Policy recommendations for the enhancement of community engagement in higher education:
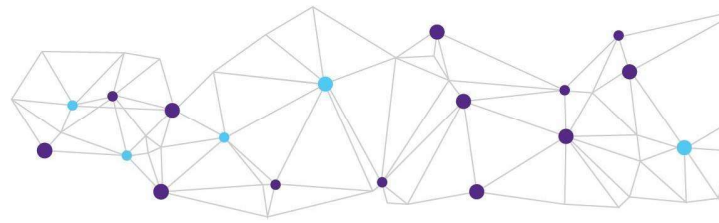
European-level policy recommendations

Institute for the Development of Education
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PROJECT FUNDING

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Policy recommendations for the enhancement of community engagement in higher education: European-level policy recommendations

Contents

1. Introduction

These policy recommendations are created as a part of the Erasmus+ KA2 project *SHEFCE: Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement*[1], in which the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) is the lead partner for the 2020-2023 period. Based on research of national policy documents for higher education and structured dialogues carried out with stakeholders in higher education, in 2023 a group of European experts created policy recommendations for improving community engagement in higher education in Croatia, Austria, Belgium - Flemish Community, Ireland, and Spain – Catalonia. After these national policy recommendations, the SHEFCE project has also created this European level policy recommendations for the improvement of community engagement in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The SHEFCE project defines the concept of community engagement as a process whereby higher education institutions undertake joint activities with external communities to satisfy various societal needs (political, economic, cultural, social, technological, environmental and other needs influencing the quality of life) in a way that is mutually beneficial. Knowledge generated at higher education institutions should help partners in their communities to achieve their goals while the knowledge of the partners in communities enriches the knowledge generating processes at higher education institutions. Within the SHEFCE project, the term community is defined as "communities of place, identity or interest", and, therefore, includes a broad range of external university stakeholders – public authorities[2], organisations of civil society, social enterprises, businesses, cultural organizations, schools, hospitals, and the general population.

The process of formulating European level policy recommendations commenced in October 2022 with an initial phase of desk research dedicated to European level policy frameworks and documents pertaining to community engagement in the EHEA. Researchers at the IDE conducted analysis of these frameworks and documents, identifying their strengths, challenges, and opportunities in relation to community engagement in higher education at the European level.

Following this stage, the IDE research team turned its attention to an analysis of documents generated as part of the project *TEFCE: Towards European Framework for Community Engagement*[3]. Additionally, the IDE researchers analysed the national level policy recommendations for community engagement in higher education, which had been generated as part of the project SHEFCE. In this process, relevant sections of these texts were identified for the European level recommendations. These comprehensive analyses collectively informed the development of transnational conclusions and, ultimately, the formulation of European level recommendations for community engagement in higher education.

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[1] Information on the project SHEFCE is available at https://community-engagement.eu/ or at https://www.shefce.eu/

[2] It could include representatives of the ministries, representatives of the local public authorities, public agencies responsible for education etc.

[3] Information on the project TEFCE is available at https://community-engagement.eu/ or at https://en.iro.hr/2022/06/29/tefce-towards-a-european-framework-for-community-engagement-of-higher-education-2/
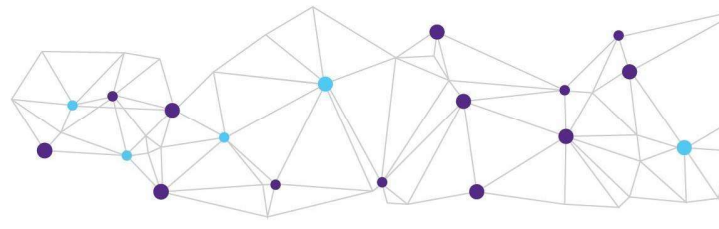
2. Overview of developments in the European Higher Education Area: higher education policies relevant to community engagement

Among the ten principles for social dimension of the European Higher Education Area, there is one principle that establishes the link between community engagement and social dimension in higher education. The Working Group on Social Dimension of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) created a new strategic document – *Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in European Higher Education Area* – which was adopted by the ministries of education of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in their Rome Ministerial Communiqué in 2020 (2020b). This document contains 10 principles for social dimension which should help member countries in their continuous development and implementation of social dimension policies in higher education. One of the principles of social dimension (Principle 9) states that "higher education institutions should ensure that community engagement in higher education promotes diversity, equity and inclusion" (Rome Ministerial Communiqué, 2020b).

The European Commission has defined indicators for public authorities' support to higher education institutional community engagement. In the European Commission (EC) - Eurydice report *Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe* (EC, 2022: 90-91), the EC has developed a set of indicators for each of the EHEA principles of the social dimension in cooperation with the BFUG Working Group on the Social Dimension. There are two indicators developed for Principle 9 on community engagement. The first one pertains to the support public authorities provide to higher education institutions to develop community engagement activities focused on equity and inclusion. Data collected for the EC's report demonstrate that the majority of countries do not provide support for community engagement activities explicitly focused on equity and inclusion. This is the case for 23 out of 37 education systems in the countries of the Eurydice Network.

The second indicator considers whether there are requirements for external quality assurance agencies to consider the community engagement activities of higher education institutions focused on equity and inclusion. Data collected demonstrate that only seven countries have such a requirement (EC, 2022). A composite scoreboard indicator on the Principle 9, which shows whether public authorities provide support to higher education institutional community engagement, has achieved 27 out of a possible 152 scores. This suggests a need for the continuation of the active implementation of the Principle 9 for community engagement in higher education in the countries of the Eurydice Network.

The European Commission outlines the significance of the connectivity between higher education institutions and their surrounding society. In the Communication from the European Commission regarding the realization of the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025, one of the six essential dimensions required for advancing the EEA underscores the need to bolster European higher education institutions. These institutions are recognized as pivotal actors in steering Europe's recovery from the Covid-19 crisis and promoting sustainable development across the continent. To achieve this objective, particular emphasis will be placed on reshaping higher education institutions with a heightened focus on their interaction with the surrounding society. This emphasis on connectivity is expected to be incorporated into all four universities'
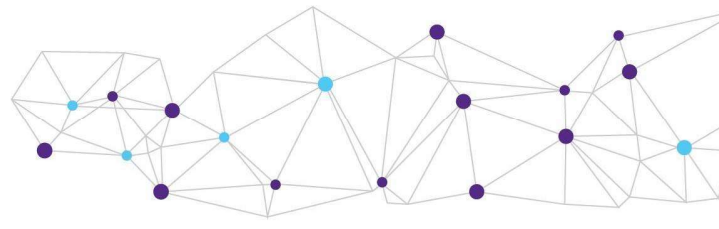
missions: education, research, innovation, and service to society (EC, 2020a). Furthermore, the European Commission has released a specialized study by the Network of Experts Working on the Social Dimension of Education and Training (NESET, which delves into the trends, practices, and policies pertaining to community engagement in higher education (Farnell, 2020). This suggests that community engagement is likely to feature prominently in the European Commission's forthcoming strategic documents.

The European Universities initiative promotes connectivity between universities and society. In the 2021-2027 period, the European Commission is set to refine the vision of European Universities, aiming to empower them to tackle significant societal challenges, act as driving forces for local and regional development, and foster active civic engagement. This initiative will be carried out under the Erasmus program, in synergy with Horizon Europe, and various other EU instruments (EC, 2020a, 2020b). The alliances formed by European Universities play a pivotal role in enhancing community engagement. These alliances are committed to facilitating connections and collaborative opportunities with their external communities and citizens. Exemplifying this mission are alliances such as Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) and the European University of Post-Industrial Cities (UNIC).

The Council of Europe (COE) has taken an active role in promoting greater university engagement with society. It is evident through the establishment of an "ad-hoc working group on the local democratic mission of higher education" in 2020. In 2021, the COE's Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice greenlit the project *The local democratic mission of higher education: a proposal for a Council of Europe platform,* aiming to create a long-term cooperative platform within all 50 state parties to the European Cultural Convention by 2025. The term "local" refers to universities addressing the specific needs of their immediate geographic communities. The COE's platform is expected to bolster the role of higher education in advancing democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

The European University Association (EUA) affirms the importance of universities' societal engagement. The EUA foresees for 2030 that "reaching out to society at large and opening up for co-creation will be a continuous ambition for universities in this decade". One of the three key areas where European universities "see major potential for moving forward in increasing societal engagement and contributing to sustainable development" is the enhancement of their civic engagement. This vision until 2030 could be realized through a "dialogue with society, actively involving citizens and non-academic partners such as business, non-governmental organisations, public authorities and others" (EUA, 2021).

New priorities under 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme include fostering diversity, inclusion and civic engagement. There are four horizontal priorities in the Erasmus+ programme during 2021-2027 aimed at (1) fostering inclusion and diversity, (2) increasing participation in democratic life, (3) protecting environment and fighting against climate change and (4) enhancing digital transformation. Therefore, higher education institutions that hold the European Charter for Higher Education (pre-requisite for their participation in the Erasmus+ programme) are expected to reach out to underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students by creating inclusion strategies for academic mobility, to ensure green practices in organising Erasmus+ activities, and
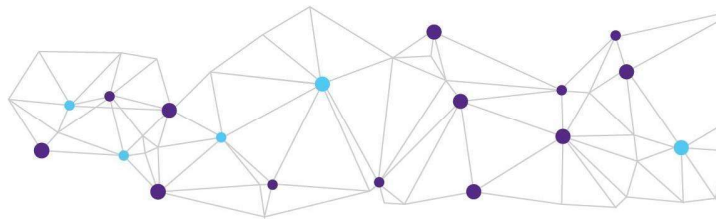
to enhance the civic engagement of mobile students. The civic engagement of mobile students could positively influence community engagement activities of higher education institutions that participate in the Erasmus+ program.
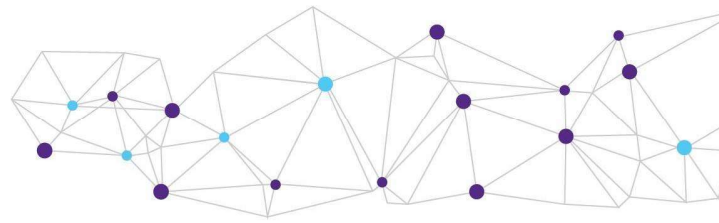
The Erasmus+ programme has financed the creation of an internationally recognized tool for systematic development of community engagement in higher education in Europe: "TEFCE Toolbox: An Institutional Self-Reflection Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education". The TEFCE Toolbox[4] (Farnell et al., 2020) allows higher education institutions, communities, and public authorities to assess all the dimensions and levels of community engagement in higher education as well as to identify space for improvement. Therefore, the TEFCE Toolbox provides analytical and documented insight to the improvement of community engagement in higher education. The reliability of the TEFCE Toolbox has been proven with its application at eight European universities. The Institute for the Development of Education (IDE) from Croatia has coordinated the creation of the TEFCE Toolbox within the Erasmus+ project *TEFCE: Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education*[5] (2018-2020). IDE and TEFCE partners possess significant expertise for the implementation of the TEFCE Toolbox and could provide this service to various EHEA higher education institutions.

The project SHEFCE has established a European online platform for community engagement, offering templates for institutional action planning in this area. Another Erasmus+ project, *SHEFCE: Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement*[6] (2020-2023), also led by the IDE, developed a template for action plans, allowing higher education institutions to translate the results of the TEFCE Toolbox application into concrete action plans, with specific targets and measures. This allows for the improvement of higher education institutions' community engagement. Additionally, the SHEFCE project has launched the European Platform for Community Engagement in Higher Education at www.community-engagement.eu. This web resource supports higher education institutions seeking to address societal needs through partnerships with external communities, encompassing the public, business, and civil society. The platform allows users to explore how universities engage with their communities through institutional profiles and featured practices. It also serves as a network of experts and potential partners for future community engagement projects.

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[4] Available at https://community-engagement.eu/

[5] More information on the TEFCE project is available at https://community-engagement.eu/ and at https://en.iro.hr/2022/06/29/tefce-towards-a-european-framework-for-community-engagement-of-higher-education-2/

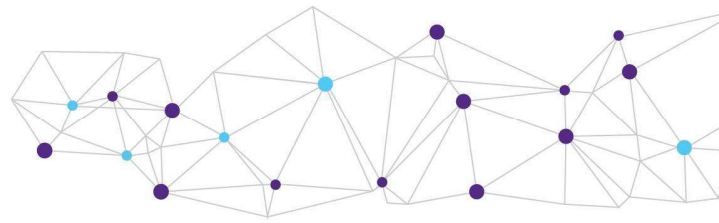[6] More information on the SHEFCE project is available at https://community-engagement.eu/ and at https://en.iro.hr/2022/05/12/steering-higher-education-for-community-engagement/
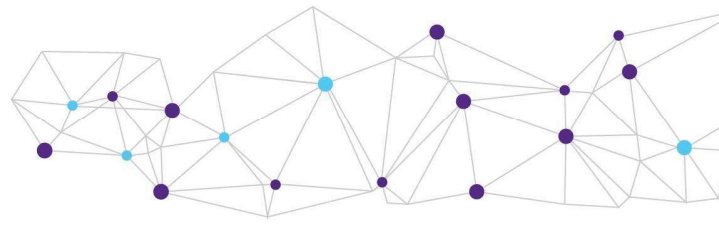
3. Assessment of the main challenges and opportunities for the community engagement improvements in the European Higher Education Area

Challenges

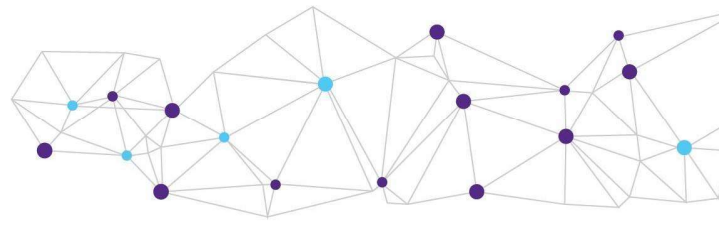|	
Diversity of higher education institutions and systems in the EHEA	The EHEA encompasses a multitude of higher education institutions and systems, each characterized by its unique traditions and practices related to community engagement. To promote community engagement at the European level, it is essential to acknowledge and respect this diversity. Solutions should be adaptable to the specific requirements of individual higher education institutions and systems.
Lack of a strategic approach and standardization in community engagement in the EHEA	In the EHEA one of the foremost challenges pertains to the absence of a strategic approach and standardized framework for community engagement. The multitude of names and definitions associated with community engagement within the EHEA can create obstacles in developing a coherent and cohesive policy area in this relatively new domain. The absence of a unified strategy specifically designed for community engagement at the EHEA level leads to varying interpretations and applications of community engagement principles. Different stakeholders, including higher education institutions, governments, and civil society organizations, often employ distinct policy instruments and tools to promote and facilitate community engagement. This lack of alignment and harmonization can impede the coordinated and effective advancement of community engagement as a pivotal component of higher education across the EHEA.
Resource constraints	There is a pressing challenge stemming from the limited availability of European Union (EU) funds and programs specifically tailored to support community engagement in higher education. Furthermore, the field of community engagement has not yet secured a stable, long-term position as an eligible domain for EU funding. Even in the Erasmus+ program, which is a flagship EU initiative for education and training, community engagement does not consistently feature as a designated area for funding in calls for proposals. The temporal dimension compounds this challenge. EU-funded projects generally operate within defined timeframes, often not exceeding three years. The uncertainty surrounding the inclusion of community engagement in future calls for proposals places restrictions on the duration and sustainability of community engagement activities. Moreover, organizational structures and positions at higher education institutions associated with community engagement (usually financed through EU-funded projects) tend to be provisional and may lack long-term continuity. Consequently, the community engagement

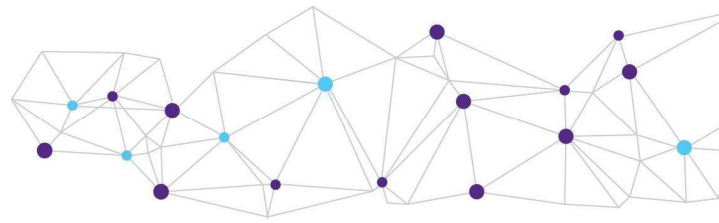|	activities of higher education institutions frequently appear disjointed and do not seamlessly integrate into the institutions' long-term strategic plans.
Resistance to change	Academic institutions have long-standing traditions that have shaped their core values, missions, and operational norms. These norms, which often prioritize teaching and research endeavours and do not see community engagement as something that can be included in both teaching and research, can create a barrier to the introduction of innovative practices like community engagement. Faculty, staff, and administrators who are accustomed to these established priorities may be hesitant to embrace new roles or responsibilities related to community engagement, viewing them as secondary or conflicting with their primary duties.
	Furthermore, the culture and ethos of higher education institutions may not naturally align with the principles of community engagement. This misalignment can manifest as a lack of recognition for community engagement activities in career progression, meaning that faculty and researchers may be disincentivized from participating in these initiatives.
	In cases where community engagement is not perceived as a core element of an institution's mission, overcoming resistance to its implementation can be especially challenging. The EHEA level policies should point out to these challenges. This issue may require a fundamental shift in institutional culture and values, potentially leading to conflicts between EHEA and national level policies in addressing this challenge.
Lack of policy coordination among European level stakeholders	Effective promotion of community engagement within the EHEA depends on well-coordinated and aligned policies at the EHEA level. Currently, a significant European level challenge arises from the lack of policy harmonization for community engagement among different European level stakeholders, hindering the progress of community engagement initiatives in higher education.
	At the European level, the absence of a common set of principles, guidelines, or standards poses difficulties for different countries to synchronize their policies with European objectives and benchmarks. Consequently, the development of a coherent approach to community engagement across the EHEA becomes complex. Therefore, there is an urgent need for improved policy coordination for community engagement horizontally across European level organizations dedicated to higher education.

Opportunities

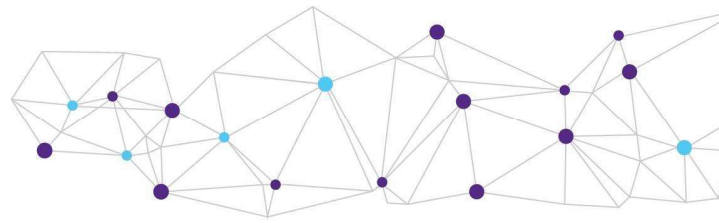|	
Alignment with the Bologna Process and the EHEA	The Bologna Process, as an intergovernmental process, provides an opportunity for championing community engagement as a shared European value. This commitment is further reinforced by the EHEA ministers' adoption of Principle 9 on the social dimension, emphasizing the role of higher education institutions in promoting community engagement for diversity, equity, and inclusion. By leveraging this dedication, European countries can align their policies and practices to foster community engagement as a shared value in the EHEA. There is an opportunity to promote community engagement as a part of the social dimension agenda by using the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA. The establishment of a well-structured EHEA Action Plan for Community Engagement could serve as a strategic roadmap for improvement, with clearly defined objectives and indicators.
EU policy documents offer various opportunities to promote community engagement through a plethora of EU policy instruments	The 2021-2027 Erasmus+ program, in conjunction with Horizon Europe, provides financial support for community engagement projects in higher education. This support aims to encourage diversity, inclusion, and civic engagement, with a particular focus on underrepresented students and sustainability initiatives. This funding creates opportunities for cross-border collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the expansion of innovative community engagement initiatives. It is essential to consider opening future opportunities for financial support for community engagement projects through various EU funds and programs. The European Commission, in collaboration with the BFUG Working Group on the Social Dimension, has developed indicators for community engagement. Member countries can use these indicators as a foundation for assessing and enhancing their community engagement initiatives. European Universities alliances play a crucial role in advancing community engagement. These alliances are committed to fostering connections and collaborative opportunities with external communities and citizens. Active participation in these alliances allows higher education institutions to contribute to the transformation of higher education in favour of community engagement. The EU can enhance the synergy among these policy instruments by incorporating more explicit references and objectives in its future policy documents related to the development of community engagement in higher education. Additionally, the creation of a coherent EU strategy for fostering community engagement in higher education could further enrich these synergies. This would allow grouping all policy instruments in one place and securing the strategic management of community engagement at the EU level.

Opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange in the EHEA	The rich diversity of community engagement within the EHEA offers opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange. Countries with well-established community engagement traditions can share their experiences and best practices with those in the earlier stages of implementation. The establishment of dedicated platforms for sharing successful community engagement models and outcomes can serve as catalysts for innovation and improvement in the field, contributing to the collective growth of community engagement across Europe. The establishment of the Council of Europe's platform dedicated to the local democratic mission of higher education presents an opportunity to further the role of universities in advancing democracy, human rights, and the rule of law within their communities.
Already existent European level tools and platforms for enhancing community engagement in higher education could be recognized as the EHEA tools for community engagement	The Erasmus+ funded "TEFCE Toolbox" serves as an effective tool for the systematic development of community engagement in higher education. It offers a structured approach to assess and enhance community engagement, providing analytical and well-documented insights to improve community engagement in higher education. Institutions can use this toolbox to evaluate and enhance their community engagement efforts, guided by evidence-based insights and best practices. The SHEFCE project has established the European Platform for Community Engagement in Higher Education (https://community-engagement.eu/), which offers templates for institutional action planning and facilitates collaboration with external communities, including the public, business, and civil society. It provides a network of experts and potential partners for community engagement projects. Institutions can utilize this platform to strengthen their community engagement initiatives and explore successful practices.

## 4. Policy recommendations for the enhancement of community engagement in the European Higher Education Area

Title 1.	Definition and EHEA framework for community engagement in higher education
Challenge	Challenges arise from the absence of standardized definitions, principles, and tools for community engagement within the diverse educational systems and higher education institutions across the EHEA, making it difficult to standardize approaches to developing community engagement policies.
Approach	Utilize the definition and tools for community engagement developed in the TEFCE and SHEFCE projects as a common framework for community engagement within the EHEA. This framework should be collectively agreed upon at the EHEA level to ensure consistency and comparability. An optimal EHEA policy framework for community engagement should prioritize transnational learning, the capacity-building of higher education institutions for engagement, and the facilitation of a learning journey, rather than focusing on compliance or competition.
Proposed actions	1. Promote the use of tools like the TEFCE Toolbox, SHEFCE Institutional Action Plans and the European Platform for Community Engagement (https://community-engagement.eu/) as a common EHEA framework for community engagement. 2. Encourage EHEA level organizations and public authorities in the EHEA member states to adopt and implement the common EHEA framework for community engagement in their policies and practices. 3. Encourage higher education institutions to assess and improve community engagement efforts using the above tools (TEFCE Toolbox, SHEFCE Institutional Action Plans and the European Platform for Community Engagement). 4. Provide training and support for institutions in utilizing these tools effectively.

Title 2.	European network for community engagement in higher education
Challenge	Lack of an EHEA level network allowing the exchange of knowledge, information, and examples of good practices in community engagement within EHEA.
Approach	Create an EHEA Network for Community Engagement to facilitate collaboration and coordination across EHEA. Provide systematic,

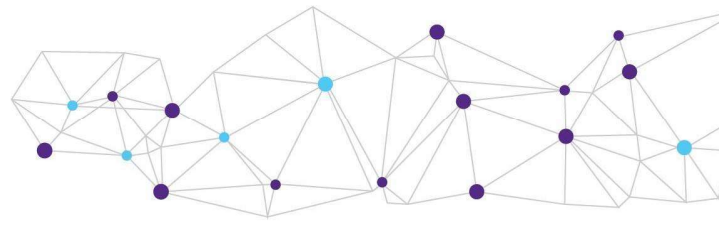|	
	structured, and competent capacity building services to individuals (staff of higher education institutions, students, community actors) and institutions for the development of community engagement (leaders of higher education institutions, policy makers among public authorities on a national and European level).
Proposed actions	1. Establish an EHEA level organizational unit responsible for managing the network, providing expert support, and facilitating the establishment of community partnerships and collaborations. The EU could provide financial support for such a unit. 2. The network should promote the value of community engagement to higher education institutions, their staff, students, and the wider community through awareness-raising campaigns. Also, the network should facilitate cross-border collaboration projects. 3. The network should offer professional development opportunities and organize peer learning activities to facilitate knowledge exchange and the sharing of best practices in community engagement in higher education among all stakeholders. 4. Utilize the already established European Platform for Community Engagement (https://community-engagement.eu/) for maintaining resources, tools, and professional training programs accessible to all stakeholders involved in community engagement in higher education. Additionally, use the platform to share best practices, successful community engagement models, and outcomes to expedite improvements.

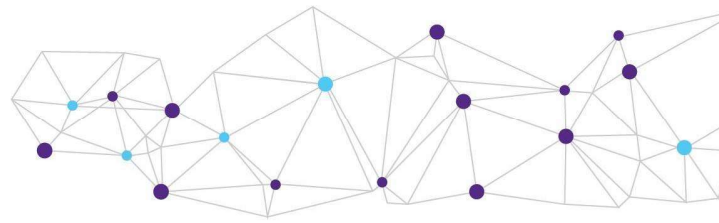| Title 3.	Resource allocation and EU funding
Challenge	Insufficient financial resources and unstable funding for community engagement through European level funds. Lack of coordination among EU funds and programs for community engagement in higher education.
Approach	Ensure consistent and long-term funding for community engagement initiatives through EU funds and programs and through funds from other European level organizations. Financial support for community engagement projects should emphasize collaboration and cross-border initiatives.
Proposed actions	1. Advocate for the inclusion of community engagement as an eligible field for long-term funding through EU funds and programs (such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe) as well as through funds from other European level organizations. 2. Monitor the availability and duration of EU-funded projects.
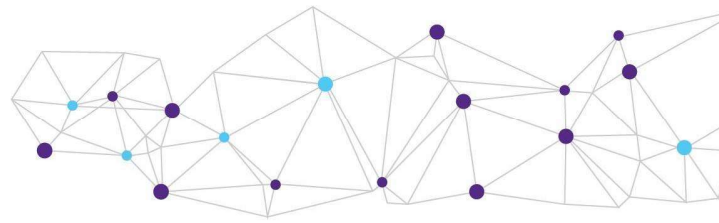
	3. Encourage EHEA member countries to allocate adequate resources, both financial and human, to sustain and expand community engagement programs within higher education institutions.

Title 4.	**The EU-wide strategy for community engagement in higher education**
Challenge	Lack of a comprehensive EU strategy for community engagement in higher education.
Approach	Develop a coherent EU strategy for fostering community engagement in higher education. This would allow grouping all policy instruments in one place and securing the strategic management of community engagement at the EU level.
Proposed actions	1. Create a coherent EU strategy for fostering community engagement in higher education as a separate policy document for a period of 5-7 years. 2. Determine the financial and human resources required for effective implementation of the strategy. Consider potential sources of funding and allocate resources accordingly. 3. Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework to track the progress of the strategy. Regularly review and assess achievements, identify challenges, and adapt the strategy as needed. 4. Ensure that the strategy is communicated effectively to all relevant parties on a European and national level. Utilize various communication channels to raise awareness and garner support.

Title 5.	**Leveraging the Bologna Process for enhanced community engagement in higher education**
Challenge	Underutilized potential of the Bologna Process for the development of community engagement in higher education. Lack of a strategic roadmap for the community engagement in the EHEA.
Approach	Utilize the Bologna Process as a platform to champion community engagement in higher education, aligning it with the shared objectives of the EHEA. Develop a comprehensive EHEA Action Plan for enhancing community engagement with precise objectives, activities and indicators. This plan could serve as a strategic guide for advancing community engagement within the EHEA member states.
Proposed actions	1. Establish a BFUG working group on community engagement with the objective to develop the EHEA Action Plan for Community Engagement.

	2. Create a robust EHEA monitoring and evaluation system to systematically track the progress of the action plan. Conduct regular reviews, assess achievements, identify challenges, and adapt the action plan accordingly. 3. Ensure national policies and practices support the Principle 9 of the social dimension of the EHEA, emphasizing community engagement to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education. 4. Leverage BFUG's peer-learning activities to facilitate knowledge exchange related to community engagement among EHEA member countries. This collaborative approach will enable countries to effectively implement the EHEA Action Plan for Community Engagement, fostering a culture of shared learning and good practices.

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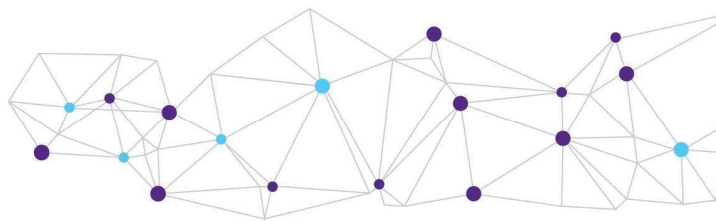
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Appendix

About the project SHEFCE

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Project Title	Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement
Project Acronym	SHEFCE
Project Start Date	1.9.2020.
Project Total Duration	36 months
Project End Date	31.8.2023.
National Agency of the Applicant Organisation	HR01 Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes, Croatia
Project Web Sites	https://community-engagement.eu/; https://www.shefce.eu/; https://en.iro.hr/2022/05/12/steering-higher-education-for-community-engagement/

Project partners

	Organisation	Abbrev.	*Country*
1	Institute for the Development of Education – **project coordinator**	IDE	*HR*
2	University for Continuing Education Krems	UCEK	*AT*
3	University of Rijeka	UNIRI	*HR*
4	Ghent University	UG	*BE*
5	Technological University Dublin	TUD	*IE*
6	University of Girona	UDG	*ES*
7	Free University of Brussels	VUB	*BE*
8	Association of Catalan Public Universities	ACUP	*ES*
9	Mary Immaculate College	MIC	*IE*
10	Brodoto	BDT	*HR*

Associate partners

Advisory team

1	European University Association	EUA
2	European Association of Institutions in Higher Education	EURASHE
3	European Students' Union	ESU
4	Council of Europe	CoE
5	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	OECD
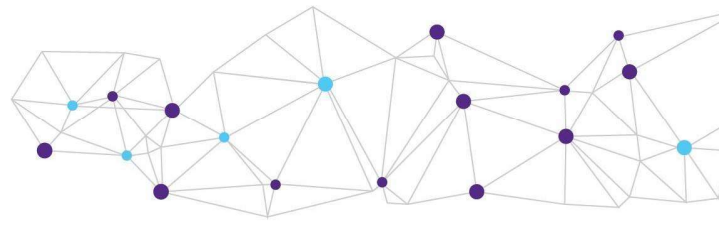
Dissemination partners

1	Campus Engage	CE
2	European Higher Education Society	EAIR
3	Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research	MESR

Local partners

1	CitySpark	CS
2	Dublin City Council	DCC
3	Girona City Council	GCC
4	Rijeka City Council	RCC

Abbreviations

BFUG	Bologna Follow-Up Group
EC	European Commission
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
IDE	Institute for the Development of Education
TEFCE	Project "Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education", funded by the Erasmus+ programme
TEFCE Toolbox	An institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement in higher education created through the project TEFCE
SHEFCE	Project "Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement", funded by the Erasmus+ programme