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Digital civics projects putting people at heart of digital innovation

Putting people at the heart of new developments in artificial intelligence and digital technology will be the focus of a Digital Civics Exchange taking place at Northumbria University this Spring.

Digital Civics research seeks to explore the ways in which citizens and communities can be empowered in decision making processes and service provision – on both local and national scales – through the design of digital technologies that create more relational interactions with governments, political organisations, healthcare providers and civic authorities.

This May, academics, students, businesses, and people from local communities will come together for a series of events, including research projects, talks, panels, and workshops from leading researchers working in this field.

The event will also see the official launch of Northumbria University's new [£9 million UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Citizen-Centred Artificial Intelligence](#).

Announced in October last year, the [Centre is one of 12 across the UK funded through UK Research and Innovation \(UKRI\)](#) and will train the next generation of AI researchers and innovators, benefitting the UK's economy and society.

With the first cohort of students starting this September, the Centre will involve academics from across the University, and will focus on the inclusion of citizens in the design and evaluation of AI – helping to ensure this rapidly advancing technology works for everyone.

This emphasis on the involvement of people in the development of new digital technologies and services is an area of research in which Northumbria University is leading the way.

Northumbria University's Department of Computer and Information Sciences, which will host the Digital Civics Exchange event.

Established in 2018, the annual Digital Civics Exchange involves students from around the world visiting Newcastle and working with local researchers and partners to undertake mini research projects, focused on societal challenges and citizen empowerment through the design of civic technologies.

It was developed through a collaboration with Dr Austin Toombs and Dr Colin Gray, then at Purdue University in the US, with the aim of creating opportunities for students to engage with ongoing Digital Civics research in the North-East of England. Dr Toombs and Dr Gray have since moved to Indiana University, where they are continuing this collaboration.

The event has continued to develop over the years, and now includes

researchers from the UKRI-funded [Centre for Digital Citizens](#) – a collaboration between Northumbria and Newcastle universities, the University of Edinburgh and UCL, which works with citizens and partners to ensure technology applications support diverse communities and have long-lasting social value and impact.

Also involved in the exchange this year are members of the EU-funded project [DCitizens - Fostering Digital Civics Research and Innovation in Lisbon](#) – established through a Horizon Europe Twinning programme between the Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia, in Italy; the University of Siegen, in Germany; Northumbria University in the UK; and overall project coordinator Lisbon University's Instituto Superior Técnico, in Portugal.

The aim of DCitizens is to empower communities with and through digital technologies, developing innovative solutions to the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital age by bringing together researchers from different countries and disciplines.

[Dr Kyle Montague](#) of Northumbria University is organising this year's expanded Digital Civics Exchange and said the upcoming event is set to be the biggest yet, bringing together experts from across Northumbria's research community, and other institutions around the world.

He explained: "Technological innovations in recent years have transformed our lives – from work and education, to shopping and communication. However, most new digital technologies have been developed without any input from the people who ultimately use them.

"The aim of Digital Civics is to empower citizens – giving them a more central role in the digital era we are living in, as well as ensuring technology is used as a force for societal and individual good rather than harm.

"Through the Digital Civics Exchange, we are bringing together both academic and non-academic audiences interested in this area of research to better understand the role of digital citizenship and its impact on society.

"Northumbria University is ideally placed to host this event, with our involvement in projects such as the Centre for Digital Citizens, the DCitizens project, and the new UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Citizen-Centred

Artificial Intelligence at Northumbria, and we look forward to welcoming all those who share our focus on this important area of research.”

[Professor Shaun Lawson](#) is Head of the [Department of Computer & Information Sciences](#) at Northumbria and oversees the world-leading research carried out across the University on the theme of [Computerised Society and Digital Citizens](#). He is also Director of the [UKRI AI Centre for Doctoral Training in Citizen-Centred Artificial Intelligence at Northumbria](#).

Speaking about the Digital Civics Exchange, and Northumbria’s role in global digital civics research, he said: “I’m thrilled that we are hosting the Exchange again here in the Department and it’s been truly amazing to see how this has grown year on year.

“The collaborative relationship between all the universities involved is a joy to be part of. The added dimension this year of the new citizen-centred AI CDT into the ecosystem of Digital Civics projects here at Northumbria gives us further capability to continue to grow this area of research and offer further new collaborative opportunities to our international partners.”

Find out more about the Digital Civics Exchange and how you can get involved by emailing tanya.vlasova@northumbria.ac.uk

Centre for Digital Citizens ([follow @digi_citizens](#))

[Professor Pamela Briggs](#), of Northumbria University’s Department of Psychology is Co-Director of the [Centre for Digital Citizens](#). She said: “Too often, when technology hits the news, it is for the wrong reasons. The Post Office Horizon scandal is yet another example of the way we overlook the knowledge and understanding of ordinary citizens when considering the impact of digital technologies on our everyday lives. This work recognises that citizens have the right to be heard from the outset in the design, development and deployment of transformative new systems. ”

Centre for Digital Citizens – Next Stage Digital Economy Centre and CDT in Citizen-Centred AI(CCAI) have received funding from UKRI EP/T022582/1 [Grant Ref: EP/Y030729/1].

DCitizens ([follow @dcitizens_proj](#))

Dr Hugo Nicolau, of Lisbon University's Instituto Superior Técnico, is Project Coordinator for the [DCitizens project](#). He said: "The ongoing collaboration with Northumbria University in the field of Digital Civics has opened new opportunities and empowered us to build capacity for ground-breaking research and innovation in the field. The student and staff exchange has been a critical instrument to share knowledge, craft new partnerships, and work on digital technologies to provoke positive social change."

The DCitizens project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme under Grant Agreement No 101079116.

Study Abroad Programme:

Speaking about the Digital Civics Exchange, and the benefits it brings, [Associate Professor Austin Toombs](#) of Indiana University said: "Colin Gray and I [initiated the study abroad from Purdue University](#) specifically because we wanted our students to have the chance to learn about Digital Civics from world experts on the topic. Over the last six years, the program has grown to include a broader scope and has fostered several new collaborations on the topic. We are incredibly excited to see how this exchange continues to develop over time!"

Follow Austin Toombs [@altoombs](#) / Follow Colin Gray [@graydesign](#)

The article [Digital civics goes abroad](#), based on the original Study Abroad Programme in 2018, was published in the Association for Computing Machinery's Interactions journal in February 2019.

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