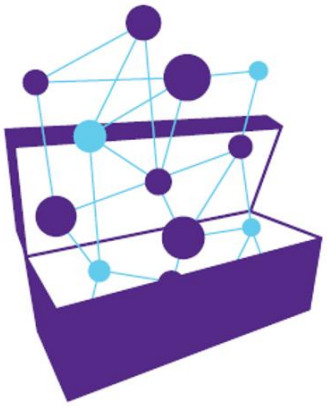
SHEFCE

Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement



UNIVERSITY ACTION-PLANNING FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: METHODOLOGY AND GUIDELINES

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Main authors: Thomas Farnell (Institute for the Development of Education), Thomas Cooney (Technological University Dublin), Martina Brophy (Technological University Dublin)

Contributors:
Institute for the Development of Education: Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, Ana Skledar Matijević
University of Rijeka: Bojana Ćulum Ilić; Sandra Nuždić
Ghent University: Davide Dusi
Free University of Brussels: Eline Livemont; Karel Verbrugge
University of Girona: Sílvia Llach Carles, Jaume Feliu, Edgar Iglesias Vidal, Alícia Betts, Ann Planas, Pere Soler

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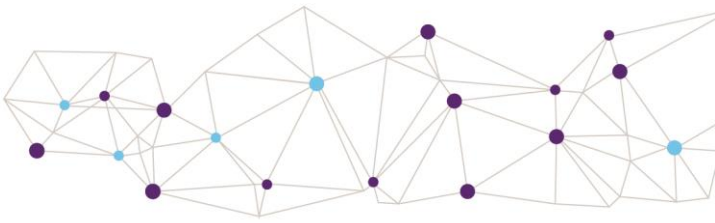

Introduction

Community engagement in higher education can take place through a broad range of activities: teaching, research, service and knowledge exchange, student initiatives and university-level initiatives. One of the main difficulties to institutionalising community engagement is how to adopt a coherent, coordinated, institution-wide approach to supporting community engagement without 'drowning' such initiatives in bureaucracy. Universities therefore need supporting tools to identify and adopt an approach to community engagement that is specific to their context, and that is meaningful both to community-engaged practitioners at the universities and to the external communities themselves.

In a previous EU-funded project entitled *Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education*), a team of international experts developed an institutional self-reflection framework (the "TEFCE Toolbox") that supports universities and their communities to jointly carry out a process to examine their community engagement in a robust and comprehensive way and identify areas for improvements.

In the current follow-up project to TEFCE, entitled Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement (SHEFCE), a team of experts developed a comprehensive methodology for the subsequent stage of university action-planning for community engagement. The resulting methodology and guidelines for action-planning is based on the assumption that universities have carried out the institutional self-reflection using the TEFCE Toolbox, and guides users through a process to set priorities to further improve their community engagement, identify measures and plan which stakeholders and resources are necessary to include.

Similarly to the TEFCE Toolbox process, the methodology and guidelines for action-planning follow a series of stages:

1. **Framing:** Considering what type of plan will be created, and who will adopt it.
2. **Prioritising:** Identifying priority areas and objectives.
3. **Planning:** Identifying specific actions and measures.
4. **Dialogue:** Including relevant community stakeholders in the planning process.
5. **Evaluating:** Setting monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

For each stage, this document provides guidelines and (in some cases) templates to support users in the process. This document describes the SHEFCE Toolbox methodology, provides guidelines for each stage and points to existing templates that can be used.

A growing network of universities have already applied the TEFCE and SHEFCE toolboxes and are we are eager to support new institutions wishing to enhance their community engagement through webinars, training and advice/mentorship in the toolbox process, as well as to explore options for peer-learning. To enquire about support options, please contact us via the email address iro@iro.hr.

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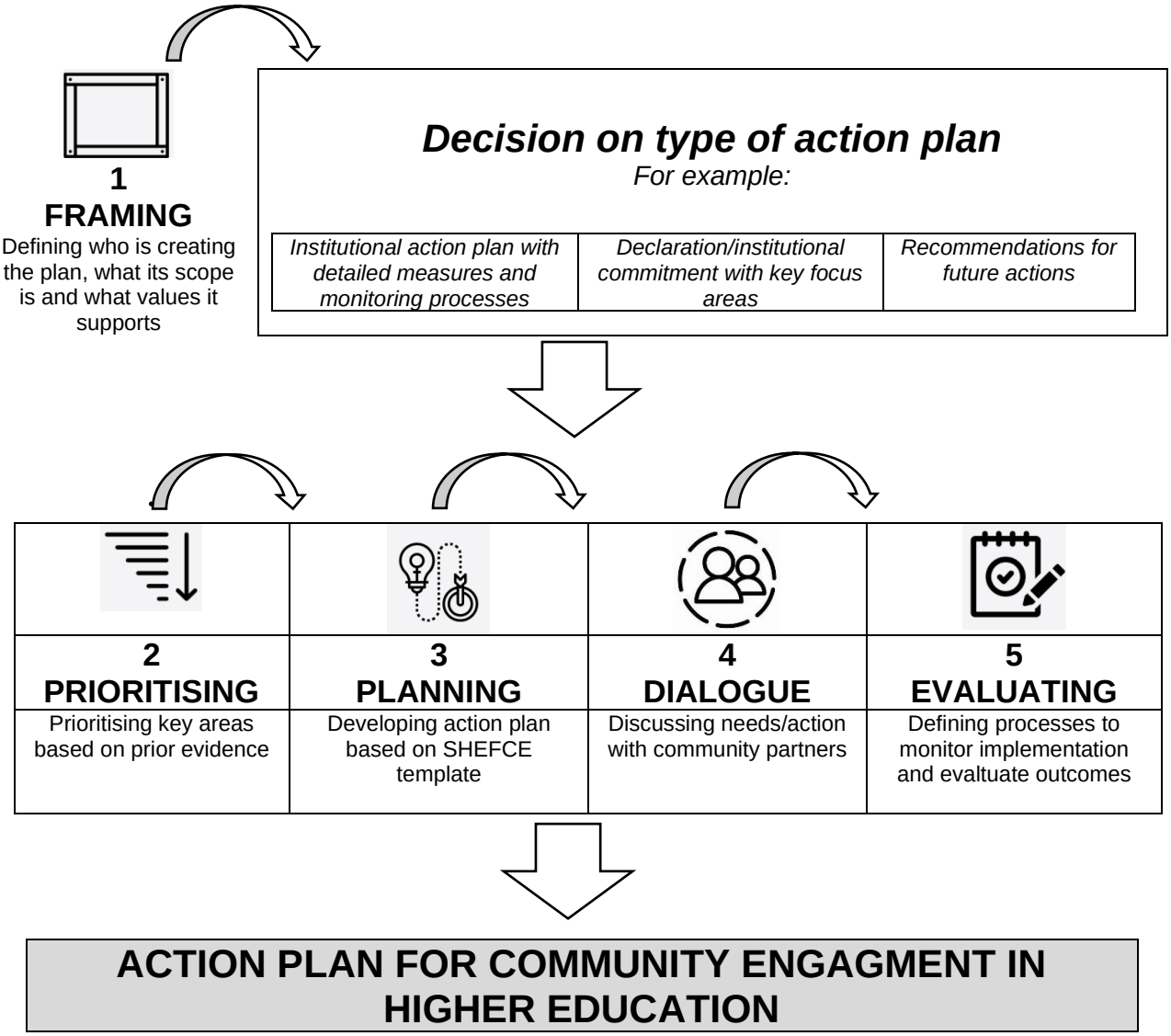
Overview of action-planning phase

A summary diagram of the action-planning process is provided below.



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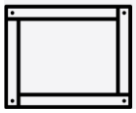
Guidelines for action planning

STAGE 0: CORE TEAM AND TEAM LEADER

The action-planning is led by a **'core team' -** two to three university staff members that will lead and coordinate the action-planning process (academic or professional staff). One of these should be nominated as the team leader. In Stage 2 a broader university team (e.g. 5-10 members) incorporating other stakeholders (internal and external), will be set up.



STAGE 1: FRAMING

The core team should complete this framing exercise as a first step before inviting the broader university action-planning team. The result is a critical reflection on what the action-planning process is likely to result in and where it will be positioned at the institutional level. Below is an overview of the questions to be answered by the team. A template is available to lead teams through this process.

1.1.	**Source of / support for the initiative:** Is the initiative more bottom-up or top-down?
1.2.	**Leader and core team of action-planning process:** Is there a team (both core team and broader team) that has sufficient motivation and resources to develop an action plan?
1.3.	**Values:** What core values does the team associate with community engagement – and how does this compare to how the institution approaches the topic?
1.4.	**Strategy/policy positioning:** Is there any link to any of the university's current strategic documents?
1.5.	**Third mission positioning:** Is there tension between community engagement and other university priorities in the third mission (e.g. innovation, business engagement, etc)?
1.6.	**Institutional complexity; scope of plan:** Does the type, size or structure of the university allow for a central community engagement action plan?
1.7.	**Positioning in institutional structure:** Which institutional structure, office or body should be the logical 'owner' of an action plan for community engagement.
1.8.	**Type and scope of action plan:** Based on the above, what type of action plan is likely to be developed?

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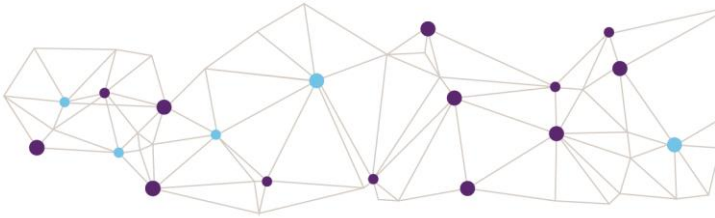

STAGE 2: PRIORITISING

The following steps in Stage 2 should be carried out by the members of the university team in a participative environment - ideally as a workshop or working meeting. There is no template to follow, since the results of Stage 2 will feed into the development of the action plan itself in Stage 3. The team can therefore choose to use Excel, Word or even flipcharts as working tools for this stage,

2.1. Prioritising areas with potential for development
Based on the results of the implementation of the institutional self-reflection (the TEFCE Toolbox), each university carried out a 'SLIPDOT' analysis (a SWOT analysis, but replacing 'weaknesses' with 'areas of lower intensity' and 'areas with potential for development'). Based on the institution's SLIPDOT analysis results, the following steps should be carried out: • List all the identified areas with potential for development; assign a priority level to each of the identified areas, and/or re-order the list of areas according to priority. • List all the identified areas with 'areas of lower intensity': confirm whether these areas should remain as 'lower intensity' in the near future, or should begin to be addressed; also consider whether the areas with potential for development listed as 'lower priority' should be moved to the 'areas of lower intensity' category. • Decide on which should be the highest priority areas to address in the action plan, taking into account the previous step of 'Framing', and the extent to which it is realistic to implement actions and create the desired change in the current context.
2.2. Reflecting on 'internal and external threats'
As above: • List all the identified threats (internal and external to the university) • Carry out an initial brainstorm of how those threats could negatively impact shape possible actions that could be identified in the plan
2.3. Initial brainstorming of objectives and action-areas
Based on the above steps: • Make an initial 'wish list' of possible action-areas at the university to address the identified challenges, without worrying too much about how realistic those actions are. • Formulate one or several overarching objectives of the action plan (defining what change you want the action plan to make, e.g. 'Increasing …', 'Improving', etc)

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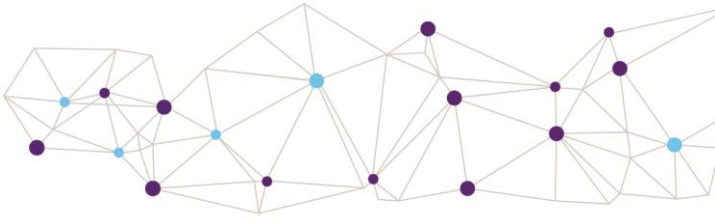

STAGE 3: PLANNING

As above, Stage 3 should be carried out by the members of the university team. Step 3.1 is a 'desk-based' and involving learning from other institutions in the TEFCE/SHEFCE network. Steps 3.2 and 3.3 are the most intensive and creative of the entire action-planning process, and require the university team to define possible measures to address identified needs.

3.1. **Peer-learning**
• Use the platform www.communityengagement.eu to explore approaches to community engagement at other universities as 'desk based peer-learning' to inform possible action areas and as inspiration for possible new approaches to community engagement in your contexts. • Discuss action planning process with other institutions undergoing the same process during online meeting and onsite peer learning visits.
3.2. **Brainstorming of action plan measures**
• Discuss in a group setting what possible actions could address the challenges and objectives defined in the previous step, and which of these would be most desirable and feasible in the given time frame.
3.3. **Writing-up draft action plan**

• Using the SHEFCE action-planning template, which can be adapted to your specific institutional needs, develop a draft action plan defining:
  ○ Objectives
  ○ Actions
  ○ Responsible actors
  ○ Timing
  ○ Resources

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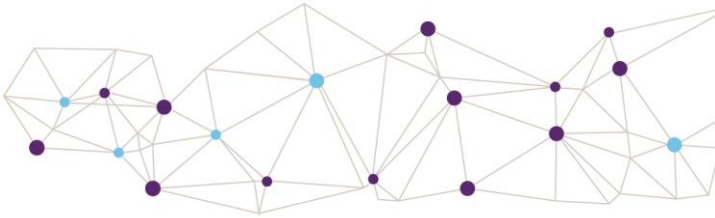

STAGE 4: DIALOGUE

Stage 4 involves critically considering how to involve community voices in the action-planning process and incorporating their feedback into the plan itself, following the steps below. There are no set templates for these actions.

4.1. Identifying community partners and stakeholders
Decide on which approach (or both) to adopt in planning dialogue with communities: • Conversations with existing community partners on how partnerships can be improved (changes to institutional practices, policies) • Conversations with communities that *are not yet partners* on ways in which the university and communities could collaborate to address certain needs (i.e. brainstorming new project ideas)
4.2. Defining dialogue channels
Decide on possible approaches to involving community representatives in co-creation and/or consultation regarding the action plan. Possible examples: • Survey of community partners to identify interests and needs • Meetings/workshops with community representatives to identify interests and needs • Advisory team of community representatives involved in core team • Consultation with community after initial draft
4.3. Collect community feedback
Depending on the response to the two previous questions, the feedback can focus on: • how partnerships can be improved (changes to institutional practices, policies)? • what kind of ways the university could engage with new communities it does not yet cooperate with to address societal needs
4.4. Process community feedback
Process and incorporate the results of the dialogue into the results of Stage 3 (prioritising). Carry out a critical reflection on what the feedback says about the perception of the university and/or the extent of its openness and the possible room for change and improvement.

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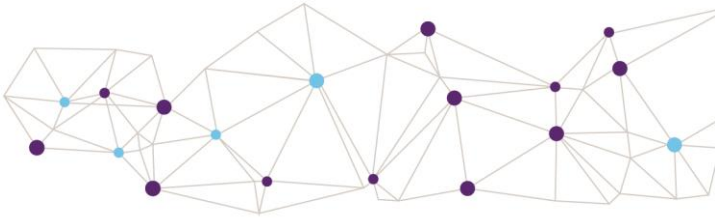

STAGE 5: EVALUATING

As the final stage of the process, Stage 5 is to ensure that the team creating the action plan defines the bodies/structures and processes that will be in place to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the proposed actions and plan further steps.

5.1. Defining indicators

- Discuss whether each proposed section of the action plan (or individual key actions) can have a corresponding indicator of achievement.
- Adopt a flexible, context-specific approach to indicators, and decide whether the indicators will be a quantitative target (e.g. target number or % increase), a tangible deliverable (e.g. a document, an event, etc.) or a qualitative assessment of an outcome by a university body or staff member (e.g. improved processes, communication, feedback). When agreeing on an indicator, ensure that the definition of the indicator is sufficiently clear and unambiguous.

5.2. Defining monitoring and evaluation processes

- Define which unit (e.g. university office, body, staff member) will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the action plan.
- Define the mode of the monitoring and evaluation (e.g. desk-based monitoring and evaluation; monitoring and evaluation meetings; integration into other department meetings) and the frequency (e.g. quarterly, annually, etc).
- Define the expected output of the monitoring and evaluation process (e.g. meeting minutes, an institutional report)

5.3. Linking evaluation to further development and sustainability

- Discuss the sustainability and further institutionalisation of community engagement at the institution after the completion the action plan.
- Link the final evaluation process to future plans for applying the TEFCE Toolbox (discussing how regularly the self-reflection process should take place at the institution)
- Link the final evaluation process to future funding opportunities for development of community engagement at the university (e.g. national funding schemes, EU-funded projects).
- Explore international collaboration opportunities for further development using the SHEFCE European platform for community engagement in higher education.

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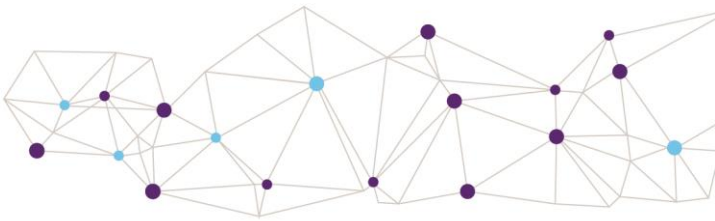

Action planning timetable and milestones

Proposed deadline	Stage	Who	Meeting
Month 1	Set up core team, define members of university team; **begin Stage 1**	Core team	Meeting 1
Month 1	**STAGE 1: FRAMING**	Core team	Workshop 1
Month 2	Set up university action planning team (5-10 people)	University team	Meeting 2
Month 3	**STAGE 2: PRIORITISING**	University team	Workshop 2
Months 4-6	**STAGE 3: PLANNING**	University team	Workshop 4 + Working meetings
Month 7	**STAGE 4: DIALOGUE**	University team	Workshop 3
Month 8	**STAGE 5: EVALUATING**	University team	Workshop 5

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