Community engagement in higher education: trends, practices and policies

NESET Analytical Report, 2020
Summary

This report argues that universities play a crucial role in responding to societal needs and can further enhance their societal impact at local, national or international levels through community engagement. Community engagement refers to mutually beneficial partnerships between universities and their external communities (encompassing public, business and civil society sectors). In the context of COVID-19, this report will be especially relevant to policymakers and university leaders developing plans for the recovery and development of higher education in the post-crisis period.

AUTHOR

Thomas FARNELL, Institute for the Development of Education (Croatia)

PEER-REVIEWERS

Ellen HAZELKORN, BH Associates, Ireland, and professor emerita, Technological University Dublin

Dragana AVRAMOV, NESET Scientific Coordinator

Access the full report: **bit.ly/NESET-CE**

Erasmus+ PPMi

ABOUT NESET

NESET is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training, set up at the initiative of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC).

The Network is one of the seven key knowledge providers that contribute evidence-based advice to DG EAC. NESET provides reliable, independent and rigorous scientific support, country-specific expertise and advice to the European Commission in relation to equity and social aspects at all levels of education and training. NESET acts as a knowledge broker, bridging the gap between EU policy coordination and the academic world.

NESET COORDINATION

NESET is coordinated by **PPMI** – a leading European research and policy analysis centre. PPMI began coordinating the Network in January 2015, and has successfully developed a network of **over 60 highly qualified researchers and education policy specialists from around 40 countries**.

GET INVOLVED

If you are a researcher into the social dimension of education and training and would like to be included in the NESET database of experts, simply complete a short online form on our website and **open yourself to new research opportunities!**

www.nesetweb.eu/experts-registration

FOLLOW THE LATEST UPDATES

f /groups/NESET.Education

in /company/neset-network

RG Network of Experts on Social Dimension of Education and Training (NESET)

SUBSCRIBE TO QUARTERLY NEWSLETTERS

www.eepurl.com/dOatJL

Community engagement in higher education: trends, practices and policies

Context

The societal impact of higher education is becoming a prominent issue, within both research policy and within higher education itself. However, the focus of policies and practice in this area has predominantly been limited to economic impacts, in terms of the contribution of higher education to innovation and the development of human capital. This trend is gradually shifting towards a discussion on 'community engagement in higher education'. This term refers to the variety of ways in which universities can address a much broader range of societal needs by engaging with communities such as local/regional authorities, public institutions and businesses, as well as non-governmental organisations, disadvantaged communities, and the general public.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will arguably further reinforce the priority of community engagement. During the COVID-19 crisis, stories quickly emerged of universities around the world mobilising their knowledge and resources to respond rapidly to the crisis by addressing a range of different 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.

The report

The report clarifies the concept of community engagement and analyses its various dimensions, based on a comprehensive review of the literature. It presents international trends and good practices, identifies challenges to the further development of community engagement, and provides policy recommendations at EU, national and institutional levels.

Key findings

A diverse range of terms are used to refer to community engagement in higher education – for example, 'civic', 'public', 'regional' and 'societal' engagement. What all of these approaches have in common is that they all focus on universities working with external organisations in a mutually beneficial way, to address societal needs.

The idea of mutual benefit is crucial to the concept of community engagement in higher education. Rather than being framed simply as a question of moral or social responsibility, the engagement of universities with communities brings tangible benefits to the university's knowledge process (through the enrichment of teaching and research). Such engagement also brings benefits to communities that can be both practical (e.g. resolving problems or providing access to resources, facilities and services) and transformative (e.g. building the capacity of communities to solve their own problems).

Community engagement in higher education works best when it is embedded into a university's teaching and research, and reflected in its institutional culture, rather than being considered a 'third mission' that represents an additional (and peripheral) activity. Community engagement takes place via the following types of activities:

• **Teaching and learning** – in which the most common form is community-based learning (or 'service learning'), a teaching methodology combining 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 community-identified needs, validates communities' 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 to economic and political debates.

• **Student initiatives** – whereby students directly address the needs of external communities by launching their own community engagement activities, either through student organisations or via 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 for the provision of other public services) and via open access to educational resources.

Despite the potential of community engagement to lead to broad societal impact, there are significant pressures on higher education systems that often result in community engagement being treated as a low priority. These pressures include global competition in higher education, decreasing levels of public funding, increased scrutiny of performance and the pressure to prioritise economic development activities. Universities also face internal challenges regarding how community engagement is managed at the central level. Lastly, the management of community engagement (whether at the level of the university or of the higher education system) is further complicated by the difficulty of measuring such activities quantitatively.

Recommendations for strengthening community engagement in higher education

Providing community engagement with due recognition and support at policy level could allow universities to mobilise their resources to achieve a much greater positive impact in terms of addressing Europe's pressing societal needs. Today, the gradual increase in references to grand challenges, societal impact, relevance and engagement in higher education and research policy suggests that Europe now has a unique opportunity to make this happen.

In order to inform policy makers on ways to support community engagement in higher education across Europe, the report

• presents four possible policy approaches to support community engagement

• identifies possible synergies with other policy areas and existing programmes

• recommends that policy levers should focus on building capacities for community engagement

• invites the European Commission, EU Member States, international stakeholders and universities to take joint action.