Local Economy Viewpoint Piece

Title: Taking sides: The role of universities in supporting community driven approaches to addressing poverty.

**Abstract**

Universities are often placed at the heart of their local communities and yet for some remain at arm’s length from the issues most affecting them. This viewpoint piece will use Staffordshire University as a case study to illustrate how universities can play a full and active role in addressing issues of hardship and the subtle ways in which their relative power can both help, or hinder, the process. It will argue that for universities to be able to make a difference to hardship they need to be aware of the underlying causes of hardship and challenge the power structures that create them, including their own.

The viewpoint will use a number of university wide initiatives and projects to highlight what has worked and what hasn’t in Stoke-on-Trent. It will outline how storytelling and creative and digital engagement have been used to raise awareness of hardship, how the university have taken risks and embedded themselves in public and community spaces to reach people most affected by hardship and how strategic relationships have enabled the university to increase its impact. Crucially it will explore how working with communities to address issues of hardship is as much about how we do things as what we do.

**Manuscript**

*“Universities have lots of power… and how they chose to use it or not use it will have profound impacts” (Grant, 2021, pg. 33)*

In 2016 I was lucky enough to be part of the team that led the bid for Stoke-on-Trent to be named City of Culture in 2021. Despite not bringing home the title, the work galvanised people in Stoke-on-Trent around a common goal, giving hope and a vision of a different future for a city that had been in post-industrial decline for decades. One of the projects that emerged from our engagement with communities for the bid was called Reaching for Culture (Gratton, 2019), a participatory action research project with people with learning disabilities that highlighted the needs and wishes of people with learning disabilities in accessing mainstream arts and culture while provided a direct learning opportunity for cultural sector organisations to review the accessibility of their arts and culture offer. The seeds of the project were sown at a discussion with the City of Culture community steering group. The group were discussing some of the barriers they experienced in accessing arts and culture. When it came to hearing feedback from the table of people who went on to lead Reaching for Culture, the room fell silent as we heard how emotional exclusion, physical and verbal assaults, financial insecurities and a lack of communication left them feeling unable to access an arts and culture community that they were so keen to be a part of. The very foundation of Reaching for Culture therefore was built on these stories and, crucially, me, as lead researcher, believing them. In essence I chose my side before we even spoke to any other research participants.

This notion of ‘taking sides’ does not always sit comfortably in formal, academic research settings. Researchers are meant to be objective, to allow the data to speak for itself. But as researchers we have power, and where we decide to position our power can make all the difference, not necessarily to our research outputs, but certainly to the people we are purporting to value as research collaborators, partners, or beneficiaries. In participatory action research integrity comes from having a multitude of perspectives and broad range of expertise involved in the research process (Fine and Torres, 2021). Having empathy, creating a human connection and allyship, and using lived experience as the foundation for the research, especially in those early interactions, builds trust and can mean the difference between people getting involved or not, exposing their vulnerability to create change, or not. We can see parallels here between the roles of participatory researchers and how universities can use their power to fulfil their social responsibilities to their localities and bridge the gap between universities and their places.

This article provides a reflection on how, at Staffordshire University, we have built our approach to engaging communities for social change around the core principles of participatory action research, embedding participation, inclusion and relationship building into our approach and testing the theory of ‘taking sides’ to build trust on an institutional level. I’ll focus particularly on how a combination of creativity and research, taking risks and becoming visible, and creating strong and long-lasting strategic relationships with civil society, including members of the public, have enabled Staffordshire University to build its Connected Communities mission and have an impact on how hardship and poverty in Stoke-on-Trent is addressed.

At the time of writing, the UK was experiencing rocketing fuel costs, the highest inflation rates in 50 years and rising interest rates. Stoke-on-Trent is an area hard hit by post-industrial decline, austerity and resulting local authority spending cuts, and in 2019 was 14th, out of 317 districts, in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (Gratton and Jones, 2023). 28% of households were classed as fuel poor in 2021, the second highest rate in the country, meaning their property has low energy efficiency ratings and their disposable income, after energy costs are accounted for, pushes households below the poverty line (Harris, 2022). The reality at the start of 2023 however is that even those with energy efficient housing are facing rapidly increasing energy costs. “Poor energy efficiency, low wages (in 2022 wages in Stoke-on-Trent were 86% of the GB average) and high levels of benefit reliance make Stoke-on-Trent especially vulnerable to the cost-of-living crisis” (Harris, 2022, Pg. 8).

Staffordshire University’s main campus is based in an urban area of Stoke-on-Trent, an area where fuel poverty rates are at 35% and within 2 miles of four wards with at least one neighbourhood in the 10% most deprived in the country (Corrigan, 2019). Staffordshire University is a vibrant and busy campus, with the new £40m Catalyst Building taking centre stage and giving the campus a new heart and strategic vision as a Catalyst for Change. The building is industrial, airy and modern. Like many universities we aim to create spaces where students, businesses and partners can collaborate, focus and innovate. So, it can be easy, while in there, to forget about the world outside.

Poverty is one of the greatest barriers to accessing higher education (REF). It makes financial sense then that universities would want to reduce levels of poverty in their place to provide the very best opportunities for local young people within their university. However, there is also a moral obligation for universities to take concerted and coordinated action to tackle poverty in their towns, cities, and regions that moves away from self-interest towards societal interest (Grant, 2021).

Of course, a more prosperous city would be of benefit to everyone, and will, we would hope, ensure that in the future more young people from the area have aspirations to study with us. The economic impacts of universities as businesses, developers, and drivers of economic change through knowledge transfer are well evidenced (Brennan et al, 2018). They provide jobs, contribute to regeneration initiatives support business, provide income for local suppliers, and produce skilled graduates. However, as I argue elsewhere (Gratton and Jones, 2023), these economic impacts are not always recognised by the communities facing multiple disadvantages and universities remain out of reach for many. Thinking about the economic benefits of a university to a region, in isolation from the impacts of economic inequalities on its communities, not only risks isolating already disillusioned communities but also significantly reduces our ability to create any real changes at a local level.

The civic role of universities is as old as universities themselves. In 2012, Joseph Rowntree Foundation outlined ways in which higher education supports ‘disadvantaged’ communities, which included as employers, widening participation of local young people through schools and colleges liaisons, outreach into communities and some pockets of research (Robinson et al, 2012). While these activities are important and will have positive future impacts, they will do little to address some of the immediate challenges of economic inequality felt by so many people living in the immediate vicinity of our university. Crucially though, JRF go on to say that “institutional commitment to [supporting disadvantaged communities] is a key factor, together with a good understanding of needs, opportunities and relationships, and policies to support these activities”, a sentiment echoed in the 2019 Truly Civic report that called for greater strategic coordination of higher education’s community engagement activity (UPP Foundation, 2019).

At Staffordshire University, we are not totally removed from the poverty faced by some of the residents of area. Around 30% of students and 67% of staff live in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire and our students have been significantly impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. However, declaring an ‘institutional commitment’ to addressing hardship and poverty in our city requires us to admit that poverty exists there. This act is, in itself, a risk. Grant (2021) provides a framework for the many different types of political and social issues that universities take a position on. Grant presents two dimensions, firstly, whether the issue is contested or uncontested, and secondly, whether engagement with an issue is driven by a university’s self-interest or wider societal interest.

Many issues universities take a position on are largely uncontested, such as sustainability or climate change. Not everyone might agree that these are core issues impacting on communities, but they are generally uncontested. Other matters are, however, more contested. And here lies the challenge. Despite much evidence of the realities of hardship in Stoke-on-Trent (Gratton et al, 2019) and what Etherington et al (2022) calls “pending poverty catastrophe” in the city, Stoke-on-Trent is red wall conservative led council with a clear narrative of being ‘on the up’. Poverty in Stoke-on-Trent then is partially contested by some, and clearly uncontested by others. As Grant (2022, pg. 179) argues, “while we have seen that universities are willing to voice opinion or even criticism of uncontested social and political issues, things get very uncomfortable when … there is open and vocal disagreement.” To publicly oppose the message of ‘Stoke is on the up’, risks alienating one of our main civic partners in the region.

Furthermore, like all universities, student recruitment is essential to our existence. We want students to travel from across the world to study with us. Being honest about the realities of hardship and poverty in the city we want them to move to could potentially be off putting to prospective students. Reflecting on Grant’s (2022) framework, acknowledging hardship and poverty as a societal issue could potentially damage the self-interest of the university by impacting on student recruitment.

However, if declaring our commitment to addressing hardship and poverty is a risk, to not declare it would pose a greater risk to the reputation of our university. To do so would be to deny the impact of poverty and stigma felt by so many. Stigma not only dehumanises, humiliates and scapegoats people living with poverty, but also deliberately reinforce the social inequalities that create poverty in the first place. Tyler (2020, pg. 27), who defines stigma as “a form of classificatory violence ‘from above’ which devalues people, places and communities,” illustrates how stigma has been used to control individuals and communities for centuries and continues to create the conditions for widening inequalities through the “subjugation, exploitation and control of others” (Tyler, pg. 100).

The day before I wrote this, Johnathan Gullis, MP for Stoke North, posted a video on Twitter calling people in his constituency who fly-tip, use illegal drugs and demonstrate anti-social behaviour “scumbags”, “scroats” and “savages”. Perhaps most telling are the film’s locations at the time he uses the term - in terraced housing ally ways, and outside accommodation where people experiencing homelessness have been housed (Parker and Byatt, 2023), areas where hardship is palpable. He later states, "I absolutely stand by my remarks that a tiny monitory of scumbags, scroats, and savages sadly can cause the overwhelming majority of good folk across Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke to feel unsafe, at times, in their local community” (Parker and Byatt, 2023). This ‘othering’ provides a clear message, people who are in poverty are a threat to the rest of us. This is an extreme and blatant case of using stigma to shame and divide. However, the machinery of stigma is often more subtle than this, although the harm it can cause is just as damaging. Since austerity has become normalised in the UK since 2010, foodbank use, rough sleeping and the numbers of people living in relative poverty have increased, yet ‘welfare stigma’ is consistently used to systematically dismantle the welfare state (Tyler, 2022) and ensures those most in need of state support are labelled as ‘scroungers’, shamed and their experiences disbelieved.

What then, can universities do to help to address this ‘pending poverty catastrophe’ and the stigma experienced by so many residents of the city?

Poverty is a symptom of a grossly unequal society. Austerity, for example, which has disproportionately impacted poorer people in the UK, was a political choice to reduce spending over raising taxes (Tyler, 2020). And as a university we cannot hide from the fact that we have a role in furthering the inequality divide, by furthering the gap between graduates and the wider population, deepening social inequality (Brink, 2018, Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

To do nothing then is to accept and tolerate the realities of poverty and deny the difficult choices and stigma so many people living, working and studying in the city face on a daily basis. If we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem. As Grant (2021, pg. 172) argues, we “must ditch the notion of political neutrality to become powerful advocates for its students, staff and communities.” We must take a stance that opposes the decisions that create the inequalities in which poverty thrives and stand together with communities to advocate for the changes that they need to happen. We must decide how to use our power, we must take a side.

Staffordshire University’s response to the poverty in Stoke-on-Trent has been multifaceted. Its response reflects the complexities of hardship and its affects by supporting individuals, strengthening communities and addressing inequalities at structural levels. We have carefully considered how to use our power, where to use our own expertise or trust in the expertise of partners, and where to use our power to elevate the voices and experiences of others. Throughout it all we have focused on the assets in our communities, not its deficits.

Community engagement and participatory action research have a long history at Staffordshire University (Gratton, 2020, Gratton and Reynolds, 2022). The Get Talking approach to participatory action research, first developed in 2004 at Staffordshire University, reflects the asset-based community development and youth work principles of participation, inclusion and building trusting relationships through ethical engagement, of its founding team, and embeds creativity throughout. The approach works with community researchers as equal partners in the research process and encourages them to “ask critical questions about the systems and practices that shape their lives, and to imagine -through research- how they might be otherwise”. (Fine and Torre, 2021, p. 3).

Staffordshire University were appointed by Stoke-on-Trent Hardship Commission in 2019 to deliver Get Talking Hardship, a participatory action research project that aimed raise awareness of the experiences of people in poverty or hardship in the city. The project, which was delivered over a 6-month period, attracted 43 Community Researchers who were trained and supported to reach out interview approximately 250 people about their experiences of hardship. Get Talking Hardship resulted in some powerful impacts, including a week’s worth of media reporting raising awareness of the realities of hardship in the city and a change to the Hardship Commission’s terms and conditions, enabling people with lived experience of hardship to sit on its steering group.

In 2022 a second project was conducted to reignite the conversation about poverty and hardship following the Covid-19 pandemic and raise further awareness in the city through creativity and social media. The project, Raising Voices, Changing Minds, Ending Poverty, worked with a number of people who had been community researchers in Get Talking Hardship, in addition to new members, to develop a steering group of 12 people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages, including poverty and hardship. The steering group model resulted in shared ownership of the project, its methods of delivery and its impacts and recommendations, maximising the value of both lived and learnt experience to raise awareness and create change (Fox et al, 2023). Creative workshops in poetry, photography, podcasting, all created and delivered by members of the steering group based on their own interest areas and skills, helped others to share their stories of hardship with the project in creative ways. Further reach was gained through a postcard that people could complete and send into the project, videos and a wellbeing workshop to support individuals deal with the impacts of hardship on their wellbeing. The outputs from these workshops and creative tools were compiled into a physical and online exhibition and were shared through social media. Crucially, the Raising Voices project resulted in a negotiated Manifesto for Change, developed and signed by members of the Hardship Commission and the Raising Voices Steering group that commits each group to working together, using the lived and learned experiences of both parties to ‘Raise Voices, Change Minds and End Poverty’.

Both Get Talking Hardship and Raising Voices had many positive impacts on the individuals within the group, including increased confidence, helping them feel heard which helped their emotional wellbeing and created connection within the community research team and Raising voices steering group that has created a firm foundation for future collective action. The asset-based approach we adopted, as opposed to a deficit model that is so often resorted to when researching social inequalities, had several positive effects, not least making a clear statement about the expertise of people with lived experience of hardship and role this has to play in finding local solutions. This positive framing also supports communities coming together around their strengths and around solutions as opposed to creating divisions between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’.

Both Get Talking Hardship and Raising Voices have demonstrated a clear commitment from our university to stand alongside people with lived experiences to raise awareness of and create the conditions for hardship and poverty to be tackled. Over several years, Get Talking as a methodology has also informed the development our university’s strategic approach to community, public and civic engagement, embedding participation and cocreation at the heart of the strategy (Gratton, 2020, Gratton and Jones, 2023), meaning that the deliberate act of ‘standing alongside’, that is so tangible in participatory action research, is now rooted into our Connected Communities Strategy (Gratton and Jones, 2023). Staffordshire University’s Community Advisory Network, or Staffs CAN, has elevated the participatory approaches used in our Get Talking research methodology to enable community members and civil society partners to inform our approach as a civic university. The model has created a network of people from a range of backgrounds, including people with lived experience of hardship and poverty, and voluntary sector organisations who have seen a huge increase in demand for their services over recent years. Staffs CAN makes us visible as a university, and accountable to the local community.

Participatory projects and embedding participatory and inclusive approaches into our strategic relationships with communities are part of our action to address poverty and hardship. However, our wider research agenda has raised visibility of us as a university committed to addressing hardship and has contributed significantly to the generation of knowledge and awareness raising locally, presenting a direct challenge to structural inequalities at the heart of poverty in the city. Several prominent researchers, including the Vice Chancellor, are actively researching specific issues of hardship and poverty in Stoke on Trent, especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of these examples are collaborative efforts, working in partnership with, for example, Citizen’s Advice (Etherington et al, 2021). Furthermore, in 2022, Staffordshire University hosted the inaugural Action Against Poverty Conference, which has further cemented our visibility as a university that is taking a stand against hardship and poverty, and the societal inequalities that create them.

In addition to standing alongside people with lived experience and increasing the visibility of commitment to addressing hardship and poverty we have also formed strong partnerships and joined networks with civil society to enable us to learn from the sector and cocreate interventions and solutions. As an institution we have extensive networks across the region, including Stoke-on-Trent’s Hardship Commission, and Stoke-on-Trent Collaborative Network. Both have few resources to deliver work to directly address hardship and poverty themselves, however, it is the assets within the groups that are worth much more. Through both groups Staffordshire University has been able to develop an extensive understanding of the needs, and crucially, the assets of the local area, build our capacity and strength to deliver in partnership with community sector partners and advocate for people with lived experience to play a central role in decision making in relation to how poverty and hardship needs to be addressed. Through the Collaborative Network, Staffordshire University were able to lend its capacity as a large organisation to lead a Community Renewal Funded bid, Discover, which aimed to boost digital inclusion in Stoke-on-Trent and support 10 community and education partners in Stoke-on-Trent to provide digital skills, equipment, and confidence to people across the city through bespoke, accessible and bite sized digital learning opportunities (Jundi and Gratton, 2023). Our existing relationships with those partners enabled the project to thrive and address digital poverty for people in our city. But it was our ability to take a leadership role that didn’t misuse our power and that provided space for every partner’s expertise that really cemented our collective ability to make a difference.

Although I have outlined some the projects, research and collaborations that have helped Staffordshire University to make a difference, it is our principles, how we do these things, that speak volumes about who we are as a university. ‘Taking sides’ is about being unafraid to call out inequality and injustice. It is about being an ally and advocate for people with less power than us. In the same way I deliberately chose a side in order to raise the voices of people with learning disabilities in the arts and culture arena, universities need to do the same for people living, working or studying in their region. But it takes courage. Universities need to be brave enough to identify poverty where it exists and name the injustices that create it. Calling out injustice risks exposing us, risks making us vulnerable. But not doing so still makes a statement about what we believe and how we choose to use our power. Grant’s (2020) argument that universities need to be advocates for their students and communities, meaning they can no longer remain neutral, is relevant to our own need to acknowledge poverty in the city and openly side with communities to address it. It has been argued that universities are facing an identity crisis (Grant, 2020), so let’s use our work in this arena to tell a story about ourselves, and let the communities were work with tell that story about us too. Let’s be brave enough to take a stand on contested issues, especially where those with least power are telling us that the reality is that they are not at all contested. It might be considered a risk to openly take sides, but as soon as we start seeing the strengths and assets in our place and its people, and the power that comes from working together, that side feels like a very good place to be.

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