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Community engagement in higher education: trends, practices and policies

Executive Summary



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Executive summary

This report argues (based on a comprehensive review of the literature) that universities¹ play a crucial role in responding to societal needs, and can further enhance their societal impact at local, national and international levels through community engagement. The report proposes a broad definition of community engagement in higher education, whereby:

- **engagement** refers to the range of ways in which university staff, students and management interact with external communities in mutually beneficial ways, either as part of teaching and research or as part of other projects and joint initiatives;
- **community** is defined as 'communities of place, identity or interest', and thus includes among others, public authorities, businesses, schools, civil society and citizens;
- **societal needs** addressed through community engagement refer to all political, economic, cultural, social, technological and environmental factors that influence the quality of life within society.

While this report was drafted before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the current crisis arguably makes the topic of community engagement more important than ever. The arguments presented in relation to the dimensions, good practices and benefits of community engagement will be highly relevant to policymakers and university leaders developing plans for the recovery and development of higher education in the post-crisis period.

A re-emerging policy agenda

Universities have always interacted with their surrounding communities and responded to societal needs. There is evidence that universities play a key role in supporting economic development and the well-being of citizens, and that the benefits of higher education are not limited to students and graduates but extend across society. Since the late 20th century, there has been a re-emergence of interest in the societal role played by universities. The expectation that universities should contribute to social and economic development has become known as the 'third mission' of higher education.

In practice, however, the third mission of higher education has focused on the economic role and impacts of universities. The role of the university in strengthening democratic values and civic engagement, addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, contributing to cultural development, informing public policy and addressing large-scale social challenges has not been nearly as prominent a priority.

The broader societal contribution of higher education is now re-emerging as a policy priority in many countries, due to increasing societal challenges worldwide. In addition to the 'grand challenges' of climate change, migration and ageing societies faced worldwide, societies worldwide have experienced increasing income inequality, decreasing social cohesion, declining trust toward political institutions and a rise in populist attitudes. Universities are not only called upon to respond to these challenges, but are themselves affected by declining public trust with regard to their legitimacy and their impartiality as experts (reflected in rising 'science denial' and 'expert rejection'). In this context, the engagement of universities with their communities to address societal needs cannot be considered a trivial policy concern.

¹ This report uses the terms 'university' to refer to all forms of tertiary education institutions, including research-intensive universities and universities of applied science.

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis will arguably further reinforce the priority of community engagement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, stories quickly emerged of the ways in which universities around the world had mobilised their knowledge and resources to respond rapidly to the crisis by addressing a range of societal needs. The question of how universities can contribute to social and economic recovery in the post-COVID-19 period is likely to be at the top of policymakers' agendas in the years to come.

Existing policies and practices

Around the world, a number of policies and initiatives exist to support universities' broader societal contributions. The topic has become increasingly prominent in the policies and programmes of transnational institutions (the EU, UN and OECD), as well as at national and university level. While a range of terms such as 'civic', 'public', 'regional' and 'societal' engagement are employed in such contexts, this report argues that all of these can be considered synonyms for community engagement as defined in the report.

Community engagement can be misunderstood as focusing on charitable actions and 'good neighbourliness' between a university and its immediate local community. The concept is in fact much broader in scope and meaning. It encompasses all of the university's core activities, and potentially involves local, regional, national and international dimensions. Many European universities are already community-engaged in this broader sense, and the report features illustrative good practices of such engagement from both Europe and the United States. Community engagement practices are presented according to five thematic dimensions of a 'whole university' approach to community engagement. These can be summarised as follows:

- **Teaching and learning** – in which the most common form is community-based learning (or 'service learning'), a teaching methodology that combines classroom instruction, community service, student reflection and civic responsibility.
- **Research** – in which the most common form is community-based research, a collaborative form of research that addresses a community-identified need, validates community knowledge, and contributes to social change. Another form is citizen science, whereby citizens participate in scientific research by 'crowd-sourcing' data or through their full inclusion in all stages of research.
- **Service and knowledge exchange** – whereby academic staff provide consultancy and capacity-building for community groups, or contribute as experts in economic and political debates.
- **Student initiatives** – whereby students directly address the needs of external communities by launching their own community engagement activities, either via student organisations or through activism and advocacy initiatives.
- **University-level engagement** – whereby universities open up their facilities to the community (including as venues for cultural and social activity, or as providers of other public services) and provide open access to educational resources.

Challenges and obstacles

Higher education systems face significant pressures, as a result of which community engagement is often treated as a low priority. These pressures include global competition in higher education, decreasing levels of public funding, increased scrutiny of universities' performance, and the pressure to prioritise economic development activities.

Universities also face internal challenges in relation to the way community engagement is addressed at the university management level. Community engagement takes different forms in different academic disciplines, and the diversity of these forms makes it complex

to coordinate community engagement across an entire institution. Another challenge exists at the level of the acceptance of engagement by academics as a legitimate knowledge activity (i.e. as a 'normal' part of teaching and research), since changing academic practice is a long-term process. Any effort to institutionalise community engagement will thus require time, coordination and support.

Finally, the management of community engagement (whether at the level of the higher education system or within individual universities) is further complicated by the difficulty of measuring it quantitatively. This falls into a broader discussion on the problems of relying on metrics for performance assessments in research and higher education; however, in the case of community engagement the problem is particularly acute as such activities are, by definition, context-specific.

Policy recommendations to address the challenges

Providing due recognition and support for community engagement at policy level could allow universities to mobilise their resources to achieve a much greater positive impact in addressing Europe's pressing societal needs. The gradual rise of references to 'grand challenges', 'societal impact', 'relevance' and 'engagement' in the context of higher education and research policy suggests that Europe currently enjoys a unique opportunity to facilitate such support. This report presents policy approaches and concrete recommendations to support community engagement in higher education across Europe. These can be summarised as follows:

Four possible policy approaches exist to support community engagement

Policymakers wishing to support community engagement can employ various policy approaches, presented here from the most to the least comprehensive:

1. Transforming framework conditions (system-level embedding of community engagement in higher education and research).
2. Targeted supportive policies (increasing the prevalence and quality of community engagement activities at system level).
3. Incorporating community engagement into existing programmes (encouraging community engagement activities at the level of individual universities).
4. Status quo/bottom-up initiatives (no specific policies other than general references to 'relevance' and 'impact').

This report recommends that Approaches 2 and 3 should be considered as a first phase in supporting the institutionalisation of community engagement, with Approach 1 being an aspirational future scenario.

A coherent policy approach will need to create synergies with other policy areas and existing programmes

This also entails ensuring joined-up governance across other policy areas (e.g. connecting higher education, research, regional development, etc.) and ensuring that the policy is embedded into existing initiatives within higher education and research policy. For example, community engagement can be connected to both the European Green Deal² and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The policy would also benefit from establishing a clear relationship with other 'third mission' priorities within higher education policy, i.e. by distinguishing between economically driven engagement and community engagement.

² COM (2019) 640

Community engagement can also be incorporated as a priority or dimension within existing policies, programmes and initiatives in higher education and research. The table below provides an overview of potential synergies between community engagement and existing policy priorities, as well as with existing programmes and initiatives of the European Commission:

Policy area	Policy priorities at national and transnational level connected to community engagement	European Commission programmes and initiatives (non-exhaustive list) connected to community engagement
Higher education policy	<p><u>Major overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teaching and learning ▪ Relevance of higher education ▪ Social dimension / social inclusion in higher education <p><u>Potential overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accountability and quality assurance ▪ Internationalisation 	<p><u>European Education Area</u> <u>European Higher Education Area</u></p> <p><u>Major overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Erasmus+ (Key Action 1 - Individual mobility; Key Action 2 - Strategic partnerships; European Universities Initiative: Knowledge Alliances) <p><u>Potential overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Eurydice (e.g. data collection on community engagement) ▪ NESET (e.g. further analyses of community engagement policies and practices) ▪ U-Multirank (e.g. upscaling indicator on community service learning)
Research and innovation policy	<p><u>Major overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ (Societal) impact of research ▪ Responsible research and innovation (RRI); citizen science; science education <p><u>Potential overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Open innovation ▪ Research missions 	<p><u>European Research Area</u> <u>Open Science</u></p> <p><u>Major overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (Horizon Europe): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Responsible Research and Innovation - Citizen science
Other policy areas	<p><u>Major overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active citizenship ▪ Social inclusion ▪ Sustainable Development Goals <p><u>Potential overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regional development ▪ Smart specialisation ▪ Climate and energy 	<p><u>Major overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) <p><u>Potential overlaps and synergies:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ European Institute of Technology ▪ Smart Specialisation Platform ▪ European Green Deal

The European Universities Initiative could play a key role in pushing forward the community engagement agenda. This stems from the initiative's focus on connecting academics, researchers and students with regions, cities, businesses, civil society and citizens to co-create solutions to the most pressing societal challenges linked to Sustainable Development Goals. A tool such as U-Multirank could also consider the feasibility and benefits of expanding its existing indicator related to Community Service Learning (currently limited to one subject group), in order to gain greater insight into the prevalence of institutionalised community-based learning at European universities.

Policy levers should focus on building capacities for community engagement

Since community engagement is context-specific and involves a wide range of activities and stakeholders, it would be inappropriate at an initial stage to employ policy levers that rely on compliance with prescribed standards, or on the measurement of quantitative targets, since such measures would be unlikely to result in the desired outcome. Prescribing the type or volume of community engagement activities that should be carried out would at best result in reactive rather than proactive measures by universities that would focus on meeting targets rather than the real societal needs of the communities with which the universities engaged. The optimal policy levers would be those that address capacity-building, thereby supporting institutional change and improvement.

Joint action is required from the European Commission, EU Member States, international stakeholders and universities

The report concludes with a series of specific policy recommendations for different stakeholders. These recommendations follow a similar structure, and include the following elements (whether at transnational, national or institutional level):

- Establishing the societal role of universities as a priority within future policy frameworks and/or institutional strategies.
- Developing new policies and programmes to support this objective, and/or incorporating community engagement into existing programmes, tools and initiatives where potential exists for synergy.
- Consolidating, strengthening and creating synergies with existing thematic networks and initiatives to support community engagement in higher education.

The report concludes that in order to provide community engagement with greater recognition and support at policy and university levels, the necessary approach must be gradual, developmental and qualitative, rather than rushed, top-down and driven by metrics.

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