

POLICY BRIEF

A European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education: Why and How?

KEY MESSAGES

- Community engagement is emerging as a policy priority in higher education, reflecting increasing pressure on universities to demonstrate how they deliver public benefits.
- Community engagement is about mutually beneficial cooperation between universities and their wider communities, with an emphasis on communities with fewer resources.
- Universities are under pressure to address other priorities such as research excellence and technology transfer, leaving little incentive to pursue community engagement.
- Community engagement is difficult to manage and measure, due to its range of activities and stakeholders.
- With the (re)emergence of the community engagement agenda, there is a need to develop a framework for community engagement in higher education to support universities in institutionalising their cooperation with the wider community and to inform policy-makers on the value of such engagement.
- Although accountability tools in higher education have so far focused on competitive comparisons of performance through quantitative indicators, there is gradual move away from such tools.
- The new framework that will be developed through the TEFCE project will acknowledge the complexity of community engagement and the diversity of university-community contexts. It will foster a learning journey for universities towards transformational forms of engagement, rather than being a measurement and ranking exercise.

1. INTRODUCTION

This policy brief presents the conclusions of the publication *Mapping and Critical Synthesis of Current State-of-the-Art on Community Engagement in Higher Education*, by Paul Benneworth, Bojana Čulum, Thomas Farnell, Frans Kaiser, Marco Seeber, Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, Hans Vossensteyn and Don Westerheijden. The publication is issued as a part of the TEFCE project, whose objective is to develop innovative policy tools for supporting, monitoring and assessing the community engagement of universities.

2. BACKGROUND

Community engagement has emerged as a priority in the European Commission's Renewed Agenda for Higher Education. While actions that link the university with broader society are not a novelty, community engagement in higher education is a new way of articulating and structuring how higher education interacts with the wider world.ⁱ The Commission's Renewed Agenda emphasises that 'higher education must play its part in facing up to Europe's social and democratic challenges' and should engage 'by integrating local, regional and societal issues into curricula, involving the local community in teaching and research projects, providing adult learning and communicating and building links with local communities.'ⁱⁱ

Universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate how they deliver public benefits. The increased emphasis on community engagement in higher education can also be understood as a critical response to the predominance of university engagement with business.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, with the dominance of research excellence as a priority in higher education, many universities have failed to develop infrastructures to translate the knowledge they produce into tangible benefits for the wider community.

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3. DEFINITIONS

Community engagement is about mutually beneficial cooperation. The TEFCE project defines community engagement as a *process whereby universities engage with community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial* even if each side benefits in a different way: university knowledge helps societal partners to achieve their goals and societal partners' knowledge enriches the university knowledge process. There should be co-determination and an interdependence between the university and community through open dialogue that allows societal partners to meaningfully influence the decisions made by university actors.

Community engagement is an integral part of universities' 'third mission' activities, but it has so far been marginalised. Since the 1980s there has been increasing policy pressure on universities to develop their third mission, beyond teaching and research, through which they directly contribute to societal development. However, the emphasis within third mission activities has predominantly been on contributing to the knowledge economy through business engagement, entrepreneurship and innovation, and much less on community engagement.

'Community' refers to a broad range of external university stakeholders, but with an emphasis on those with fewer resources. Universities engage regularly and systematically with businesses and policy-makers, but have far more difficulties engaging with NGOs, social enterprises, or other civil society organisations that do not have the resources to engage easily with universities. The latter are therefore the primary beneficiaries of community engagement, as defined by the TEFCE project. Equally, the TEFCE project does not consider stakeholders involved in technology transfer and commercialisation of intellectual property as fitting in the community engagement category, since universities have already developed comprehensive infrastructure to support these processes.

'Engagement' refers to a huge variety of activities, including through teaching, research and other initiatives led by the university or by academics. Based on a comprehensive international literature review, the TEFCE project has mapped seven key dimensions of university-community engagement: (i) institutional engagement (policy and practice for

partnership building); (ii) public access to university facilities; (iii) public access to knowledge (dissemination of academic findings); (iv) engaged teaching and learning; (v) engaged research, (vi) student engagement; and (vii) academic staff engagement.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to community engagement – it is always context-specific. Different places have different histories of university engagement, different cultures and different communities. The value of different forms of community engagement also varies per academic discipline. It is therefore important that academic staff retain the autonomy to determine how best to organise their community engagement activities.

Community engagement can fulfil different social purposes. A framework developed by Hazelkorn (2016)^{iv} differentiates between three approaches to community engagement: (i) a social justice model, which focuses on community-based learning and research, community-based volunteering and knowledge exchange activities; (ii) an economic development model, which focuses on technology transfer, innovation, entrepreneurial activities and links with businesses; and (iii) a public good model, which embraces a deeper transformative agenda where engagement is included in both university mission and governance as well as in teaching and research. According to the TEFCE project's definition, each of these approaches can be equally legitimate as a form of community engagement, provided it meets the other criteria listed above.

Authentic community engagement goes beyond 'corporate social responsibility' by embedding mutually beneficial partnerships. As a concept and set of actions, community engagement ranges from one-dimensional to multifaceted, from superficial to embedded, from transactional to transformational, from collaborative betterment to collaborative empowerment. Holland and Ramaley^v distinguish four sequences in the 'engagement continuum' that start from volunteerism, then move to engaged learning, engaged research, ending with engaged institutions. Progress across these sequences depends on producing mutual benefits for academic and for community goals, as well as on fostering understanding and mutual cooperation between university and community partners.

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4. CHALLENGES

Policy priorities in higher education focus on excellence and global league tables and do not encourage community engagement. A trend in the 2000s has been the rise of discourses around excellence and the world-class university, which emerged out of the development of global league tables. Notions of community engagement have not been included in league table measures, because of its diversity of engagement activities. As the idea of a world-class university has become a normative ideal, community engagement has been seen as something that universities should not aspire to.

Competing priorities within universities' third mission make it difficult to institutionalise community engagement. Since the 1990s, the focus of universities' third mission activities has been increasingly on forms of engagement that have more tangible economic benefits and are easier to measure: university technology transfer and associated activities focusing on commercialisation of intellectual property. This trend has caused a vertical differentiation of the different variants of third missions, within which it has proved difficult to institutionalise community engagement.

Community engagement is resistant to being measured. In the context of management systems where 'what can be measured matters', community engagement is not immediately available for codification and measurement. The concept of community engagement covers a wide range of objectives, activities and outcomes, for which is difficult to develop a small number of simple indicators that would cover the definition in a satisfactory manner. Combining this with the complex intra-institutional diversity of universities due to their various disciplinary communities, makes the management of community engagement extremely difficult for university managers.

Most attempts to externally assess community engagement have had limited success and uptake. For example, in 2011 the European Indicators and Ranking Methodology for University Third Mission (E3M) were developed through a project co-funded by the European Commission, with the objective to develop standard quantitative indicators for third mission activities of universities. Despite having developed a comprehensive database with 98 indicators, their implementation proved impracticable and the developed methodology has not been

used after the project's completion.

5. NEW DEVELOPMENTS

There is increased uptake and interest in one tool for external assessment of community engagement: the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement. This tool developed in 2006 has achieved major success in terms of its mainstreaming in the U.S. It combines self-assessment and external review by leading scholars in community engagement, who assess which institutions qualify to receive the Classification. Such a form of assessment results in a formal external recognition that an institution has reached a certain standard of performance.

Institutional self-assessment tools for community engagement can also provide an alternative approach to assessment, although they have their limits. Dozens of tools, primarily in the U.S., Australia and the UK, exist to help higher education institutions reflect upon the extent to which they are community-engaged. The disadvantages and limits of the existing self-assessment tools analysed in the TEFCE project are that they focus on the process of community engagement, rather than on outcomes or impact. They are more 'top-down' than 'bottom-up' and do not provide a clear platform for including community perspectives in the process.

New Public Management (NPM) tools focusing on comparisons of competitive performance and top-down steering have reached their limits. Many accountability instruments in higher education encourage better performance by setting a minimum standard and then use a market mechanism to raise that standard through comparing performance indicators. The NPM approach can only work on the basis of efficiency, by turning quantifiable data into simple indicators, which is often incompatible with the multifaceted and context-specific nature of community engagement. Such an approach is highly rigid and undermines the encouraging and rewarding of universities for responding constructively to societal needs.

There is increasing acceptance by the European Commission of multidimensional assessment

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approaches that avoid simplistic indicators.

Recent European Commission-supported initiatives such as HEInnovate (2013), U-Multirank (2014), Indicators for Promoting and Monitoring Responsible Research and Innovation (2015), and the Regional Innovation Impact Assessment Framework for Universities (2018) use a mix of assessment methods, with the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data to create a better understanding of university performance. These approaches to assessment permit customisation by universities through context-specific selection of indicators and are more bottom-up oriented. This will result in a decreasing possibility to make transnational comparisons of scores. Benchmarking in such a context would therefore be limited to identifying and promoting best practices and encouraging mutual learning among higher education institutions that share similar features.

6. TOWARDS A EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There have been no initiatives yet at the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) level that have focused exclusively on community engagement.

The TEFCE project aims to fill this gap and support university managers, practitioners and policy-makers by developing a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education. In proposing a new Framework for community engagement in the EHEA, the TEFCE project will examine how to balance internal and external assessments, qualitative and quantitative assessments as well as how to develop a multidimensional, customisable and bottom-up approach to assessment.

In line with the findings of our analysis above, the TEFCE project recommends four principles that should underlie a Framework for community engagement in higher education:

(1) Commitment to authentic, mutually beneficial community engagement. The TEFCE Framework will promote genuine university-community partnerships that benefit both universities and communities, as opposed to engagement that results in the university being the primary benefactor or where the university acts as a 'charitable donor'.

(2) Empowerment of individual actors within and outside university. The Framework should not be a tool that is only intended for management staff at the central university level. The tool should be meaningful to individual actors and should recognise value and award different kinds of community engagement activities undertaken by individuals within the university or community.

(3) Allowing users of the Framework to influence the level of value assigned to different engagement practices. The Framework should avoid producing best-practice stories that are selected by university management only. The Framework will therefore attempt to include a mechanism by which various users can provide critical reflection on the value of the featured engagement practices.

(4) Collaborative learning rather than comparison of competitive performance. The Framework should represent a learning journey to motivate universities' community engagement efforts and not provide a mechanism for ranking universities. The framework should recognise the collective nature of community engagement activities and not frame them as being excessively individual or indeed stimulate competition between units or universities.

The next phase of the TEFCE project will focus on developing and piloting tools and mechanisms that could incorporate these principles, thereby developing a Framework for community engagement that could be applicable in the European Higher Education Area.

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ⁱ Hazelkorn, E. (2016). Contemporary Debates Part 1: Theorizing Civic Engagement. In J. Goddard, E. Hazelkorn, L. Kempton and P. Vallance (Eds.), *The Civic University: The Policy and Leadership Challenges* (pp. 34-64). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

ⁱⁱ European Commission. (2017). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education (pp.6-7). Brussels: European Commission, COM (2017) 247.

ⁱⁱⁱ von Schomberg, R. (2011). Towards Responsible Research and Innovation in the Information and Communication Technologies and Security Technologies Fields. Brussels: European Commission, Directorate General for Research and Innovation.

^{iv} Hazelkorn (2016), op.cit.

^v Holland, B. and Ramaley, J. (2008). Creating a Supportive Environment of Community-University Engagement: Conceptual Frameworks. Paper presented at the HERDSA Annual Conference.

About the TEFCE project

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