

# POLICY BRIEF

## A European policy approach to foster community engagement in higher education

### KEY MESSAGES

- The role of higher education in responding to societal challenges is re-emerging as a policy priority in Europe and community engagement is central to this debate.
- There are many policy tools to steer, assess or reward performance in higher education. Many tools focus on compliance to standards or fostering competition, while some focus on building capacities.
- Community engagement in higher education is context-specific and multi-dimensional. Previous attempts to narrow community engagement to quantitative indicators have not succeeded.
- The policy tools best suited to support community engagement in higher education are those that build capacities of higher education institutions for engagement and that facilitate a learning journey, rather than tools that focus on compliance or competition.
- An optimal European policy framework for community engagement should focus on transnational learning, capacity-building tools and funding incentives.
- In parallel, bottom-up approaches are crucial in advocating and supporting community engagement. The best approach in the European context would be to build a network of community-engaged universities and create alliances with institutional networks at the global level.
- The TEFCE Toolbox, an institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement in higher education, can support institutions developing their community engagement, and could also provide the basis for a transnational learning tool and a capacity-building tool.

The role of higher education in responding to societal challenges is re-emerging as a policy priority in Europe. Community engagement in higher education, i.e. how higher education institutions address societal needs in partnership with their external communities, is central to this debate.

This policy brief summarises the findings of the publication *Assessing the Feasibility Of Developing a Framework for Community Engagement in European Higher Education*, issued as a part of the project Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education (TEFCE). The publication examined how community engagement might become a central part of the higher education policy landscape in Europe in the next decade, proposing various policy options and policy recommendations. The publication also considered how the TEFCE Toolbox (an institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement in higher education) could play a role in this process.

### 1. Policy levers for community engagement: analysis of options

There are many tools available to policymakers in higher education for steering, assessing and/or rewarding performance in higher education, as presented in the table below:

1. Funding agreements
2. External quality assurance with accreditation
3. External quality assurance without accreditation
4. Ranking
5. Awards
6. Quality labels
7. Benchmarking
8. Institutional reviews
9. Self-assessment

The TEFCE project assessed the suitability of such policy tools for steering, assessing and/or rewarding

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performance in the specific area of community engagement in higher education. To reach this assessment, the project applied four principles that should be satisfied in order to respect the context-specific and multidimensional nature of community engagement, as well as the need to avoid the pitfalls of previous attempts to measure community engagement using only quantitative indicators (see Benneworth et al., 2018):

**1. Authenticity of engagement:**

the tool should recognise (in a qualitative way) mutually beneficial community engagement.

**2. Empowerment of individuals:**

the tool should result in a process that empowers individuals involved in community engagement.

**3. Combining bottom-up and top-down steering:**

the tool should be based on discussions with practitioners rather than only on assessments by university management staff.

**4. Learning journey rather than benchmarking:**

the tool should result in qualitative discovery of good practices and a collaborative learning process.

The evaluation of the aforementioned policy tools according to these four principles suggests that funding agreements, external quality assurance and ranking would not be well-suited. These tools do not encourage critical reflection and holistic approaches, but rather encourage compliance and/or competitive behaviour among institutions.

Self-assessment and institutional reviews are best suited to supporting community engagement in higher education, in line with the aforementioned principles. Moving forward, policy tools such as benchmarking, quality labels and awards could be revisited in the later stages of development of community engagement in higher education in Europe.

## 2. The TEFCE Toolbox: a potential policy tool?

The TEFCE Toolbox reflects the kind of policy tools that are most suitable to support community engagement in higher education. By combining elements of self-assessment and institutional reviews in innovative ways, the TEFCE Toolbox can be

categorised as an **institutional self-reflection tool** that encourages a developmental process (a learning journey) for institutions rather than a formal evaluation, benchmarking or ranking exercise. Based on its positive piloting results at diverse universities in different countries, the TEFCE Toolbox could be upscaled and used throughout Europe (and beyond).

## 3. Creating a European policy framework for community engagement

Widespread, system-level embedding of community engagement in higher education requires a major change in European policy. To achieve this, a Europe-wide initiative is needed to signal the importance of community engagement in higher education and to stimulate synergies among existing programmes and tools that support this agenda.

The TEFCE project team considers that a European policy framework for community engagement should focus on capacity-building measures for universities to carry out such engagement, rather than impose policy levers relying on compliance with prescribed standards. Specifically, the TEFCE project recommends the following approaches at the European policy level:

**1. Begin with policy statements supporting community engagement** (e.g. in future EU and EHEA policy documents).

**2. Follow-up with learning tools in the form of thematic working groups** allowing for policy learning among policymakers and for peer learning among practitioners.

**3. Continue with programmes for strengthening institutional capacity** (e.g. targeted support programmes, expert advice and supporting tools).

**4. Explore transnational learning and capacity tools** (e.g. targeted tools for connecting universities that are community-engaged).

**5. Scale up through incentives and capacity building** (e.g. new targeted funding stream for community engagement; a new tool for mapping community engagement in Europe; or incorporating community engagement into existing EU funding programmes).

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## 6. Only consider tools such as funding agreements and external quality assurance measures in the longer term.

An institutional self-reflection tool such as the TEFCE Toolbox could play a key role throughout such processes by supporting both policymakers and institutions in further developing community engagement in their higher education systems.

## 4. Building a European movement for community engagement

While policy support is essential for system-level change, policy change does not happen overnight. It is therefore essential to work in parallel on bottom-up approaches to further foster community engagement in European higher education. The TEFCE project recommends to:

**1. Build a network/alliance of European higher education institutions committed to community engagement** and organise capacity development events to support their efforts.

**2. Connect with existing European-level institutional networks** and ensure discussions on community engagement within European level organisations such as the EUA, EURASHE, ESU and ENQA)

**3. Build other alliances and scale up:** At the European level, connect the community engagement agenda to the European Universities initiative; establish connections with global networks promoting community engagement (e.g. the Talloires Network; the Global University Network for Innovation).

## 5. Long-term potential of a comparative tool based on TEFCE Toolbox

The TEFCE Toolbox was confirmed through several pilots as a robust framework to support individual higher education institutions' commitment to community engagement.

The TEFCE project considers that creating a single transnational tool allowing the comparison of different institutions' levels of community engagement should be explored, and may be feasible, bearing in mind that:

- the objective of the tool should be a combination of a **learning tool and a capacity-building tool**;
- any tool developed would need to **avoid ranking** the performance of institutions or any other forms of direct comparisons of quantitative scores.

In September 2020, a follow-up project to TEFCE began and is exploring the feasibility of such a tool. The project, Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement (SHEFCE), will last from 2020 to 2023.

The combined efforts of the TEFCE project and its follow-up SHEFCE project will undoubtedly provide both institutions and policymakers with the tools and support to make community engagement a central part of European higher education in the years to come.

### Sources:

Benneworth, P.S., Ćulum, B., Farnell, T., Kaiser, F., Seeber, M., Šćukanec, N., Vossensteyn, H., Westerheijden, D.F. (2018). *Mapping and Critical Synthesis of Current State-of-the-Art on Community Engagement in Higher Education*. Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

Farnell, T., Veidemane, A., Westerheijden, D. (2020). *Assessing the Feasibility of Developing a Framework for Community Engagement in European Higher Education*. Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education

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## About the TEFCE project

Project title: **Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education**

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Project web page: [www.tefce.eu](http://www.tefce.eu)

### PROJECT COORDINATORS



### PROJECT CONSORTIUM



Sveučilište u Rijeci  
University of Rijeka



Dresden.  
Technische Universität



Comhairle Cathrach  
Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City Council

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