Commentary

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Reflections from the Business School's margins: On doing engaged scholarship

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Abstract
In this response to Lees's opening article on engaged dialogue, we reflect on doing engaged scholarship in the context of UK high streets. We foreground three facets of this approach: first, collaborating with partners beyond the ivory tower; second, engaging with 'left-behind' places; and third, reconsidering the value of academic outputs to move beyond esteemed journals. We offer these insights working as an interdisciplinary collective focused on helping communities to make their places better, which some might say is marginal within a Business School research agenda context. Finally, we conclude that, despite the challenges we have encountered doing engaged scholarship, the rewards of generating real-world impact outweigh any potential personal costs to our individual career ambitions.

Keywords
Engaged scholarship, high streets, participatory research, place management

Introduction

We were pleased to receive Lees's (2023) article on engaged dialogue, since it chimes with our experiences using 'engaged scholarship' (Van de Ven, 2018) which undergirds our work with UK high streets – a term we use loosely to encompass main streets, district and town centres, and sometimes metropolitan downtowns. Like the engaged dialogue Lees describes, engaged scholarship involves a diverse team of academics collaborating with partners outside the ivory tower to address 'wicked' societal problems (Ntounis and Parker, 2017).

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In our case, high street revitalisation has thwarted British policymakers for almost half a century, bringing into question decades of interventions informed by a neoliberal approach to regeneration. In short, partnership working and community empowerment are key to our approach; but unlocking this potential is difficult given solutions have to be devised on a place-by-place basis with local stakeholders, often where there is mistrust of governmental authorities and academic expertise following years of both private and public divestment. We are highly sensitive, therefore, of being accused of parachuting into places, extracting data to further our academic careers, before leaving communities with nothing but crumbs of academic insight (Pain and Kindon, 2007). In this commentary, we reflect on these experiences in relation to three themes raised by Lees: overcoming the distance between universities and wider society, research on 'left-behind' places and the challenges in translating applied research into valued (and valuable) outputs. First, however, we outline how a small team of academics passionate about place based in a 'new university', came to lead a national governmental programme which has supported 150 locations across England.

Engaging with local high streets

Manchester Metropolitan University (a former Polytechnic) has a long history of research on high streets, and in 2006 took the unusual step of creating a professional body, the Institute of Place Management (IPM), to support the professionalisation of the sector. Combining a team of academics from different disciplinary backgrounds, together with professional services staff, the IPM is an externally facing membership organisation, with a research agenda driven by engaged scholarship. The High Street UK 2020 project, for example, involved working with 250 stakeholders from 10 UK towns (Parker et al., 2017), followed by Bringing Big Data to Small Users, a government-funded project led by a non-academic partner involving a consortium of national stakeholders, together with representative groups from seven UK towns (Mumford et al., 2021). The know-how derived through this work fed into the Vital and Viable Neighbourhoods programme in collaboration with two local authorities (Manchester and Stockport) and involving stakeholder groups across 13 district centres (Steadman and Millington, 2022). The main outcome of the above projects has been the co-creation of adaptable toolkits, frameworks and learning resources designed for use by local stakeholders. Ultimately, this approach to building sustainable placemaking skills underpinned a successful tender from the IPM to establish and manage the High Streets Task Force (2024) for England, funded by the central government department also responsible for the UK's Levelling Up agenda. This project involves a consortium of 12 partners including other professional bodies (e.g., the Royal Town Planning Institute) and has supported 150 locations across England.

On being present

We agree with Lees's (2023: 3–4) argument that too much academic research engages in 'distanced scholarly critique' when 'engagement on the ground' is paramount. Indeed, Brenner (2018: 579) highlights how in urban studies research knowledge can become hegemonic through one's 'self-imposed enclosure within their own putatively separate discursive worlds'. Engaged scholarship refutes this style of knowledge production and gives way to a wide spectrum of situated knowledge generated through working in partnership with interdisciplinary scholars, practitioners and people passionate about their places (Sheppard, 2015a). Indeed, place management as a field is an amalgamation of geography, urban studies, management, strategy and public administration (Coca-Stefaniak, 2008) and oscillates between top-down understandings as an entrepreneurial process for place competition and regeneration and bottom-up place-based forms that promote community participation (Ntounis et al., 2020).

Our engaged approach necessitates a certain plasticity to enable 'people from different traditions to join without renouncing their respective worldviews' (Miettinen et al., 2009: 1313), such as national government, local authorities, Business Improvement Districts, professional bodies, local traders, civic

society groups and local residents. Yet, of course, working in diverse research teams can be testing due to different styles of working, disciplinary backgrounds and positionalities (Steadman and Millington, 2022). Even though we feel like 'outsiders' within our academic department since our research style differs from the Business School's intelligentsia, local communities can likewise be suspicious of academics and their role in making places better. Such a challenge necessitates a shift to what Fatsis (2018) calls a 'public character', building on Jacobs's (1961: 68) notion of a 'person who is public, present and talks to lots of different people' on the ground. This openness can also allow us to navigate people's passions and tensions in the urban sphere, through discussions that are open and inclusive (Davidson, 2020), as we have done in the hundreds of stakeholder workshops conducted across and beyond the UK.

We therefore welcome the opportunities engaged dialogue offers, as Lees outlines, to learn and develop long-term relationships with people and places. It is through these dialectical interactions (Blancke and Boudry, 2021) where dominant narratives of urban change, or in our research, high street change and its impending 'death' (White et al., 2023) can be challenged and questioned. Being present means being sensitive to the complexities of places and the people who live, work, commute, travel and play there, but more importantly, being attentive to how people produce knowledge, when and where their ideas and agendas become persuasive and how these create the conditions of possibility to generate different urban narratives and understandings (Sheppard, 2015b). This is a tall task in the high street context, as the paucity of partnership working (High Streets Task Force, 2023), frustration with local government and gatekeeping by long-time entrenched stakeholders, including democratically elected members (Steadman and Millington, 2022), can constrain our ability to engage a range of voices in engaged scholarship research.

Engaging places

Hardly a week goes by without someone proposing their solution for the high street. However, a one-dimensional fix, be it independent shops, pop-ups or markets, overlooks the complexity of challenges at the local level, where the practicalities of putting ideas into action are complicated. Hubbard (2017) is right to highlight how imaginations of the future high street often reflect middle-class preferences, or top-down visions thrust upon places by professional elites, lacking sensitivity to the locality they are designed to fix. Hence, the need for our place-by-place approach working through challenges with local communities to develop viable solutions which work for that particular place.

Sometimes we work in major city centres, but mostly in smaller towns, district and suburban centres, rural market towns, small villages, coastal resorts and new towns; often places described as 'left-behind' or in need of 'levelling up' (Dobson, 2022). This entails engagement in a terrain perhaps unfamiliar to many academics and policy-makers, often late into the evening. A working man's (sic) club, community theatre, market hall, sea cadets hut, library, church meeting room, swimming baths and even the cellar of a bar, are just some of the community spaces where we have run workshops for local communities. It has been important, where we can, to do this work in spaces familiar to local people; on their home turf. Too often, conclusions about places are drawn from a handful of (mainly western) metropolitan centres since, as Lees (2023) argues, often scholars do not seem to like 'crossing borders' away from their familiar terrain. But if we are to generate real-world change, the ordinary and everyday is where this work needs to happen.

To do this successfully requires a certain sensibility, empathy and a language which can translate across a range of community contexts. We have found complex ideas can be communicated, but by leaving a lot of our 'academic baggage' at the door. There are theories and concepts underpinning the content we provide, but it is articulated differently. We have found adaptable toolkits and frameworks to be most useful, more readily understood and applied. But neither do folk like being patronised. It is important to avoid going into a community challenged, say by deprivation, and telling them they are deprived. They already know. The action plans produced by and for local stakeholders,

therefore, reflect what they tell us and what they would like to change. They are stripped of academic jargon and instead provide an honest and independent assessment of what can be achieved locally, in contrast to some CGI-rendered utopian vision of the high street.

But what has surprised us over the years, is how urban policy makers – and we would add some academics – seem entirely removed from this landscape. Whereas negotiation with differently positioned social groups is part and parcel of ethical research, dealing with class difference remains a challenge, as Lees makes abundantly clear. Sometimes, we have been astounded by class-based disgust aimed at working class people and places (Edensor and Millington, 2009), especially when expressed by those considered as the progressive liberal left. As researchers in a new university in the North of England, we were once described by an unnamed professor as 'proles'. We therefore identify with Gibson and Klocker's (2005: 101) concerns that urban policy must understand 'the texture of poverty and working-class lives as ordinary and extraordinary ways of being' to avoid being seen as 'less than'. Whereas some might find stocking-filler books like 'Crap Towns' amusing, for us the joke is beginning to wear thin.

Revaluing outputs

Lees (2023: 9; original emphasis) observes non-academic voices are typically missing from academic outputs since 'we know the value of diverse voices… but rarely do we write with or publish scholarly work *with* those voices'. We agree that, whilst non-academic partners may be involved in data collection, they are seldom actively involved in the writing stages. Like Lees, we have experienced co-authoring outputs with non-academics, including the first author's blog article about the Vital and Viable project written with local authority officers and a local place leader (Millington et al., 2020), and 25+ reports he has co-written with practitioners as part of a national placemaking programme he is leading across England for the High Streets Task Force. However, we have faced challenges co-writing such publications with non-academics, with the academic team usually having to take on a greater share of the workload, since we have found external partners do not always possess skills in clearly articulating complex ideas in written form due to a lack of training, nor the time available to fully engage in writing (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018).

Indeed, we have encountered issues producing academic articles from our applied research even amongst the academic team. Engaged scholarship prioritises solving local issues over academic theory development, and methods are tailored to local communities with resultant data often 'messy' and not easily communicated through academic papers or lacking the 'robustness' required to pass academic muster (Steadman and Millington, 2022). Yet, academic articles are arguably ineffective alone for achieving 'real-world' impact, especially given the opaqueness of much academic writing which can be 'esoteric to the point of academic parody' (Schmitt et al., 2022: 753), thereby building '…barricades to keep readers out rather than open doors to invite them in' (Tourish, 2020: 105) and leading to a 'pandemic of [in]accessibility' (Cayla, 2023: n.d). As Davidson (2023) suggests, even dialogue amongst academics has become more 'closed' as we are siloed into increasingly specialised communities each with their own unique terminology, with more open dialogue across academic and non-academic communities thus required to tackle urban challenges.

Subsequently, we call for a reconsideration of the types of outputs produced from academic research to ensure it is actionable by the very communities it should seek to support. To avoid the 'knowledge transfer problem' (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006), we encourage more creative outputs tailored to community needs, such as the Estate Watch website described by Lees (2023). For instance, we have co-created a series of adaptable learning journeys, toolkits and frameworks with non-academic partners – such as the '25 priorities', '4Rs of Renewal' and 'Transformation Route Map' – which are being rolled out nationally for the High Streets Task Force and are designed to empower local communities to devise plans to address local issues. Yet, for this to become more commonplace, academics must also feel empowered by the academic institutions demanding this real-world impact from them by universities placing much more value on

'alternative' outputs, thereby releasing us from the shackles of the 4* REF agenda.

Conclusions

In this response, we have addressed three themes discussed by Lees (2023) in her opening paper. In doing so, we have reflected on our experiences of doing high-impact research with UK high streets. We strongly agree with many of the points raised by Lees and build on this discussion in relation to working beyond the ivory tower with a range of external stakeholders from an array of places, some might describe as 'marginal' or 'left-behind', and the challenges and compromises involved in doing engaged research. First, we have learned that partnership working is a two-way process and collaborative research requires willing partnerships from both sides. Our engaged approach works best when working with a coalition of the willing; otherwise, it fails when external stakeholders abdicate their responsibilities to improve their place. What this reveals is a much deeper structural problem in the UK regarding community capacity and leadership for change (High Streets Task Force, 2023). Second, engaged scholarship involves working at inconvenient times and in unfamiliar places (Steadman and Millington, 2022), which the IPM has extensive experience of. Our message to academics, therefore, is to get out of their comfort zones into a range of everyday community spaces to more fully understand the nature of urban change in light of people's lived experiences. Finally, our impact on wider society is well-documented in a range of outputs but has required compromises, whereby the additional time required to do engaged scholarship well leaves less time to meet instrumental academic targets. Historically, this has not aligned well with the academic agenda in terms of scholarly publication. All that said, we have no regrets. The IPM's mission is to help communities to make places better and we are confident we have helped to do this.

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