


Civic Sociology

# The University Library as Bellwether: Examining the Public Role of Higher Education through Listening to the Library

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This article engages the university library with live debates concerning the transformation of higher education. Focused within the British context, the article draws together previously distinct literatures from sociology, studies in higher education, and library and information studies to argue that the library represents an untapped lens through which to understand the university, its interface with civil society, and efforts to retain and reenergise its civic role. Beyond being solely diagnostic, the library is introduced as a *bellwether*—an institution that can also incubate trends towards privatisation and against publicness in higher education. Through exploration of an unusual joint-use public-academic library in Britain which combines academic and public collections, staff, and communities, the article’s analysis highlights both the opportunities that this “disruptive” shared space provides and the challenges posed by such an arrangement. Examples explored include the encroachment of private academic institutions in public spaces, the increasing asymmetry of fortunes between public and academic bodies, and the consequences of new library management technologies on the temporality and integrity of the library, and by consequence, the university.

## INTRODUCTION

The university library is an underexamined but highly influential institution which warrants sustained sociological attention, particularly in relation to the crises besetting the higher education (HE) sector. The library speaks to the organisation, communication, and sociality of academic knowledge production. As a well-known institution which spans the histories of both academic and public conceptions of education and leisure, it is valuable for enhancing our understanding of practices of “everyday academia” and for seeing how university policy plays out on the ground and between the shelves. The library also inhabits a bridging role within the university system that is arguably unique. Unlike the lecture hall or seminar room, the university library is instantly recognisable in towns and cities, resembles public libraries, and corresponds to shared understandings of collected knowledges and undirected inquiry. This bridging position allows the library to be additionally illuminative of the borderlands between the university and its local community. This article attends to each of these complexions and fundamentally argues that paying sociological attention to the university library reveals its capacity as a

*bellwether*, not only reflecting but also incubating broader issues affecting HE and civil society.

I begin with an ethnographic excerpt from the research site which serves as the article’s interpretative motif, a joint-use public-academic library in Worcester, England. The library, named The Hive and opened in 2012, is a private finance initiative (PFI) which houses both the city’s public library and the University of Worcester’s academic library.<sup>1</sup> Both libraries’ collections, staff, and space are integrated, and the building is physically open to all. The ethnographic excerpt grounds the article in a physical space and opens the article’s central concerns. These concerns lie in questioning, firstly, what can be learned about the crises in HE from libraries; secondly, what can be learned from dwelling at the borderlands between the university and civil society; and finally, what formally integrated spaces, like the Hive, can do to disrupt the regime of privatisation that now shapes the HE system in Britain and further afield.

*Turning towards the library’s entrance, I walk towards the glass and the door slides open. There is a vestibule area of around four metres before a second sliding door. Inside the doorway the left-hand side of the wall is a busy jostling of prizes and plaques, signalling the building’s recognition by architectural and librarianship organisa-*

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Worcester began as a satellite teacher training college for the University of Birmingham in 1946 and was granted full university status in 2005. Though a “post ‘92” university in a literal sense, it is not a former polytechnic.

tions. On the opposite side of these celebrations, a solitary, totally transparent and inconspicuous plaque tells us in barely legible grey font that “The Hive is a Public Private Partnership with Galliford Try completed January 2012.” Above my head is a silver sculpture called the Kaleidoscope by the artist Robert Orchardson. It hangs from the top floor ceiling and dangles through holes built into the floors above. The first time I read the caption, which is on the wall next to all the award plaques, I was surprised by how political it sounded and how much it resonated with my own interest in the public role of academic libraries:

Orchardson was particularly struck by the library’s guiding inspiration that “learning” and attendant cultural processes of exploration, finding out, thinking, imagining, inventing and knowing are the province of all citizens—and to be nurtured and celebrated accordingly. The Hive, in these terms, he saw as a declaration of hope and possibility, and a rare project of enlightenment at a time of national difficulty. (Orchardson 2012)

While “a time of national difficulty” is certainly ambiguous—which new time, and whose difficulty?—I liked that there was a gentle nod of recognition in a civic space like The Hive that public education and citizenship are political. That idea of education and “places of learning” (Ellsworth 2005) being the “province of all citizens” sums up so much about the promise of The Hive, and the reflective and light-giving qualities of the sculpture’s mirrored metal slices mimics its myriad creative possibilities. It reminded me of hearing that Stuart Hall had celebrated the library named after him at INIVA, laughingly describing it as “this subversive thing...quietly throbbing away” (Back 2010).

At the same time, Kaleidoscope’s angular and disorientating nature, with flashes of light but also shade and edginess, felt inadvertently suggestive of the fractiousness that comes from making such a promise in a society where education has become so routinely removed from “all citizens.” Hanging at the threshold of the building, like its paratext, the sculpture with its contrasting connotations is an emblem of the ambitious but complex constitution of the project itself.

(Fieldwork Reflection)

Joint-use libraries, like The Hive, are built on partnerships between allied but distinct institutions, such as local authorities and universities, schools, and colleges. The diversity of such projects worldwide speaks to the variety of ways that education and civil society are conceived. Joint-use libraries are currently very rare in Britain<sup>2</sup> but are more commonly found in the United States and in Scandinavia (Hansson 2006). The different financial and cultural drivers that have propagated these libraries are revealing. In the United States and in Britain, financial pragmatism in the face of declining public funding for public libraries and universities dominates the rationale (Bundy and Amey 2006; Molteni, Goldman, and Oulc’hen 2017). In the Scandinavian

context, joint-use libraries reflect a more natural marrying of equally valued and equally public institutions of formal or informal education (Hansson 2006). Overall, this article’s characterisation of the crises facing universities focuses on the British case, with it being understood that similar conversations are being had to greater or lesser degrees further afield. Here, libraries like The Hive challenge the trends towards the enclosure of academic spaces and the total closure of public ones. At the same time, these libraries have emerged from the same complex and contradictory financial and political processes that ultimately gave rise to these enclosures.

The article’s structure is as follows. After outlining the situation of the university within debates concerning the “crises” of public services and of HE, I summarise how these issues pertain to the changing function of the library and speculate on why those changes are often overlooked by sociologists. In the second half of the article, I draw further on ethnographic excerpts which offer unique glimpses into how these interconnected processes meet and are transformed in The Hive. Since the stated aim of The Hive is that, at the point of entering, “there is no concept of an ‘academic’ or ‘public’ [distinction]” (Dalton, Elkin, and Hannaford 2006, 542), attending to this unusual library allows us to dwell on the nature of these categorisations, these delineations, as they relate to broader processes of privatisation and enclosure. Thinking with this atypical library as a “non-example” (Ellsworth 2005, 9) allows the existing tensions regarding the public role of the university to be viewed in unusually stark relief. The three scenes selected to walk through these tensions concern, firstly, the asymmetric fates of academic and public institutions and their effects on academic enclosure; secondly, the everyday encounters that shape public perceptions of academia through the space of the library; and finally, the consequences of new library management technologies for the temporality and integrity of the library, and by consequence, the university. The article concludes by arguing that attending to the library sociologically reveals its overlooked role as a bellwether of transformations of the public role of HE. Without arguing that joint-use libraries represent a panacea, I argue that they nevertheless have productive effects for troubling the entrenching divide between public and academic spaces, goods, and communities. They warrant attention as, at least, an area for speculation about possible civic futures for HE.

## RELATIONAL CRISES: PUBLIC SERVICES, HE, AND KNOWLEDGE

I begin this section on crises and their relation to HE and libraries with a discussion of the idea and varieties of “crisis” itself. Given its ubiquity, crisis has almost become an organising concept in itself (Rodrigo 2011) and it abounds in the literatures that coalesce around (and in!) libraries. In

<sup>2</sup> The Forum, Southend-on-Sea, is Britain’s only comparable library. It combines collections from Essex University, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council, and South Essex College and was opened in 2013.

Britain there is a long-standing and acute naming of crisis in the funding and survival of public libraries (Appleton et al. 2018; Corble 2019; Mars and Medak 2019). There is a crisis cited in academic publishing (Ephemera Collective 2021; Harvie et al. 2013), in political culture (Mirowski 2013; Walby 2015), in work and its precariousness (Southwood 2011), and, unsurprisingly, in the effects of austerity in public services themselves (Hitchen 2019a).

While the term *crisis* ought to conjure visions of suddenness and totality, many of the crises mentioned above have proved ongoing and tenacious. *Crisis* is a go-to term that, as Roitman (2013) has argued, has a “certain telos,” implicitly referring to a time, or a norm, before the current situation was in play (see discussion in Loveday 2021). While the normative inflection of crisis, and its incongruous suggestion of brevity, carries a valid concern, I follow Hitchen’s (2019a, 2019b) work on the affective life of austerity to add definition to crisis, recognising it as, often, a slow-burning, multivarious, and diversely felt phenomenon. In the case of HE, crisis is ambivalent, occurring to differing intensities globally, and felt by different bodies at different times. The crises have sharp, time-sensitive financial and political origins but also play out unevenly and mundanely: in feelings of dislocation, a lack of belonging, a gritting of teeth while entering academic spaces or engaging in academic work as a student, an academic, a librarian, a member of the public. Crisis happening “year after year after year” is, for some, “background noise” (Hitchen 2019b, 21).

The library—both academic and public models—deals in both “sharp” and mundane forms of crisis. Following the global financial crash of 2007–8, closures of public libraries in Britain have not only exacerbated inequality but also extended the material and cognitive distance between infrastructures of education and the non-university-going public. Over the past decade, almost eight hundred public libraries have been closed by local authorities beset by cuts in Britain (Flood 2019). Many more have been kept open only by community volunteers (Casselden, Pickard, and McLeod 2014). In addition to the oft repeated refrain that “*everything’s* online now anyway” being false, the claim also overlooks the fact that not *everyone* is online: 10 percent of people in the United Kingdom never use the internet (Serafino 2019, 2). COVID-19 has made the “digital divide” only more pronounced, globally and locally. According to UNICEF, two-thirds of the world’s children had no access to the internet while home learning was their only option during the pandemic (UNICEF 2020). In the United Kingdom, almost 10 percent of children had no access to an electronic device enabling them to keep up with their peers during this time (Vibert 2020). There is also a long-standing class, racial, and gender dimension to British public library usage: compared with 32 percent of white adults over sixteen, 43 percent of black adults used one in 2019 (GOV.UK 2019). Women are more likely to be library users than men (Applegate 2008).

On the academic side, the literature on crisis is well worn, and this review is necessarily selective (for thorough discussions, see Holmwood, Cohen, and Wallis 2016; Lybeck 2021; McGettigan 2013). I select two strands from the range of critiques concerning HE’s contested public role, both of which originated prior to the financial crisis of 2007–8. The first strand focuses on the marketisation and privatisation of HE (Brown and Scase 1994; Shore and Wright 1999). The second strand concerns the “loss of faith in the Enlightenment project” (Elliot et al. 1996 xv) of universities themselves. The two strands seem to have changed little since their origins except in their intensity. Criticisms of the entrepreneurial, neoliberal, corporate university abound within one argument (Collini 2017; Giroux 2014; Watts 2017) while debates over scientific “neutrality” characterise the other. Opponents denounce the so-called “infantilisation” (Furedi 2016) that is said to accompany this debate, while proponents argue that there is a desperate need to challenge—among other things—the “colonial construction of knowledge... [in] the rule-bound and white-male dominated university system” (Patel 2020, 505).

In the first strand, we can see worldwide that the public role of HE is, to greater and lesser degrees, being (re)imagined. In Britain, significant reforms in HE such as the Browne Review (2010)<sup>3</sup> accelerated the shift from HE being a publicly funded social right to understanding it as a private investment in human capital (Holmwood and Bhambra 2012; Neary 2013). As undergraduates become consumers of education (Cruickshank 2016) they also fund an unprecedented proportion of their institutions through revenue raised by individualised debt (Dolton 2020). At the same time, individual universities must demonstrate public impact in unprecedented ways to secure remaining central research funding. The Research Excellence Framework (REF), a five-yearly auditing exercise which aims to “provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment” in order to “inform the selective allocation of funding for research” (REF 2021), began to include “impact” as a prerequisite for funding in 2014 (Pearce and Evans 2018, 349). Debate around the so-called “Impact Agenda” is fraught (Dallyn, Marinetto, and Cederström 2015; Watermeyer and Lewis 2017). For many, it represents a symptom of, rather than a challenge to, the privatisation of HE (Neary 2020). In the US and British context, the pervasive physical expansion of private campus buildings across city centres (Baldwin 2020; Haar 2011) similarly sits in tension with the civic role of HE.

What the university means for civil society and how it is experienced by those “outside” it has, by consequence, shifted. The reforms to British HE bring with them a cultural complexion of boundaries, distinctions, permissions, and memberships. Technical binaries of public/academic, social good/private product are liable to bleed into feelings of valued/not valued, welcomed/barred, and belonging/dislocation which affect the public position of HE for those

<sup>3</sup> Commissioned by a Labour government in 2009, the report recommended a shift in funding HE from public grants to private fees, funded by individual loans. It precipitated the fee norm of £9250 per year for undergraduates.

within and beyond its formal walls. If we are told, and treated as though, universities are run for and by only those with explicit “rights” to—or ownership over—them, the position of the university in civil society is surely altered accordingly. While we can measure some of this reaction through surveys and debates, gauging public feeling through everyday encounters with academia is challenging while the general public are so routinely barred from engaging with it. Looking to the unusual space afforded by a joint-use library therefore enables an unusual glimpse into how these trends affect public engagement with academic space.

The second strand of crisis in HE literature coalesces around truth, value, expertise, and elites. Here, the underlying racialised, sexist, and elitist foundations of the university (Emejulu 2017) are argued not only to be an issue of access, inclusion, and diversity in the sense of demanding redress to the skewing of representation towards traditional elite groups, but also to be an issue of knowledge production. Feminist (Gill 2009; Pereira 2015) decolonial (Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu, and Gebrial 2020; Shilliam 2018) and class-based (Brook and Michell 2012) criticisms have revitalised public conversations not only on whose voices need to be heard, but also on how the inclusion of diverse voices disrupts the canon. The hostility—within and particularly beyond the university—to the challenges raised by these writers and movements has been pronounced. Indeed, Shilliam (2018, 59) argues that the pushback in the British conservative government and national press against diverse scholarship have been stronger than the calls were themselves, arguing that “*that* is the identity politics we should be critically addressing.”

The challenges presented by this second crisis come from a place previously denied by the university (Ahmed 2012; Emejulu 2017), and they problematise some of the more wistful calls for a return to the days where neither tuition fees nor a very diverse university population existed in Britain. Scholars working in this area have thus highlighted the coincidence of the elitist foundations of universities alongside their more recent marketisation. In so doing, they draw the two forms of “crisis” together—of the university in public, and of the knowledge in the university. As Bhambra (2020, 511) has argued, “we cannot build the decolonised university separate from rebuilding and transforming the public university.” In disrupting the idea of the golden age of universities while also challenging privatisation, these scholars bring into focus some of the fundamental relationships that flow through the university library.

The university library should be viewed as a bellwether here, structured *by* and structuring *of* these two strands of crisis. Although they are often considered separately, there are substantial points of dialogue between them that centre upon the civic role of the university. Both strands have significant ramifications for the library as a place of learning and sociality, and as a functional and symbolic gateway between the university and civil society. On the one side, HE’s movement from a public to a private good affects the library’s purpose, governance, and possibilities both as a (semi)public building and as a “service.” Contrary to the ideal of a library as a shared resource, this move repositions it as a space of individual entitlement and ownership. On the other side, the crisis of academic knowledge calls

into question how knowledge is chosen, given status, and valued. Here, the library’s provision of access to organised knowledge is implicated in terms of whose knowledge is available, where, and in what form. As Ahmed says with reference to citational practices, these taken-for-granted practices are generative: “the reproduction of a discipline can be the reproduction of these techniques of selection, ways of making certain bodies and thematics core to the discipline, and others not even part” (Ahmed 2013) In what follows, I bring the library itself into sharper focus to argue that it reflects, incubates, and has the potential capacity to transform the civic role of HE.

## THE SILENCE OF THE LIBRARY IN SOCIOLOGY

The university library has undergone transformation which predates and coincides with the broader landscape of HE, while garnering insufficient sociological attention. Described as “the powerhouse” (Hoare 2013, 319), “laboratory” (Abbott 2011, 43) and “central organ” (Ratcliffe 2003, 367) of the university, the library continues to operate as a metaphor for the historic research and teaching roles of HE but is largely absent from scholarship beyond the discipline of library and information science (LIS). A consequence of the “pincer movement” (Bowker and Star 1999, 239) of new technologies and new public management philosophies, the automation, outsourcing, and dispersal of the librarian’s former core role in the last two decades renders the library less visible but does not negate its continued importance. Despite the declining use of the physical space of the library by researchers and postgraduate students (Garnar and Tonyan 2021, 2), the work and infrastructure of the library continues to matter. From negotiating and financing access to online journals, to compiling digital reading lists, and providing much needed study space for ever increasing numbers of fee-paying undergraduates with nowhere else to go (Hurdley 2010, 49), the university library and its workforce continues to underpin the modern university.

Libraries are quietly complicated spaces which benefit from ethnographic attention. They combine high structure and loose interpretation, are temporally diverse, and engender written and unwritten behavioural expectations. Libraries are materially structured around classification and belonging: this item belongs here—in this shelf space, in this discipline, in this community of practice—and not there. This person’s position makes them entitled to—trusted to have—this number of books for this length of time; this person is barred from entry at both the turnstile and the firewall. These issues of discipline, appropriateness, and legitimacy are engaged with through classificatory practices that make and remake academia (Bowker and Star 1999; Foucault 1970; Gieryn 2002). Even as much academic knowledge migrates online, this information ecosystem is based on principles which originate in the library. As a consequence, the infrastructures of digital libraries follow many of the conservative, slow-changing, and problematic classificatory structures that critical library practitioners have long fought to redress (Drabinski 2008; Morales, Knowles, and Bourg 2014). The development of open access, which aims to make academic work freely available to all, has been “messy” (Eve and Gray 2020). It has neither re-

solved the inequities developed by predatory publishing monopolies (Harvie et al. 2012; Mars and Medak 2019) nor—so far—truly opened scholarship to those far outside the university (Gray 2020; Lawson 2018).

Curiously, academic libraries and librarianship have been relatively overlooked in sociology (Abbott 2011). Zygmunt Bauman begins the first edition of *Thinking Sociologically* (1990, 1) with an extended reference to sociology, libraries, and their relation to disciplinary knowledge. After detailing how works belonging to the discipline of sociology can be identified through having sociology in the title or subtitle and being thus stacked together by the fabled figure of “the librarian,” Bauman muses that “the librarians who arranged such shelves close to each other probably had the reader’s comfort and convenience in mind. They assumed (or we may guess) that the readers browsing through sociology shelves would occasionally reach for a book placed on, say, history or political science shelves; and that this may happen more often than searching the contents of, say, physics or mechanical engineering.” What Bauman suggests is that the university library is something static, self-evident, instrumental, and not where the work of sociology, education, or sociability happens. He implies—at least for rhetorical value—that librarianship is both a little arbitrary and a little unknowable: “or we may guess.” Les Back (2007, 195) also implores his students to *leave* the library and head out into the real world, saying that among the “musty shelves” and “pages that are yellowed by time” we will “not find the answers to the questions we want to ask.” While both are well-intentioned metaphors, they also illustrate an oversight of thinking with the library to understand the university, the public, and their overlapping educative possibilities.

This lack of interest in the university library, even in literatures concerning the transformation of HE, stands in contrast to studies of museums (Star and Griesemer 1989; Tolia-Kelly 2016) which often underline that these institutions communicate values, standards, and common senses in addition to their role of preserving and displaying objects of epistemic importance.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, minimal crossover currently takes place between scholar-practitioner library workers working within LIS and sociology. According to some in LIS, this ignorance is borne of sub- or unconscious derision of LIS, libraries, and librarians (Eichhorn 2013). Beyond academia, libraries and librarians are subject to clichéd and often gendered commentary (Gambrell and Brennan 2014). For others, like LIS practitioners Salisbury and Peseta (2018), the feeling is mutual: they, and others (Buschman 2021) have argued that LIS does not “theorize the university” sufficiently, and no more than sociologists theorize the library.

Far from being neutral and uneventful, the library remains part and parcel of all academic work and activity, and its ongoing minimisation and technological and managerial transformation makes attending to it more, rather than less, important. In turning now to my research site, a joint-

use library called The Hive, I explore scenes which illustrate how it can be understood as a bellwether for broader issues in HE and civil society.

## THE HIVE: INTEGRATION, VULNERABILITY, AND FUTURITY

I now draw out three distinct talking points from The Hive to use as motifs for further discussion. In turn, each section addresses the three complexions of interest highlighted at the start of this article: what can be learned about the crises of HE from libraries, from the borderlands between the university and civic life, and finally from formally integrated spaces (like The Hive) which go some way to subverting the prevalent privatisation regime. The first scene explores what is revealed by the institutional makeup and challenges of The Hive. The second concerns the affective experience of ceremonial academic architecture, gated communities, and knowledges. The third examines how the two strands of HE’s crises are etched into the (e)bookshelves by a “pincer movement” (Bowker and Star 1999) of new technologies combined with new management philosophies.

The Hive’s multiuse space consists of an integrated library, a children’s library, the county’s public archive and archaeology service, and the council services “hub.” Although a collaboration between two public bodies (the University of Worcester and Worcester’s Local Authority), an additional component of The Hive is the fact that it is made possible by a PFI. Prior to and particularly since the Hive’s opening, PFIs have come under heavy criticism. The idea of the PFI was first established in 1992, under the auspices of the newly appointed Conservative prime minister, John Major. Though a precursor to today’s HE and public service reforms, PFIs form part of the wider trend towards increased privatisation of public services. This trend sees public service investment as leading to the “crowding out of private investment, capital formation, and spending” (Hitchen 2019, 50). Advocates of PFIs argue that private finance will be considered only if the benefits are greater than they would be if the public had direct control. Yet public officials charged with their particular duties—building bridges, keeping schools open, running hospitals—recognise that the reality is fundamentally different; if there is no public money, then PFI is their only option, and if PFI is their only option, then a case can always be made that it offers a better deal than conventional methods. As the secretary of state for health under Blair Alan Milburn once (in)famously stated, “it’s PFI or bust” (Monbiot 2001).

The Hive’s PFI contract was administered through central government and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and completed by Galliford Try, a construction and development company (Dalton, Elkin, and Hannaford 2006, 541). The contract will last for twenty-five years and is shared by the parties in agreement with 70 per cent being paid—and eventually owned—by Worcestershire

4 Public libraries have been the subject of some growing interest for sociologists concerned with features of citizenship and migration (Robinson 2020) and austerity (Corble 2019; Hitchen 2019b)

County Council and 30 percent by the University of Worcester. While this agreement made the library possible, the PFI brings the same challenges that Krinsky and Simonet (2017) highlight in their study of urban governance in New York City Parks. As they too illustrate, the private-public partnership comes with “submerged alternatives, disagreements, contradictions, and areas of ambiguity that characterize them and are part of their foundation” (133). These ambiguities, holding together asymmetric institutions, create vulnerability.

The Hive’s staffing is centred on formal and informal convergence. The integration of the workforce is such that all staff are employed by one or the other “partner.” In other words, The Hive is not an employer; only the University of Worcester and Worcestershire County Council are. Despite this (unavoidable) maintenance of difference, “work teams” are generally a mixture of university and council employees, and they all work to an agreed Hive-wide “customer service standard.” Crucially, differences between the university and the council mean that employment contracts are not always identical, despite the employees sometimes having the same roles. The partners also manage two separate and divergent budgets. As such, there is a simultaneous integration (the books are not organised in “university” or “public” areas; they are interfiled using the Dewey decimal system) and an ongoing—indeed, deepening—structural difference.

In the years following The Hive’s opening, the divergences of budget have grown more pronounced, which has affected both staffing and resources. Staff members describe the effects that both year-on-year and “in-year” council budget cuts will have on The Hive’s ambition for equal integration as being like a “bomb waiting to go off.” In addition to shaping the everyday practices made possible by the space, asymmetric financial stress, uncertainty, and the shifting context upon which The Hive was conceived seem to alter the temporality of the project. In one reading, it is heavily future orientated: the library is not integrated, it is always integrating. At the same time, The Hive is glancing back to the past, grasping to hold on to the original goals of the integration project, aware that more challenging budget constraints may yet be to come.

There is something of a slippery purchase to the notion of integration here, exemplified in both staffing and book buying. It is always a work in progress, and one which changes with time. The Hive’s mission of dissolving the barriers between the notions of “public” and “academic” remains central, but this mission rubs up against the financial realities of a tightening council budget and concurrent changes in attitude towards the position of HE within an infrastructure of public education. As a “non-example” (Ellsworth 2005), The Hive allows us to engage at an unusual proximity with a scenario that will echo across university towns throughout Britain. Further, The Hive reminds us to consider that the public service crisis is inextricably linked to the challenges facing HE.

The following two scenes draw out these tensions further, outside and within the library, and point to more general inferences about the changing public role of the university, and the library’s potential role in incubating or reinvigorating it.

## THE BORDERLANDS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

In the following excerpt from my fieldwork, I describe the space around the Hive’s entrance—a few steps back from the location of the excerpt that opened the article. As well as grounding the space, I also specifically draw attention to the felt impressions of the library as a backdrop to closer examination of the challenges facing the public role of HE.

\*The Hive library overflows its physical building and acts as a bridge between its multiple publics: the University of Worcester and beyond. To the left of the doorway is a footbridge that links to the university’s campus pathway, to the right is another bridge connected to the city of Worcester’s shopping centre. This pavement area has Hive branding, is in The Hive’s signature colours: golden yellow, pale grey, and grey stone. Although its extension beyond the physical walls suggested at times The Hive’s overflowing, unbounded capacity, its softness and ease, it’s also a site of contradiction and ambivalence. I can see a no-smoking sign, a no-cycling sign (both visibly ignored), a no-alcohol sign, and a CCTV information sign as well as visible security cameras.

At times, and for some, this overflow area is like a temporary and malleable space between being inside and outside, the first gateway into the building: many people approached the space through the outer area and swept on inside, through the totally transparent doors that glide open with bodily proximity.\*

*For others, it was more like a two-step boundary, the first filter. However unconscious, the multiple layers of entrance created a soft discomfort for some, before the harder frontier of that same door. The door’s transparency was not definitive: pure glass without handles can be seen straight through but can also create an off-putting reflection—a reflection that actually obscures what is on the other side. I think about Alan Bennett’s evocative confession about the enduring dislocation of joining elite education from a working-class background:*

*This resentment, which was, I suppose, somewhere mine, had to do with feeling shut out. A library, I used to feel, was like a cocktail party with everybody standing with their back to me; I could not find a way in (2011, 3).*

(Fieldwork Reflection)

This reflection on The Hive’s boundary space highlights the ways that the material and structural environment of HE interplays with the affective experience of it. Ceremonial order, performative architecture, and academic expectation bled into the usage of even this highly integrated and welcoming library. At various points of the three-year ethnography, I witnessed, and talked to, many people who hovered around the doorway area of the library, a style of space increasingly typical in Britain with its securitisation and public messaging. Some told me, hurriedly, that they never read the books, or that they didn’t enter the building. I sat on the inside of the library’s doors over many other days and observed the high traffic of people using only the toilets before leaving—another public service crisis (Greed 2019; Hatherley 2019). Library staff initially faced resis-

tance from the university's student body, and various behavioural rules have subsequently been added to allow differentiation between university and public users (students have priority in booking study spaces during exam times and have differential borrowing rights). That this kind of scenario plays out in a fully physically open library predicated on integration tells us something about the broader impressions of academic libraries—and university buildings in general—in public life.

Public access to academic libraries is regulated and varies in Britain. Most universities offer very limited and conditional free access and some paid membership options. Both tend to require identification and proof of address (making them inaccessible to those without stable addresses). It seems hard to imagine now that most university buildings have swipe card entry systems, but this wasn't always the case. According to Dunn (2002), gates—in all manner of semipublic buildings—have more to do with psychological rather than physical comfort or security. As Arribas-Ayllon, Bartlett, and Lewis (2019, 2) have recently said with reference to other university buildings, university doorways are “carefully managed and centrally controlled.” Book theft, which is said to amount to 3 percent of a university library collection per year (Harwell 2014), can be remedied—as it is in public libraries—through alarmed gates without turnstiles.

Of course, the turnstiles are about keeping members of the general public out, not just about book theft. While it would be naïve to overlook security concerns and the concerns of students needing space and capacity to work amid student number growth, understanding the mechanics and repercussions of securitising library spaces against members of the general public is pertinent to the first strand of HE's crisis—that concerning the changing public role of the university. As has happened in the narratives of open access for research output, the space of the library could also be conceived of as a public good. If research remains—at least partly—publicly funded, at what point did barring routine public access become common sense? If public impact and public engagement are such linchpins of the university today (Watermeyer and Lewis 2017), why is access to academic knowledge via the space of the library not considered? Finally, if a minority of universities in the United Kingdom *do* have freely physically accessible libraries as part of a commitment to their civic role, what prevents others from following suit?<sup>5</sup>

Dwelling at the boundary of The Hive allows questioning of the troubled public role of HE as it plays out in everyday communities. I noted earlier that while we know from literature that the overarching privatisation regime in British HE is likely to affect the role of the university in civil society, we don't have many opportunities to gauge this process on the ground. Witnessing both the ongoing discomfort of

some people entering The Hive through its labyrinth of surveillance and branding, but also The Hive's overall success, gives us some insights. It underlines the importance of affective experiences of academia—of how ceremonial architecture and behavioural expectations underline belonging for some and dislocation for others.

While much of the forgoing may appear pessimistic about the opportunities afforded by joint-use libraries, The Hive is also a highly successful and popular venture; its overall popularity attests to the viability of using the university library to bridge public and academic communities. Contrary to the seemingly inevitable march of expanding and gated university buildings, paywalled academic publications, and the concurrent demise of public libraries, The Hive is productive beyond the sum of its parts. Due to its institutional makeup and aspirations for *integration* rather than (only) pragmatic *co-location*, The Hive is not just “allowing the public in,” it is creating a new kind of academic space where public knowledges, communities, and needs reform their academic counterparts. When the complexities of public life are welcomed into academic spaces, possibilities for new learning communities, academic activism, and shared public knowledge emerge, despite and alongside the inevitable tensions. Because it is home to people of all ages, many different walks of life, and a broad range of expectations and needs, The Hive often engenders empathetic encounters, socially diverse study, and the playful questioning of academic/public boundaries. Both the interfiling of academic and nonacademic books on the same shelves and the easy situation of the university's civic and public engagement events within the public library allow for mutual boundary crossings to take place in a shared and common space.

#### THE PINCER MOVEMENT OF NEW MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHIES AND TECHNOLOGIES

The final scene selected from The Hive goes within the bookshelves and illustrates, in close and graspable proximity, the tensions within academic education and how they spill out into a public conception of the university. Beyond asymmetry between public and academic finances, I outline how the rise of reading-list-only purchasing and patron-driven acquisition (PDA) intersects with, and incubates, the crises of HE.

*On The Hive's shelves, large blue stickers are attached to some of the University of Worcester stock. I get a bit obsessed by them and stare at them from my seat in the library. The stickers say the book is a “High Demand” item, which carries the significance that it has been put on a module reading list by an academic member of university staff and is no longer available to members of the non-university-going-public in the same way as books*

<sup>5</sup> I am currently engaged in developing a “typology” of what I am calling “library-based civic engagement” based on surveying the visitor access rules across British university libraries in order to ground these questions in a broader British context. One factor explaining attitudes and aptitudes may be the different foundational histories of universities (Russell Group, Civic University, post '92, for example), but so far trends have been patchy. This lack of significant trends itself underlines the points that the library is overlooked as an institution of importance when considering issues of civic engagement; it may vary for arbitrary reasons, simply because it is not accounted for within calculations of civic or public engagement.

*without the stickers are. The public may only borrow one “High Demand” book at a time in contrast to the university students, who get eight at a time. The stickers are large and take up much of the spine, so immediately give the impression of who is and who is not able to borrow the item, often at the expense of the book cover and title. The language of “High Demand” feels urgent and unequivocal; “High Demand” feels like a classification of the higher worth of those using it. Demand is used here as a word to denote need, but it is also a verb—to demand—which coincidentally reflects how the sticker came about in the first place. (It was in response to negative feedback from students who believed “the public are taking all of our books!” that the blue stickers came in.)*

*Although the actual usage statistics of the library’s collections showed that only one subject area—history—had such significant “cross borrowing” that it created a problem for students who needed books, there is an interesting mismatch between technology, practicality, and an unarticulated relative “value” placed on student voice.*

*Over time, blue stickers grow and sprawl on the shelves in front of me. Contingent microdecisions mean that in some areas they dominate and crowd out non-stickered books: the university’s own tight(ening) budget means that only books for reading lists are bought, all books on reading lists are automatically classed “High Demand,” all High Demand books are blue stickered, blue stickers are not easy to take off, and no procedure is in place for their removal should the books leave the reading list. At the same time, the public library budget faces year-on-year and in-year cuts; fewer books are bought; a greater proportion of the library carries the borrowing constraints outlined by stickers.*

(Fieldwork Reflection)

The Hive’s blue stickers are a potent emblem of the complex and antagonistic forces at play within the arena of public services and education. The processes that led to the stickers and their growth illustrate not only the growing asymmetry between the council and university partners—which we might have guessed—but also the everyday practices of enclosure that arise when needing to manage this asymmetry. Because of the individualisation of HE’s goods, movements to restrict and emphasise differential ownership of these goods become seen as the best, or only, way to move forward. Both as a result of the council being unable to afford their stock’s replenishment, and of the university needing to respond to requests from the student body for greater ringfencing of “their” stock, the integrated bookshelf is gradually turning blue. As such, while the library still aims to collapse classifications of “public” and “academic,” fault lines and imperfect workarounds arise which result in reinforcing material and symbolic differentiation.

The second aspect we can learn from the scene above has to do with the “pincer movement” of information technology and new managerialism (Star and Bowker 1998), something which is in no way unique to The Hive. Specifically, on the technological side there has been the development of automated reading lists and purchasing methods. On the new managerialism side, we see the decline of subject specialist librarians relative to the rise of (comparably fewer) teaching and technical librarians (Hoodless and Pinfield 2018). Combining the two, library collection development

philosophy increasingly follows a so-called “just-in-time model” instead of what has been retrospectively termed a “just-in-case model.” In practical terms, this means that, often, only items with demonstrated demand are acquired, and those with low circulation statistics are weeded out. Here, the mediating role of the librarian is lost, and expertise instead lies with currently teaching academic staff or with the students themselves. Lugg (2011, 17) supports this new paradigm, arguing that “instead of acquiring books that users might want, the library provides a broad range of new title information, enabling patrons to choose which books the library should buy...collecting for the ages is replaced by collecting for the moment.”

These philosophies and the technologies that operationalise them—PDA, automated reading-list systems, and reading list-only purchasing—are underpinned by, and reflective of, the broader crises affecting HE. They reflect a sense in which the university is a service that exists for the student as customer, that all academic value must be quantifiable, and that “efficiency” must supersede deliberative, disinterested scholarship. In relation to the idea of the library as bellwether, they also have two significant outcomes on reshaping the nature of the library and of the university. Firstly, these shifts change the temporality of the library. Along with privileging the short-term needs of teaching academic staff, automated reading list systems and PDA also privilege immediate, individualised (and perceived) “need” over long-term considerations and posterity. With the content of the library (physical and digital) decided largely by either PDA or a reading-list system driven by academic teaching staff, the meaning of the library, and, I argue, the university itself, alters. The temporality shrinks from the long term to daily demand, and the nature of demand changes from holistic to instrumental.

The instrumentalisation of the library collection connects directly to the second strand of HE’s crisis as it relates to representation, diversity, and a questioning attitude to how academia is formed and maintained. With purchasing being supposedly done at the “point of need,” the whole nature of what a library is alters: the library as a deliberate collection of curated knowledge(s) becomes, instead, a conglomeration of individual items. This conglomeration nonetheless creates an “accidental” collection which is compromised. If the techniques of selection reproduce the discipline (Ahmed 2013), then the field of acceptable knowledge is tacitly communicated through its existence on the (e)shelf. With PDA and reading-list-only purchasing, academic trends and short-term popularity will hold sway over the kind of deliberative, reparative, and even speculative collection development that is needed to remedy longstanding inequities of knowledge production in HE.

In this short meander into the bookshelves of one library, the privatisation and knowledge-based strands of HE’s crisis are found in challenging expressions. While in most contexts the asymmetry it revealed is harder to grasp in tangible ways, the very stuff of the library—its books, its shelves—illustrates how civic and academic forms of education are in relationship with one another and have cumulative effects. Extrapolating out from the blue stickers contributes to our understanding of the ways in which several scenarios—the crisis of HE and public services under



austerity, and the “pincer movement” of new managerialism with new technologies—are relational. Increased sociological engagement with these kinds of issues would enrich both academic analysis and activism in responding to the crises facing HE.

## CONCLUSION

The life cycle of The Hive has coincided with crises in HE and public services. Sociologists of HE have understandably tended to look at the university and its immediate activities alone as areas through which to assess HE. However valid, these foci—and even those that extend slightly beyond the university site, as with community engagement activities—often presuppose a natural distinction between the categories of “public” and “academic.” While a distinction exists (and this article has led with it, too), it is often not acknowledged or defined and remains somewhat overlooked—like the library itself. This article makes the case for dwelling in these points of distinction as they are found, in the library and out in the community. Doing so affords opportunities to gauge the reception and reach of HE as it exists in civil society and to make broader inferences about just how public HE is today.

The Hive, straddling both academic and public worlds, provides an opportunity to walk through the many crises afflicting both HE and civil society in the UK context, since it pulls into unusual proximity processes that are familiar, albeit more dispersed, elsewhere. Dwelling at the borderlands of this unique library is not only revealing of the challenges and possibilities that integrated library services offer, but is also, perhaps more importantly, revealing of the points of tension between academia and its interface with public life—the points at which the aim to eradicate barriers and boundaries between “academic” and “public” re/appear, are re/enforced, or are transformed. The unusual public-academic institutional structure, and its reliance on an imperfect financial model, therefore brings the overlapping, overspilling binaries of public/academic, social good/private product, and valued/not valued into the light. These conclusions extend beyond The Hive and illustrate the extent to which university libraries—everywhere—operate as underexamined bellwethers in the HE landscape, structured by and structuring of the crises faced by HE. Future research will dwell at the borderlands of other universities, particularly at those with different historical and cultural formations to the University of Worcester.

Beyond its broader diagnostic appeal, The Hive also represents a *practical* opportunity to address both strands of the crisis of HE through the space of the library. While the prognosis did not always feel optimistic, The Hive high-

lights new possibilities for public forms of academia that are generative beyond the sum of their parts. Further research will ask how the lessons of The Hive can inform other projects elsewhere, where a new purpose-built library is not possible. The Hive’s current outlier status presents us with opportunities to consider the generalised, profound, and widespread crises of HE, while also highlighting the limitations inherent in an endeavour that both challenges prevailing formal and informal social norms and exists in a straitened financial context. The future success of The Hive’s model will perhaps be tautological, becoming more successful if and when it becomes replicated, generating a new common sense about the role of libraries in civil society.

In conclusion, there is surely a great deal more the library can tell us—about the crises in HE and of public services, of new formations of academic knowledge production, and of new possibilities for civic engagement—but this requires a broader acknowledgement by sociologists of the library’s enduring importance within HE and civic life.

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