


Please cite the Published Version

Thomason, Carmel  (2020) Extending possibilities for widening participation: a circus arts and heritage case study. *Innovative Practice in Higher Education*, 4 (1). pp. 57-77. ISSN 2044-3315

Publisher: Staffordshire University

Version: Published Version

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Extending possibilities for widening participation: a circus arts and heritage case study

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Abstract: This paper presents a circus arts and heritage case study exploring extended possibilities for widening participation, within a broader conceptual framework of the civic university (Goddard et al., 2016) and Culture 3.0 (Boehm, 2016; Sacco et al., 2018).

Recent changes to UK higher education policy reinforced the strength of universities as 'anchor institutions', emphasising a growing civic responsibility, embracing a university's ability to positively change the economic, social, cultural and environmental wellbeing of its surrounding region (UPP Foundation Civic University Commission, 2019). Widening participation is a key priority for the civic university and can no longer be limited to recruitment activities.

The Philip Astley Project offers a potential for institutions embracing an extended vision of widening participation. The work involved overlaps in teaching, research and engagement to deliver social, cultural and economic benefits. Almost 29,000 people took part in 47 activities, while more than 200 staff and students became involved in arts, culture and voluntary activities.

Key words: Widening Participation, Civic University, Culture 3.0, Anchor Institution, Cultural Heritage, Knowledge Exchange, Community Engagement.

Introduction

This paper explores how co-ownership and co-production research processes, as described in the Culture 3.0 conceptualisation, could be employed in arts

and cultural initiatives to progress the broader higher education agendas of widening participation and civic involvement.

The UPP Foundation's report 'Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places' spurred a wider and deeper debate within higher education about the relationship between universities and the communities in which they are located. It broadened the debate around the purpose of universities away from centres of knowledge, education and skill-based training, towards a vision of universities as 'anchors' for social and economic regeneration in their localities (UPP Foundation Civic University Commission, 2019).

In 'The Civic University' Goddard argues for strengthening external partnerships through collaborative projects in which all involved have a vested interest, thus creating a 'win-win' situation making both initial engagement and long-term sustainability more likely (Goddard et al., 2016). In addition to science parks, knowledge transfer hubs, and health initiatives, Dunne and Lowe (2018) argue for recognition of the importance of arts and cultural initiatives in creating community links (Dunne and Lowe, 2018).

The Philip Astley Project is an example of a multi-partner arts and heritage initiative, co-ordinated by Staffordshire University for a steering group of arts, heritage, statutory and educational organisations in the region. Research, undertaken by the University for the project, made use of Culture 3.0 methods (Boehm, 2016), including the intentional use of co-creation, non-linear research processes, to increase knowledge and raise awareness of Newcastle-under-Lyme's historical links to circus. Culture 3.0 frameworks call for a shift towards bi-directional knowledge exchange rather than unidirectional knowledge transfer, with increased emphasis on co-production, impact and benefit.

This paper gives an overview of how the project used collaboration, co-creation research processes and student involvement within an arts and heritage context to establish strong engagement with a diverse group of

stakeholders as a way of driving social, cultural and economic benefits in the region. It raises the potential for similar projects to support a university-wide strategy for community engagement by encouraging overlap across core policy areas of teaching, research and engagement.

Civic connection and widening participation

The purpose and place of both universities and higher education in a broad socio-economic context is changing. Goddard addresses the challenge of articulating this change in his concept of a civic university which connects the local with the global, maintaining international academic excellence while creating opportunities for relevant engagement at a local level with measurable positive impacts both socially and economically (Goddard and Vallance, 2012).

The concept of western universities providing both a public and academic service is not new. Governments did, and still do, fund and build universities because of the potential impact on employment, productivity and economic and social transformation. However, as Goddard highlights, what worked for the needs of growing manufacturing economies of the 19th century, when many of the great UK and US universities were founded, requires a radical rethink for a 21st century, globalised digital society (Goddard et al., 2016).

The civic university debate has re-emphasised the importance of being accountable to the public purse that largely funds the sector, and in doing so has opened possibilities for universities to rethink how they approach traditional areas of their work i.e. teaching, research and engagement, to better reflect the socio-economic circumstances in which they operate (Goddard et al., 2016). In turn, this has expanded the perception of widening participation, which can no longer be viewed through a narrow lens of direct recruitment to higher education programmes. Instead, a wider vision of connected communities is needed, which may in the long-term positively impact degree programme recruitment but doesn't see this as its sole aim.

Instead this vision expands the traditional definition of widening participation by embracing overlaps between research and engagement, as well as between teaching and engagement. Developing support structures for such cross-boundary as well as interdisciplinary working, could encourage more collaborative projects with business, local government and voluntary sector partners to influence positive change in the surrounding region.

A sense of place

Staffordshire University operates in a region of widespread deprivation, where 30.2% of neighbourhoods are classed as being in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods nationally. Overall the city was ranked the 15th most deprived local authority area in England out of 317 districts in the index of Multiple Deprivation (MHCLG, 2019). It is one of eight local authorities to have ranked as progressively more deprived, in relative terms, with each update since the 2004 Index.

Of all Staffordshire University students 28% are recruited from the immediate Stoke-on-Trent area, while more than half full-time students (59.1%) are commuter students (Staffordshire University, 2020). Staffordshire University has the highest percentage of students from deprived backgrounds of any UK University (Sunday Times, 2019); 49.30% of full-time and 33.54% of part-time students fall within POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2, i.e. the two groups of young people least likely to progress to higher education (Office for Students, 2020).

In order to fully support Goddard's theory (that governments fund and build universities because of the potential impact on employment, productivity and economic and social transformation) widening participation and visions of connection to communities need to stretch beyond population groups targeted specifically for recruitment to higher education programmes (Goddard and Vallance, 2012).

Staffordshire University's 'Connected University' strategy reflects this situation by seeking to provide inspirational physical and digital environments with the broad aim of bringing communities together and widening access to higher education from under-represented groups (Staffordshire University, 2017).

Democratising research and Culture 3.0

Evolution of the World Wide Web from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0 has seen increasing immersion of the user experience, blurring the role of content creator and user. Sacco applies a similar framework to cultural interactions in the digital age, characterising Culture 3.0 as novel forms of active cultural participation where the distinction between producers and users of cultural and creative contents is increasingly blurred (Sacco et al., 2018). Boehm theorised how Culture 3.0 could apply in an academic context, in particular in regard to the curation of new knowledge in the arts, by calling for an intellectual shift towards bi-directional knowledge exchange, rather than unidirectional knowledge transfer, with increased emphasis on co-production, impact and benefit (Boehm, 2016).

The Philip Astley Project built public interaction and co-creation into a research process where the researcher acted as curator, enabling and overseeing public research and presenting it in a way that was accessible for a wide audience. This non-linear research process enabled strong engagement from many diverse groups across the city including public volunteers, circus professionals, arts organisations, museums, business groups, city councils, and local schools and colleges. It allowed people without formal qualifications to gain new skills, contribute to academic research, and feel a positive connection to the University in their locality.

The Philip Astley Project

Born in 1742, Philip Astley spent his early life in Newcastle-under-Lyme and is recognised internationally as the 'father of the modern-day circus'. Although Astley didn't invent the many acts we now see performed under the umbrella of circus, he was the first to bring different acts such as clowns, acrobats and jugglers together in one show, and his 13m diameter circus ring is still in use today.

The Philip Astley Project, which ran for 18 months between May 2017 and December 2018, was a multi-partner initiative funded by Heritage Lottery and led by Staffordshire University to research and raise awareness of Newcastle-under-Lyme's historical link to circus by bringing the past to life in an engaging and accessible way, raising pride in the town's heritage.

Staffordshire University's involvement in the project had three strands:

- Project management, which involved co-ordinating various partners to deliver a range of heritage circus events and workshops on the theme of the 250th anniversary of the circus.
- Heritage research.
- Student engagement.

These three areas can be thought of as coming under the broad higher education umbrellas of engagement, research and teaching.

Engagement – management of the project

A baseline survey revealed that only 11% of people in Newcastle-under-Lyme had heard of Astley and fewer knew of his connection to the region where he grew up (Papiernik-Bloor and Cooke, 2018). The 250th anniversary of circus, celebrated nationally in 2018 under the banner of Circus250, provided a timely moment to raise awareness of Astley's family connections to Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Newcastle-under-Lyme is a Staffordshire market town adjacent to Stoke-on-Trent and was identified by The Arts Council England's Active People Survey as having levels of cultural engagement within the lowest 33% of places in the UK (Arts Council England, 2018).

A previous attempt in 1992 to celebrate Astley's life and legacy was positively received in the area, but had no lasting impact due to a lack of co-ordination across organisations, limited funding and insufficient institutional backing. The Philip Astley Project led by Staffordshire University brought together a diverse group of stakeholders to form a steering group, which met monthly, with representation from: Appetite; Brampton Museum and Art Gallery; Friends of the Brampton Museum and Art Gallery; Keele University; Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council; Newcastle-under-Lyme Civic Society; Newcastle-under-Lyme College; Newcastle-under-Lyme Business Improvement District (BID); New Vic Theatre; Staffordshire Library and Information Service; Staffordshire Film Archive; and the Van Buren Organisation.

The University submitted a funding bid on behalf of the steering group and had a co-ordinating role in managing the project. The establishment of a steering group with a focused aim strengthened the partnerships by providing a central core structure for what was a multi-stranded project. Each represented organisation on the steering group had a different specific focus for their deliverables to the project, but the joint over-arching aim, to raise awareness of Newcastle-under-Lyme's circus heritage, created what Goddard has referred to as a 'win-win' situation i.e. enhancing both initial engagement and long-term sustainability of a collaborative project.

The programme began six months before the 250th anniversary of circus celebrations to give time to develop research insights into Astley's links to the area and to build the necessary momentum to engage the public in large-scale events such as a related exhibition based on the research, *Philip Astley: His Life and Legacy* at the Brampton Museum and Art Gallery, and *Astley Fest*, a large outdoor circus festival for families.

Over an 18-month period more than 47 separate related events and activities took place on the circus heritage theme. These included film screenings, quizzes, a town trail, talks, exhibitions, children's library activities and competitions, community performances, a family festival, community performances, and workshops (Thomason, 2019).

The project also provided opportunities for people to develop a range of digital, media and historical research skills through associated training and volunteering on the project. Digital and social media training was provided, via a workshop at Staffordshire University. This was available to members of the steering group, volunteers and arts organisation employees in the area. The training met a double aim of increasing employment skills in the region while enabling those who were upskilled to better promote the project and related events through social media.

In addition to engagement with diverse community stakeholders by co-ordinating the wider project and managing the funding process for the steering group, Staffordshire University was responsible for delivering specific elements of the wider project. As part of the project it was the University's role to undertake historical and heritage research using the co-creation and co-ownership research processes discussed in the next section.

Student engagement, discussed in more detail below, was not a formal element of project as regards the initial funding bid. However, for Staffordshire University, this became an increasingly important additional element of the project because it created valuable opportunities to connect students to the wider community, culture and heritage of the area. It also provided opportunities for people within the wider surrounding community to interact positively with the University via its students.

Research – embedding co-ownership and co-production

One of the University's roles in the project was to research Astley's links to the area and his family history. This fulfilled the project's broader aim to

better identify, record, interpret and explain Newcastle-under-Lyme's circus heritage.

The author used a participatory research process, bringing together diverse groups, including museum volunteers and professional circus performers, to embed co-ownership and co-production into the research process. Public interaction and co-creation was built into the research process with the author, as academic researcher, and museum staff supporting a group of six volunteers from The Brampton Museum and Art Gallery to research primary sources from several archives in the UK and France including Window Tax Assessments, Apprenticeship Records, Parish Records, Wills, archived letters, newspaper cuttings, playbills and published secondary sources from the time period.

During the project, volunteers were given training in historical research methods to develop skills to understand how archived eighteenth-century documents could be used as primary sources for research. As part of the project, some long-standing museum volunteers extended their historical research beyond the Brampton Museum's archive for the first time, visiting The National Archives and The British Library in London, and archives in Paris where Astley is buried.

Over a period of several months each volunteer was supported to research a different aspect of Astley's life and the findings were shared with the whole group at monthly meetings. Empowering volunteers to take an active role in the research process created a bi-directional knowledge exchange as a practical application of Culture 3.0 theories relating to the curation of new knowledge in the arts.

The findings revealed new insights into the life of Philip Astley, his family history, details of his home and lifestyle, his contribution to military horse training, and the role of Astley's theatrical performances in shaping recreational life of the period. As an academic researcher using a co-creation framework, the author's role became one of facilitating and curating the

creation of new knowledge to develop a body of work presented for wide public engagement.

Insights were curated by the author into a 17-page Resource Pack for a general audience, which enabled people to understand Astley in the social and political context of his time. The Resource Pack also provided the first comprehensive list of archives holding of relevant materials about Astley to benefit future researchers (Thomason, 2018).

Andrew Van Buren, a professional circus entertainer and one of the volunteer researchers, used the findings as the basis for a series of guided heritage walks in Newcastle-under Lyme and public talks about Astley both locally and overseas at circus related events such as the Monte Carlo International Circus Festival.

The research was further curated into an exhibition at the Brampton Museum and Art Gallery: "Philip Astley: His Life and Legacy", which ran from 5/6/18 to 15/7/18 and was visited by 16,700 people. Alongside the co-produced research insights, the exhibition included additional loan material from museums including the V & A Museum and Chetham's Library, bringing together archive materials relating to Astley for the first time including drawings, engravings and prints of Astley's riding school and amphitheatres, and a recreation of Astley's Amphitheatre based on a painting from 1806.

Additionally, a printed edition of the Resource Pack was distributed at an event, alongside a smaller exhibition at Staffordshire University, on 28 Nov 2018 and a copy is held as a cultural artefact in an Astley Archive at The Brampton Museum (Thomason, 2018). It is available electronically via the Philip Astley Project website (Thomason, 2018) alongside an additional activity-based, educational pack for younger children, developed by arts organisation partners, The New Vic Theatre and Newcastle Library (New Vic Education and Newcastle Library, 2017).

Enabling project partners and members of the public to be directly engaged in the research process helped to create a collective ownership of the research

outcomes. Again, this follows Goddard's 'win-win' philosophy (Goddard et al., 2016) and was important in establishing a rich and diverse base of interest from which to begin dissemination of the findings and encourage greater cultural engagement among the general population of the area.

Teaching – a whole university approach to community engagement

In Goddard's view, a truly civic university will experience overlap in core policy areas of teaching, research and engagement (Goddard et al., 2016).

The Philip Astley Project offered opportunities to connect students to the wider community and to the heritage of the area in which they are studying, boosting community coherence among groups that live side-by-side but are often disconnected. Many students initially raised ethical concerns about getting involved with the project due to outdated but strong perceptions of animal abuse in UK circuses. Hence, to engage and educate, opportunities were sought to embed the project in the formal curriculum.

The academic researcher had a focus on student involvement and actively sought such opportunities. By working closely with colleagues across the University, this was achieved in four modules across three of Staffordshire University's six schools, involving students from six different degree courses at levels 5, 6 and 7. Although thematically related, the focus on student engagement was distinct from the research and the project management elements of the Philip Astley Project.

Student engagement began by embedding elements of the project into modules that the researcher both designed and taught. These were: Review and Lifestyle Journalism at Levels 5 and 6; and Work Placement and Career Development at Level 6. In the Review and Lifestyle Journalism module students took part in circus workshops run by professional circus performers. This allowed students to dispel their initial prejudices by learning about circus in a fun, hands-on way. Students were then able to create journalistic content

based on their experiences of learning a circus skill, and interviews with professional circus performers.

Furthermore, the scale and multi-partnered nature of the Philip Astley Project, which included 47 different events, provided opportunities for students to support this work on structured and focused work placements within the University's Research Centre. This offered an office environment, which allowed both undergraduate and taught postgraduate students to experience the University from a different perspective and to begin to understand its wider research remit. Tasks on the placements included: creating content for the project's social media channels; updating the project website with news stories and details of upcoming events; keeping records of activity; distributing information to relevant stakeholders and venues; and supporting members of the project delivery team as required.

"The overall placement experience has been better and more enriching than I thought it would be. I lacked so much self-confidence before I started at the Philip Astley Project placement. I have gained many transferrable skills from my placement including problem solving, working independently and as a team, creative, and design skills. These are strengths that will be transferred into my career. With these new key skills learned on my placement I have an edge I did not have before when looking for jobs.' – Level 6 student.

"Working here has given me a boost in skills and confidence in a professional environment, a chance to network with people within the heritage industry, and it has led to me being taken on in a paid capacity within Staffs Uni Project Delivery Team" – Level 7 student.

Once the project was introduced in a formal way, student perceptions of circus gradually changed, and students outside modules where the project had been formally introduced began making requests to get involved. This

opened-up authentic learning opportunities for journalism students covering events for the University's news platform 'StaffsLive' (Thomason, 2017). There were also paid professional opportunities for Photojournalism students to provide official photographs of events during the project.

These extra-curricular activities enabled students to work with arts venues and volunteer groups across the region; building skills; sharing knowledge; connecting with the wider community and taking pride in the region's heritage.

Working across disciplines was more challenging. However, the broad scope of the overall project opened opportunities across several disciplines. Initially these opportunities were identified by the author and working partnerships were sought within the University across disciplines. Again, this worked best where there was a clear 'win-win' situation. For example, the work placement opportunities with the project team were also made available to other schools who had Work Placement modules at Levels 6 and 7.

The overall aim of the project for raising awareness of Newcastle-under-Lyme's circus heritage fitted well with work that tourism management students were required to do in relation to one of their assessments on marketing. The author approached a member of staff in this discipline who embedded aspects of the project into a Level 6 module.

Opportunities for extracurricular activities also became available for drama, fashion/textile, tourism, and history students, and the number of students involved in these extracurricular activities more than doubled those engaged formally on the project.

The opportunities created for teaching and student/community engagement were not directly related to the research outcomes in terms of the historical research on Astley. However, the multi-partner nature of the project provided opportunities for students to build an awareness of the research aspect of the

project, as well as developing a greater cultural awareness of the surrounding area.

Academic staff are often looking for fresh, topical ideas to bring into their teaching and the project provided opportunities for new relevant content in several teaching areas. However, this relied on the enthusiasm of individual staff members to embrace these opportunities. In some cases, due to already heavy workloads, staff were unable to consider or make their students aware of any additional opportunities.

By the end of the project more than 200 staff and students were involved in the arts, culture and voluntary activities in the region through the Philip Astley Project. Viewing the benefit of this type of cultural/community engagement within a broader perspective of widening participation and the civic university could help staff embarking on similar projects to gain support. Recognition of the potential impact and benefits of student cultural/community engagement beyond a single research project or discipline could influence the development of institution-wide frameworks or networks of support for this type of work.

Impact

During the 250th year of circus anniversary celebrations the Philip Astley Project engaged 29,000 people across 47 separate events in the local area, including circus workshops, talks, school events, an exhibition, town trail and a family festival. The exhibition "Philip Astley: His Life and Legacy" at the Brampton Museum and Art Gallery, was visited by 16,700 people – 100 people were invited guests at an opening event with a further 16,600 public visitors to the special exhibition. An independent evaluation report indicates 60% of visitors had not taken part in other organised Astley activities (Papiernik-Bloor and Cooke, 2018). Visitor comments included:

“Interesting to learn about his every-day life and the local connection. Thought it was interesting how it was weaved into the history of Newcastle”.

“The council should encourage people more with exhibitions like this one, especially about local people. I did not know about Philip Astley until now (I am 40!)”.

In addition to engagement via direct activities, the project reached more than a million people via mainstream media, social media, a dedicated website and online resource packs.

At the project’s completion, an independent evaluation found 56% of people in Newcastle-under-Lyme had heard of Astley compared to 11% when the project began (Papiernik-Bloor and Cooke, 2018). In addition to increasing town pride through increased awareness of its cultural heritage, the project also stimulated cultural tourism to the area with the Business Improvement District reporting footfall in the town up 34.4% on the same period the previous year (Thomason, 2019).

“High Streets are changing and have been for some years now. They have become far less about retail and much more about experience and destinations. The events and projects we have supported in the town have been a direct link to the increase in footfall...There is more of a sense of pride amongst our businesses that they are able to promote the town and its heritage through events and better understanding....We hear more and more people talking about Phillip Astley than ever. It is my view that the project has educated the community and really put Newcastle-under-Lyme on the map nationally” – spokesperson for the Newcastle-under-Lyme Business Improvement District.

Following from the work of the Philip Astley Project, the steering group member organisations founded the Philip Astley Project Community Interest Company (CIC) to further develop the heritage of Newcastle-under-Lyme and its circus connection.

“The people involved in the project from the start – it became something they really cared about...We want to keep the heritage trail going and develop more and more reasons for people to come here...people can now see the potential. It has brought people to the area who would never have come here before. People’s awareness and pride of Philip Astley has grown, and awareness and pride of the area has grown. People are exploring the place they have grown up in, which is great” – volunteer and steering group member.

Demographic data demonstrated the research reached a broadly representational group of Newcastle-under-Lyme residents in terms of age, sex, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic group. However, relative to the rest of the UK this group has low cultural engagement.

The project engaged younger people by influencing design and delivery of curricular and expanding extra-curricular activities at Staffordshire University. Students initially had ethical concerns due to outdated but strong perceptions of animal abuse in UK circuses. The research changed these attitudes.

In connecting students to the wider community and heritage of the area, more than 200 students were directly involved with local arts and cultural organisations including: the Brampton Museum; Staffordshire Film Archive; New Vic Theatre; No Fit State Circus; Appetite; and the Van Buren Organisation. This created work placement opportunities for students with the University project team as well as with its project partners.

Discussion

Facilitation and curation of collaborative research is more likely to lead to a different type of research outcome from the traditional academic journal paper. However, as the case study of The Philip Astley Project demonstrates, co-production methods offer the potential for developing impactful work with benefits that can help universities to grow and become more effective in their civic role, as well as offering opportunities to widen participation in a way not directly linked to recruitment, but one which in the long-term may have positive benefits in this way.

By creating cross-overs between teaching, research and engagement the Philip Astley Project was able to begin working towards an idea of a whole university approach to community engagement. These are ambitious ideas that require more systematic exploration with specific focus on widening participation if we are to make stronger assertions about why greater integration of these areas matters and for whom. Furthermore, strategic university-wide embracing of community engagement via such projects could have the potential to be transformative in strengthening a university's civic role and its stakeholder ties. While this paper has highlighted potential, exploring the actual impact of collaborative projects, co-production research methods and student–community engagement on widening participation requires a longer-term research strategy. A longer-term research strategy is also required to evidence the impact of similar projects on the perception of a university's value to its surrounding region. The impact and reach of The Philip Astley Project suggest this approach is worth exploring.

Co-production research is a dynamic method, which relies upon inclusion and respect between practitioners from a range of backgrounds and experience. It opens the boundaries of knowledge by embracing an openness to bi-directional knowledge creation. This involves a rethinking of the traditional academic's role in knowledge creation. In terms of widening participation, it also moves away from a traditional view of reaching out to those excluded from higher education to one which acknowledges and embraces that those

traditionally excluded also have knowledge that can be useful to universities. This counteracts a view of universities as ivory towers and it has also the potential to enable wider participation by making people feel universities are accessible spaces which contribute positively to the areas where they are located and to which the public too can contribute.

This bi-directional knowledge exchange, as outlined in Culture 3.0 theories, has the advantage of increasing engagement with the new knowledge created. This was particularly beneficial in this case study where the research output was aimed at a general audience and where high public engagement was a central aim. As a longer-term view it would be interesting to follow-up with participants in this and similar projects, to find out if their involvement with Staffordshire University changed their perception of higher education and/or influenced a decision for themselves or someone close to them to enter higher education at a future date.

Concluding thoughts

This paper looked at higher education agendas of widening participation and the civic university through the lens of co-ownership and co-production as described in the Culture 3.0 conceptualisation (Boehm, 2016). Public engagement and co-production were at the heart of the research strategy for The Philip Astley Project. This allowed researchers to develop new effective and impactful methods due to the immediacy of involving communities in the methodology of a project and being responsive to bi-directional knowledge transfer that was applied immediately for inherent impact.

The deep level of involvement from community members and diverse stakeholders created a strong commitment to the project that helped drive a wider impact. The scale of the project and strength of the partnerships also offered opportunities for students to engage more fully in the cultural life of the area.

More research is needed to give confirmative results on the long-term impact of such projects and their significance in expanding and strengthening a university's civic role. However, the impact of the Philip Astley Project suggests there could be great potential in exploring a Culture 3.0 framework for universities looking to deepen their civic roles and create more impactful research in their immediate localities.

Declaration of interests

All materials included in this article represent the author's own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list.

The work has not been previously published nor is it being considered for publication elsewhere.

The Philip Astley Project was sponsored by a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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