WP7 – Definitions and distinctions

Introduction

WP7 has realized that there is a need to spend some time working on definitions and distinctions to advance our work with greater clarity of terms, especially with regard to KPI 3 (soft skills courses for students and staff) and KPI 5 (community engagement in 10% of academic programmes).

We have identified that a main problem is lumping into one great big category different methodologies and approaches. Amongst these: Service Learning, Challenge-Based Learning, and Work-Based Learning. While they fall under the umbrella of experiential or applied learning, they have different pedagogical intentions, learning outcomes, and types of partnerships.

We believe it is essential to clarify the meaning of the grant agreement's reference to "T7.5 Integrate community engagement into EUPeace Curricula." To do so, we must first adopt a clear and shared definition of "curricular community engagement" and then establish specific criteria to determine which activities fall within, or outside, the scope of this term.

The purpose of this document is to establish a shared understanding of these terms, define their scope, and create a common foundation for data collection, analysis, and action planning, as well as clarify their implications for the work we will be doing in WP7, particularly related to KPI 3 and KPI 5.

DEFINITIONS RELATED TO KPI 3 ("CO-CREATED, CHALLENGE-BASED SOFT SKILLS COURSES FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF")

For our soft skills courses we will be utilizing a challenge-based learning approach, as this will prepare students and staff for community engagement.

1.Soft skills

Definition:

A broad set of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to **effectively navigate their environmen**t, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals.

Updated: 27/10/2026
Author: EUPeace (eupeace@comillas.edu)

Co-funded by the European Union

[Adapted from Cinque, M. (2023). *Soft skills in education: The role of the curriculum, teachers, and assessments* [Policy brief]. UNESCO Regional Centre for Educational Planning. https://rcepunesco.ae/en/KnowledgeCorner/PolicySummaries/07_Soft_Skills_in_Education_PB_EN.pdf]

Core Features:

Personal or Interpersonal Nature: Traits, attitudes, and behaviours that influence how individuals interact and collaborate with others.

Non-technical focus: Unlike hard skills, soft skills are not tied to specific technical or job-related knowledge.

Enable effective social functioning: Facilitate working well in teams, communicating, resolving conflicts, building relationships, and adapting to changes in diverse environments.

2. Challenge-Based Learning (CBL)

Definition:

An inquiry-driven approach where students work on **authentic, open-ended problems (challenges)** that matter to them and their communities.

Core Features:

Student-centered: Students co-create the challenge, questions, and solutions.

Real-world problems: Often interdisciplinary and connected to global/local issues.

Innovation-focused: Emphasizes creative problem solving and critical thinking.

Action-oriented: Often involves a product, campaign, or proposed solution.

Collaboration is key: Students work in teams and often interact with outside stakeholders.

DEFINITIONS RELATED TO KPI 5 (& OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION PROGRAMMES)

1. 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:

Co-funded by the European Union

Purpose: Public good, not private gain.

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

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

Duration: Engagement is ongoing, not transactional.

What are some pathways to reach Community Engagement?

1. **Service Learning (SL)** is uniquely designed to **foster community engagement**.
2. **Policy Clinics and Legal Aid Programs (a form of Work Based Learning)**. Students (especially in law, social work, or public policy) provide services or research support to community members or organizations. Through this, real needs are addressed and marginalized populations are supported.
3. **Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation Labs.** Here students develop sustainable solutions to social problems, often with community partners involved in ideation and testing. It fosters co-design and prioritizes needs-based innovation.
4. **Community-Integrated Curriculum.** These are courses purposefully aligned with community issues or partners. This helps students take into consideration the community contexts and analyze real issues through the academic disciplines.
5. **Civic Engagement / Deliberative Dialogue Programs.** These are educational initiatives that promote dialogue, civic responsibility, and democratic participation. It brings students and community members into dialogue on shared issues.
6. **Community-Based Research (CBR) / Participatory Action Research (PAR).** This is a type of collaborative research where community members are co-researchers — identifying problems, collecting data, and applying findings to drive change. Communities are not just used to gather or provide data.

2.Service Learning (SL)

Service learning is one pathway to reach community engagement that is anchored in our curricula.

Definition:

A pedagogical approach where students engage in **community service** (which is directly linked to the academic curriculum) and critically **reflect** on this experience to foster personal, social, and academic learning.

[Adapted from the European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EOSSLHE) - https://www.eoslhe.eu which is based on the work of several experts: Bringle, R.G., Furco, A., Puig,J.M., Tapia, M.N.]

Core Features:

Mutual benefit: Students learn and communities benefit and are strengthened.

Updated: 27/10/2026
Author: EUPeace (eupeace@comillas.edu)

Co-funded by the European Union

Structured reflection: Critical for connecting experience with academic content and values.

Civic engagement: Promotes social responsibility, ethical thinking, and active citizenship.

Co-created with community: Partners are collaborators, not just recipients of help.

3. Work-Based Learning (WBL)

Work-based learning can be carried out in the context of community engagement, when it is grounded in reciprocity and mutual benefit, aimed at addressing public issues, building civic capacity, and producing socially just outcomes.

Definition:

An educational strategy that provides students with **real-life work experiences** related to their field of study or career interests.

Core Features:

Real needs addressed

Communities supported: Authentic work contexts (internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing) where vulnerable or marginalized populations issues are tackled.

Mentorship: Guidance from professionals in the field.

Example: INCOPS UMR LINK

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

- **Definition:** Community engagement is viewed as a process where universities and communities collaborate as equal partners to address societal problems, emphasizing **mutual benefit, reciprocity, and the recognition of community knowledge**. The authors argue for a critical approach that balances power relations and fosters sustainable, transformative outcomes, rather than reinforcing the status quo.
- **Example:** The paper describes university-community partnership projects in South Africa that aim to create authentic engagements supporting collaborative knowledge creation and sustainable community development.

2. NESET (2021). ***Community engagement in higher education: Trends, practices and policies*****. NESET report.** **https://nesetweb.eu/en/resources/library/community-engagement-in-higher-education-trends-practices-and-policies/**

- **Definition:** Community engagement in higher education is broadly defined as the **collaborative interaction between universities and their external communities** (local, regional, national, or international) to address societal challenges and enhance social impact. The report highlights the role of universities in responding to societal needs through partnerships and joint initiatives.
- **Example:** The report discusses university-led projects addressing local development, such as service-learning courses where students work directly with community organizations to solve real-world problems.

3. SHEFCE Consortium. (2023). ***Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement (SHEFCE) Project Report*****. 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;**

- **Definition:** Community engagement is defined as **university partnerships with external stakeholders to address societal challenges**, with an emphasis on mutual benefit and co-creation.
- **Example:** The SHEFCE project supports university action plans and policy recommendations, and has created a European online platform for sharing good practices and resources.

FURTHER READINGS ON CHALLENGE-BASED LEARNING

University of Twente: Challenge-based learning (TBL)

https://www.utwente.nl/en/cbl/what-is-cbl/#cbl-framework-three-main-phases

The Challenge Institute. (2018). Challenge-based learning

https://www.challengebasedlearning.org/about/

Co-funded by the European Union