

Community Engagement in Higher Education

Definitions and Pathways

Community engagement can take many forms within higher education. While different pedagogical approaches may involve students working with external organisations, communities, or real-world challenges, they do not all pursue the same purposes or involve the same kinds of relationships.

This resource offers a concise orientation to community engagement in higher education and to some of the curricular pathways through which it can be developed.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is a process of collaborative learning and action between educational institutions—or learners—and communities, grounded in reciprocity and mutual benefit, aimed at addressing public issues, building civic capacity, and producing socially just outcomes.

This implies several core principles:

Purpose: Engagement is directed towards public good rather than private gain.

Partnership: Communities are not passive recipients; they participate as co-creators.

Learning: Learning outcomes can include civic understanding, ethical reflection, and social responsibility.

Continuity: Engagement seeks to move beyond transactional or one-off relationships.



PATHWAYS TO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement can be developed through different curricular and educational approaches. The following pathways illustrate some of the ways in which engagement with communities can be incorporated into higher education.

1. Community-Integrated Curriculum

Community-integrated curricula are courses purposefully connected with community issues, contexts, or partners. They enable students to take community realities into consideration and to analyse real societal issues through the perspective of their academic disciplines.

2. Work-Based Learning

Work-Based Learning is an educational approach that provides students with real-life work experiences related to their field of study or professional interests. Work-Based Learning can form part of community engagement when these experiences are grounded in reciprocity and mutual benefit, address public or societal issues, and respond to community needs.

Within curricular community engagement, this can take different forms, including:

- **Third-Sector Internships:** formal curricular placements in NGOs or other civil society organisations, where students develop professional experience while contributing to the work and needs of the organisation or the communities it serves.
- **Policy clinics and legal aid programmes:** practice-based learning experiences in which students—particularly in areas such as law, social work, or public policy—provide services, advice, or research support to community members or organisations.

Relevant features of Work-Based Learning within a community-engagement context may therefore include addressing real needs, working within authentic professional contexts, supporting communities, and receiving guidance or mentorship from professionals in the field.

3. Service Learning

Service Learning is a pedagogical approach in which students engage in community service that is directly linked to the academic curriculum and critically reflect on this experience in order to foster personal, social, and academic learning.



Its core features include:

- **Mutual benefit:** Students learn while communities benefit and are strengthened.
- **Structured reflection:** Reflection connects experience with academic content and values.
- **Civic engagement:** The approach promotes social responsibility, ethical thinking, and active citizenship.
- **Co-creation with the community:** Community partners are collaborators rather than simply recipients of support.

Definition adapted from the European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EOSLHE), drawing on the work of Bringle, Furco, Puig and Tapia.

4. Community-Based Research / Participatory Action Research

Community-Based Research (CBR) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) are forms of collaborative research in which community members participate actively in the research process. This can include identifying problems, collecting data, interpreting findings, and applying results to support change. Communities are therefore not simply sources of data but participants in the production and application of knowledge.

5. Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation Labs

Social entrepreneurship and innovation labs provide spaces in which students develop responses to social problems, often working alongside community partners in processes of ideation, design, and testing. These approaches can contribute to community engagement when they prioritise community needs, encourage co-design, and focus innovation on socially relevant challenges.

6. Civic Engagement / Deliberative Dialogue

Civic engagement and deliberative dialogue initiatives promote dialogue, civic responsibility, and democratic participation. They create opportunities for students and community members to engage with one another around issues of shared concern and to consider different perspectives through structured dialogue.

FOR FURTHER READINGS ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

1. Sathorar, H., & Geduld, D. (2021). A critical approach to university-community partnerships: Reflecting on the diverse realities. *Journal of Education*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2021/v10i2a6>

The authors approach community engagement as collaboration between universities and communities as equal partners, with particular attention to mutual benefit, reciprocity, community knowledge, power relations, and sustainable outcomes.

2. Farnell, T. (2021). *Community engagement in higher education: Trends, practices and policies*. NESET Analytical report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
<https://nesetweb.eu/en/resources/library/community-engagement-in-higher-education-trends-practices-and-policies/>

This report provides a broad overview of community engagement in higher education and examines how universities work with external communities to address societal challenges and strengthen social impact.

3. SHEFCE. (2021-2023). *Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement*.
<https://www.eoslhe.eu/steering-higher-education-for-community-engagement-shefce/> [also:
https://www.eoslhe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Research-report_2021_web.pdf;

The SHEFCE project examines how higher education institutions can strengthen community engagement institutionally and provides methodologies for action planning, policy recommendations, and resources for supporting community engagement.

