021: 338). Future work should deepen this inquiry through longitudinal evaluation of community innovation hubs, exploring how these infrastructures evolve over time as examples of new civic avenues of KE as collaborative networked learning. The co-design between social science researchers and practitioner-innovators offers a replicable model for others seeking to bridge academia, policy, and practice, informed by and drawing on the affordances created by digital innovation and the principles of networked learning. In so doing, universities can begin to reclaim their civic mission and social contract—to generate not only knowledge and growth but also hope, equity, and belonging in times of uncertainty (Hayes, Jandrić & Green, 2025).

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