

# Policy recommendations for the enhancement of community engagement in higher education:

national and system-level policy recommendations for Austria

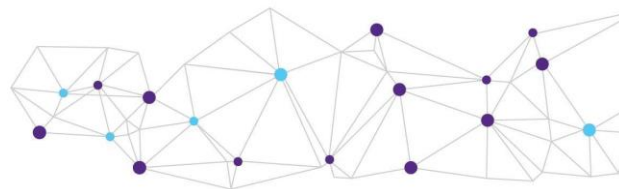
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**University for  
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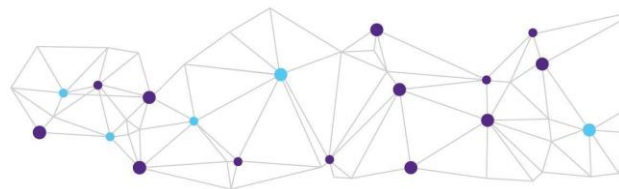
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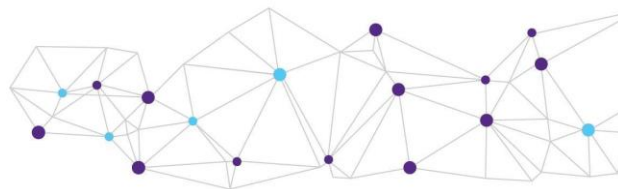
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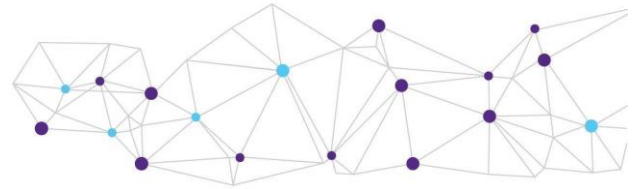
# Policy recommendations for the enhancement of community engagement in higher education: national and system-level policy recommendations for Austria

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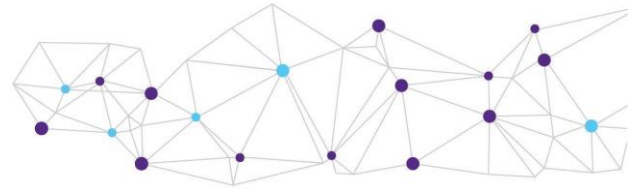


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## Acknowledgements

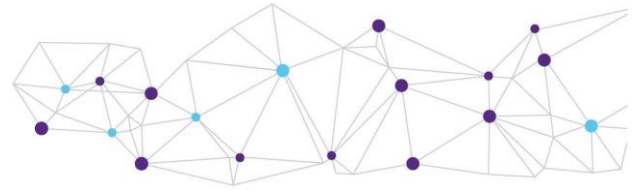
The policy recommendations were created within the framework of the Erasmus+ project SHEFCE (Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement) which aims to support community engagement initiatives at European universities and to build the capacities of universities, policymakers, and stakeholders in Europe for mainstreaming community engagement in higher education. The authors of this report wish to extend thanks to all of the partners who collaborated in its composition, in particular academic and support staff at UWK, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, the members of the national Roundtable and our community partners who supported us in the creation of the policy recommendations. Moreover, we would like to express our gratitude towards the project partners who accompanied this process and gave useful feedback. Special thanks to Lorraine McIlrath.



## Summary

This document outlines national policy recommendations for Austria regarding the enhancement of community engagement in higher education. To provide an overview of the specific characteristics and complexities of the Austrian higher education system, we first elaborate on the four sectors including public universities (22), universities of applied sciences (21), private universities (17) and university-colleges of teacher education (14) (Section 1). By undertaking the desk-based research including 57 documents, two “policy streams” related to community engagement are identified. These include *socially-oriented* policies and *entrepreneurship-oriented* policies. While there is a large number of entrepreneurship-oriented policies in place at the national level, the socially oriented policies exist mainly at the institutional level.

In general, community engagement initiatives are scattered across the Austrian higher education system. There is an absence of a unified policy-related national strategy that aims to steer and embed community engagement in higher education in various ways (Section 2). Based on these findings, we identify several challenges and opportunities to improve and deepen community engagement in Austria (Section 4) and propose concrete policy recommendations at a national level (Section 5). In summary, the proposed recommendations aim to steer community engagement in Austria’s higher education system through the stimulation of cross-sectoral cooperation. It is suggested to create spaces where all four sectors can engage in discussions and to establish ways for higher education institutions to interact and collaborate beyond the sectoral divide (e.g., through the higher education conference) and even beyond the higher education landscape (e.g., through collaborations with schools, NGOs and between different ministries in Austria).



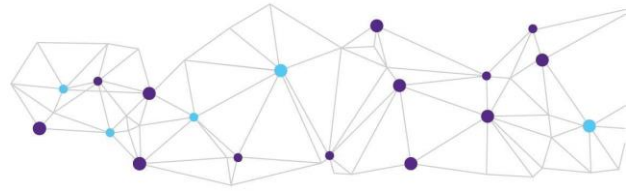
## 1. Introduction

This Section provides a brief description of the Austrian context in relation to its higher education system (Section 1.1.). Section 1.2. outlines the definition of community engagement that relates to higher education policies in Austria. In addition, Section 1.2 lists existing Austrian higher education policies that use concepts similar to community engagement. A more detailed overview of existing policies is provided in Section 2.

### 1.1. Higher education system in Austria

Austria's higher education system consists of four sectors: public universities (22), universities of applied sciences (21), private universities (17) and (public and private) university-colleges of teacher education (14):

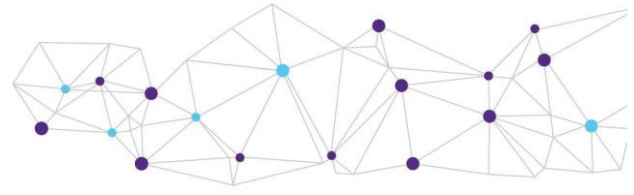
- **Public universities** represent the largest higher education sector that accommodates most of the Austrian student population (almost 75%; Statistics Austria, 2022). These universities promote the advancement of knowledge, the appreciation and teaching of arts and basic research (i.e., “research undertaken with a primary purpose of the advancement of knowledge for its own sake”); moreover, they also engage in applied research, whose aim is primarily practical utility (Bentley, Gulbrandsen, & Kyvik, 2015, p. 690). They are publicly funded by the state through performance agreements, which are negotiated every three years. Performance agreements include specific targets, e.g., enrolment rates, examination activities, graduation rates, student/teacher ratio, research output, indicators related to collaboration with industry. Regarding community engagement, public universities are legally understood as organisations contributing to society: According to the Universities Act from 2002, one of the main tasks of public universities centres on the “promotion of the use and practical application of their research findings, and of community involvement in efforts to promote the advancement and appreciation of the arts” (§ 3 Abs 8 UG). Therefore, public universities are not understood as entities isolated from society; instead, the Universities Act emphasizes their active role and contribution to society. In addition, the scientific and technological contributions of the universities to (1) solving the Grand Challenges (climate change, scarcity of resources, migration, poverty, diseases, etc.), (2) promoting gender equality and (3) increasing social mobility are highlighted (Universities Act, 2017, p. 293).
- **Universities of applied sciences** provide practice-oriented education closely linked to the labour market and mainly focused on applied research. This higher education sector was introduced in 1994 with the overall aim of diversifying higher education in Austria (Kasparovsky & Wadsack, 2004). In the original version of its legal basis



(Fachhochschulgesetz - FHG), the strategic goals for establishing this sector included the adaptation of the Austrian vocational education system to the European standards (e.g., international recognition of diplomas), the optimization of the higher education sector through "scientific-occupational-oriented" studies, permeability for the dual system (after receiving appropriate qualifications by a student) and the establishment of the universities of applied sciences as "places of education and training" (Esca-Scheuringer & Ribitsch, 2019; Pausits, 2016). Since then, this sector has been growing rapidly. Today, more than 500 courses are offered at universities of applied sciences (BMBWF, 2023). With 59,673 students, they have grown to become the second largest higher education sector after the public universities, account for 16% of the students in Austria compared to the other higher education sectors and produce around 30% of annual university graduates (BMBWF, 2023). The teaching at the universities of applied sciences is based on scientific research with an application-oriented profile (cf. § 3 in conjunction with § 8 Para. 3 Z 4 FHG). The universities of applied sciences do not receive continuous funding from federal funds to finance research activities. They are therefore dependent on obtaining research funds from other sources (e.g., project funding from the FFG, the FWF or the CDG; program funding from the federal states; funds from research projects with companies; EU programs etc.). Research and development are aimed at technology transfer and are in high demand from business and society (Esca-Scheuringer & Ribitsch, 2019). Universities of applied sciences receive public funds for teaching based on the number of enrolled students. The development and financing plans, which have a five-year planning perspective, contain long-term government financing commitments and future prospects for the sector. Additional costs (e.g., for administration or research) are mainly borne by the providers (local authorities, federal states, social partner institutions).

- **Private universities** offer programmes mostly in the social sciences, economics and medicine (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, n.d.). They enrol less than 10% of the national student population. While private universities do not receive direct funding from the government, they can apply for publicly advertised federally funded government research grants.
- **University Colleges of teacher education** provide initial and further training and development for prospective teaching staff in primary schools, secondary schools and vocational education colleges (Agentur für Bildung und Internationalisierung, n.d.). Their funding is determined in three-year annual target and performance plans with the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. In their legal status as federal institutions,





university colleges of teacher education are subordinate agencies. They only have their own legal positioning (“autonomy”) in explicitly regulated areas.

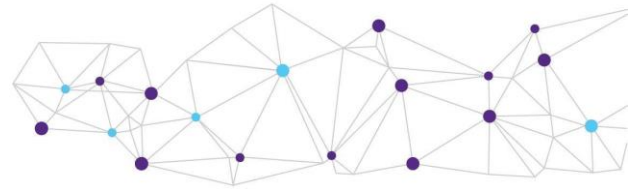
Austrian universities have a heterogeneous student body. However, individual fields of study are socially selective to varying degrees (e.g., medicine and law versus educational science or nursing science). In general, scientific and artistic pre-vocational training takes place at public universities. Furthermore, universities try to attract prospective students and students who are considering an academic career, since, among others, they are supposed to “educate young scientists”, among other things (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, n.d.). Another tendency might be that private universities are offering programmes in specific disciplines, which are not widely covered by public universities, or which are highly selective at public institutions (e.g., medicine) (CEDEFOP, n.d.). Private universities are mostly only accessible to students who are financially able to pay (high) tuition fees.<sup>1</sup> Whereas studying at public universities is (in most cases) free of charge for students, who obtained an Austrian higher education entrance qualification or an equivalent certificate within the European Union (Study in Austria, n.d.).

As described above, the four higher education sectors in Austria fulfil different functions, consist of varying funding mechanisms and tend to attract different student groups. The proposed policy recommendations below (see Section 4) aim to stimulate cross-sectoral cooperation. Moreover, spaces need to be created for all four sectors to engage in discussions and establish ways to interact and collaborate beyond the sectoral divide.

One of these possible spaces includes the higher education conference in Austria, a board that brings representatives from all four sectors as well as other higher education stakeholders (e.g., students union) together to exchange knowledge. The conference has published multiple reports that include topics related to engagement, such as recommendations on the social permeability of higher education institutions (HSK, 2013a) or on the scholarship system (HSK, 2013b). However, steering community engagement and the Third Mission (the term “Third Mission” here implies higher education institutions’ contribution to the societal development through interactions with the society in the areas of scientific continuing education, knowledge and technology transfer and community engagement (Pausits, 2014) could be integrated more prominently in the future at Austrian higher education institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the tuition fee at the Diploma programme in dental medicine at the Danube private university is 13000 euros per semester (Danube private university, n.d.), or Psychotherapy Science bachelor program at Sigmund Freud University Vienna charges 6940 euros per semester (Sigmund Freud University Vienna, n.d.).

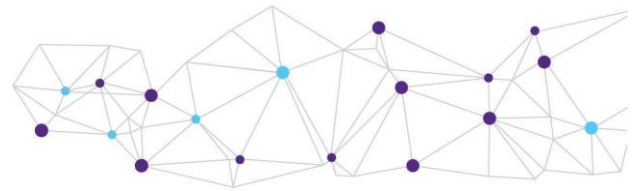


## 1.2. Definition of community engagement and its applicability within the Austrian higher education context

According to the SHEFCE/TEFCE-project, “community engagement in higher education is about how higher education institutions address societal needs in partnership with their external communities”. Community engagement is defined as a process whereby higher education institutions undertake joint activities with external communities in a way that is mutually beneficial. The term external community is broadly defined as ‘communities of place, identity or interest’ (Farnell et al., 2020, p. 5), thus including organisations from government, business, civil society, as well as the general population. Societal needs can be addressed through community engagement, by encompassing all political, economic, cultural, social, technological and environmental factors that can influence quality of life in society.

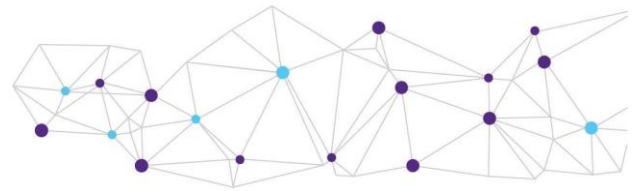
Regarding Austrian higher education, there is no specific term that is equivalent to “community engagement” in the figurative sense as described above. However, the general direction of higher education policy in Austria is aligned with the idea of community engagement as a way to connect higher education institutions with their surrounding communities, although in different ways, for instance, through the National Strategy on Social Dimension in Higher Education (BMBWF, 2017), All-Austrian University Development Plan (BMBWF, 2019) or through programs aimed at technology transfer (Government Programme 2020-2024). Across the policies and programmes in place, several terms overlap with community engagement, for instance:

- *Social dimension*: The social dimension here implies increasing participation and access to higher education of underrepresented groups (students with low socioeconomic status, migrant students, first generation students and others) (BMBWF, 2017).
- *Social responsibility of universities* – “Service to society: gender equality, diversity and social inclusion, responsible science, Agenda 2030 and implementation of the SDGs, digital transformation” (BMBWF, 2019, p.6).
- *Participation in education* is seen as one of the priorities of The Austrian Higher Education Plan 2030 (BMBWF, 2022). It implies including underrepresented groups in higher education and providing flexible learning pathways in order to “increase the potential for social, economic and political participation and integration” (BMBWF, 2022, p. 23).
- *Community education*: In the Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Austria 2020 (Republic of Austria, 2011), the term “community education” refers to inclusive education for people of all ages, supported and facilitated with the participation of various local authorities on the level of region, district, city, village etc.



- *Knowledge transfer*: In the Government Programme 2020-2024, knowledge transfer is viewed as interaction between “science, business and society” (p. 41) on themes of climate and environmental protection.
- *Community involvement*: While the term “community involvement” is not clearly defined in the Universities Act 2002, it is seen as a part of the universities’ effort to promote “the advancement of knowledge and the development of new approaches to the arts” (§ 1 UG).
- *Social responsibility*: Social responsibility of universities implies in the EHR Umsetzungsbericht (BMBWF & EHEA, 2020) their contribution “to a more cohesive and inclusive society through enhancing intercultural understanding, civic engagement and ethical awareness, as well as ensuring equitable access to higher education” (, p. 94).
- *Responsible research and responsible science*: The term “responsible science” is used to refer to universities’ participation in public discourse (see BMBWF, 2018; 2019; 2021).
- *Societal sustainability*: In the Policy Statement of UniNetz 2022, the societal sustainability refers to universities aligning their activities with the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations.
- *Student engagement and student volunteering*: The student volunteering is presented as a form of student engagement and means “being of service to others in either the academic community or to citizens outside the university in curricular or extracurricular activities” (Resch et al., 2022, p. 195).
- *Service-learning*: The term “service learning” as one of the third mission activities in teaching settings refers to various pedagogical activities enabling students to learn by providing service to community partners, e.g. in the local neighbourhood (e.g., see in Resch & Fellner, 2022; Resch & Slepcevic-Zach, 2021).
- *Third mission*: The term “third mission refers to the tasks of the universities that are not necessarily fulfilled by teaching and research activities, for instance, community engagement and understands universities as “communities of practice” as opposed to “ivory towers” (Pausits, 2015, p. 268).

An important legislation for Austrian higher education related to community engagement is the Universities Act in 2002 (UG 2002). Through this enactment, universities in Austria have “full legal capacity” to operate as independent entities from the government and started receiving funding through global budgets and performance agreements with the government (historically, the funding schemes for universities were spread around various government departments). In comparison to earlier regulations, the decisions on the use of the global budgets have since been made autonomously at the university level. Regarding community engagement, the act refers to the “promotion of the use and practical application of their (universities’) research findings, and of community involvement” (§ 3, Universities Act, 2002). In addition, the act enables universities to

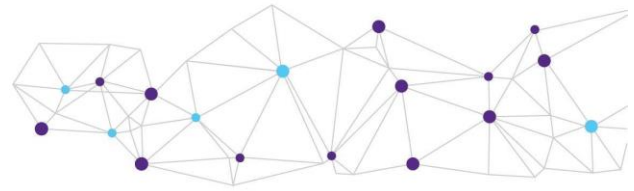


commercialise collaborative research with industry by allowing universities to keep their patents' profits. Thus, the law enables universities to commercialize research collaborations with industry by allowing universities to keep the profits from their patents, conduct research projects funded by third parties, have application-related research collaborations, sponsoring and endowed professorships. Additionally, performance agreements between the government and universities contain indicators targeting the third mission.

The first policy that specifically and explicitly aims to steer the social dimension of higher education is the National Strategy on the Social Dimension in Higher Education in Austria, that was launched in 2017 (BMBWF, 2017). According to this strategy, the social dimension can be addressed through a variety of ways including, for example, widening participation for diverse student groups, specifically underrepresented and disadvantaged groups, such as first-generation students, students with disabilities, refugee students, and others. The “MORE” programme conducted by the Austrian University Conference (UNIKO) can be an example of an initiative that aims to support refugee students through language education and an opportunity to enrol as non-degree students at a number of Austrian higher education institutions (Study in Austria, n.d.).

In addition, there are many policies in place that relate to community engagement in a broader sense. One example are policies regarding gender equality in science and research (BMBWF, 2021; Hochschulkonferenz, 2018; Wroblewski, 2022, 2018). These measures result from a solid legal framework for equal opportunities at universities (see section 3, UG, on gender equality and the advancement of women) and at universities of applied sciences (Compliance with the principle of equality and gender equality §§ 4 para. 1, 2 para 5, 8 para. 2 no. 1 and 23 para. 2 no. 3 FHG).

The next Section provides more information on policies that are relevant to community engagement, before identifying opportunities and challenges in Section 3. The recommendations were formed by a project team from the University for Continuing Education Krems (authors of this document) in collaboration with relevant policymakers from the Ministry of Science, Education, and Research, stakeholders and members from all university sectors, research centres, community partners and actors in the field of community engagement. The contributors joined the national consultation which took place on November, 16, 2022, in Linz, Austria. This meeting was part of a larger meeting of the Austrian Network for Higher Education Research.



## 2. Overview of developments in Austria: higher education policies relevant to community engagement

Through a desk-based research analysis of the literature that ultimately includes 57 documents, two streams of higher education policies in Austria that are strongly connected to community engagement could be identified. These include socially-oriented policies and entrepreneurship-oriented policies, which will be explored further below.

### 2.1. Socially-oriented and entrepreneurship-oriented policies within Austrian higher education

Within the *socially-oriented* policies, community engagement is seen as a way for higher education institutions to support underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students and improve their attainment, academic success and completion (further information is available in BMBWF, 2018; 2021). Regarding the *entrepreneurship-oriented* policies, community engagement is mainly perceived as knowledge transfer, industry collaboration and entrepreneurship development in Austrian higher education. The next two paragraphs present an overview of those two policy streams.

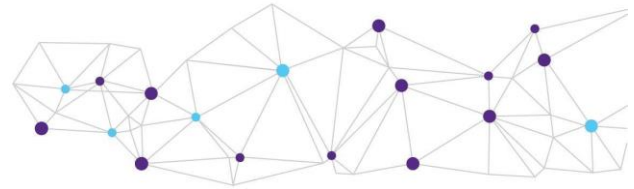
#### **Socially-oriented policies**

The National Strategy on the Social Dimension in Higher Education primarily views the social dimension as a way to improve access to and participation in higher education to diverse student groups. The strategy has three target dimensions:

- More inclusive access
- Avoid drop-out and improve academic success
- Create basic parameters and optimise the regulation of higher education policy

The strategy was launched by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research in 2017 and formulates goals that should be reached by 2025. Other policies which also consider community engagement from this angle include, for example, the prize for diversity management called “Diversitas award” granted by the Federal Ministry of Education Science and Research since 2016. Further examples are The National Mobility and Internationalisation Strategy for Higher Education 2020–2030, or the Strategy for Life-long Learning in Austria (LLL:2020), which both do not exclusively focus on the social dimension but mention equity and access as one of their priorities. The Internationalisation strategy, for example, proposes introducing hybrid or online mobility as a way to include those who cannot participate in traditional (physical) mobility for any reason.





UniNetz is an example of a socially oriented initiative aiming at facilitating the contribution of universities to the Sustainable Development Goals. It connects 23 partner institutions which collaboratively related an “option report” with concrete steps suggested for implementation of the SDGs (UniNetz, n.d.).

### **Entrepreneurship-oriented policies**

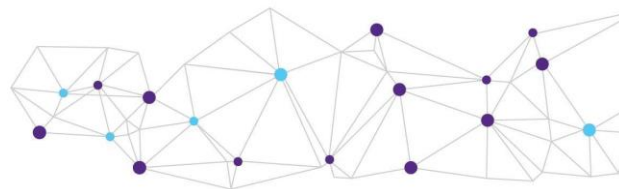
The Austrian government has taken extensive efforts to promote entrepreneurship and knowledge transfer in higher education (OECD & EU, 2019). Examples include the Universities Act 2002, which not only provides universities with autonomy from the government, but also introduced new regulations on individual patents granting the publicly funded universities the right to own the patents generated together with the industry (Trippel et al., 2015).

In 2020, the Federal Act on the Financing of Research, Technology and Innovation was introduced to enhance the long-term development of the industry, labour market and society in general. The Federal Act provides the basis for the governance of ten central non-university research and research funding institutions. One such example is the *Christian Doppler laboratories*, a non-profit association supported by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Economy and the National Foundation for Research, Technology and Development. The association provides funding for research mostly in the fields of math, information technology, material sciences, life sciences and medicine (Christian Doppler Forschungsgesellschaft, n.d.).

Another example is the COMET program coordinated by Federal Ministry of Labor and Economics and the Federal Ministry for Climate Protection, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology which facilitates the collaboration between the stakeholders engaged in research, innovation and business on the topics of climate protection, digitization, mobility and health (COMET-Programm, n.d.).

Several indicators are applied to those non-university research centres to evaluate their level of impact and to compare them with other (economic) systems at an international level; one of the indicators refers to the communication and transfer of knowledge. In 2020 and 2021, the following activities were implemented to further engage civil society actors:

- The “Österreichische Studienstiftung” (Austrian Academic Studies Foundation), provides intellectual stimulation to talented secondary-school leavers and supports them during their studies, introduced a series of discussions with public figures in 2021 alongside its summer and winter schools and mentoring by established researchers.
- The “OeAW’s Preisfrage” (public prize question) asks people from all over the world to submit essays on a particular topic, most recently “What can science do in pandemics?”.



- Two video series – “Corona-Faktencheck” (“Coronavirus Fact Check”) and “Was macht eigentlich...?” (“What do actually do?”) – were launched on the OeAW’s YouTube channel in 2021 (BMBWF, BMK & BMAW, 2022). These videos are dedicated to informing the public about scientific knowledge.

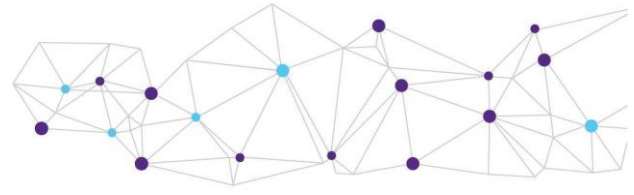
Other examples of initiatives aimed at steering knowledge transfer between higher education and industry are listed below<sup>2</sup>:

- *HEInnovate* is an initiative of the European Commission in partnership with the OECD that developed tools to steer innovation and entrepreneurship in higher education for higher education institutions and policymakers (HEInnovate, n.d.). Austria’s participation in the project revealed opportunities to promote entrepreneurship and knowledge transfer in higher education through improving collaboration between universities of applied sciences and public universities, as well as through building a common understanding of entrepreneurship in higher education. Some challenges identified within the project were institutional diversity in Austrian higher education, and difficulties in evaluating the entrepreneurship activities of higher education institutions (Ecker et al., 2019; OECD/EU, 2019).
- *AplusB* (Academia plus Business) is a network of start-up incubators that aims to “transform research-driven innovation projects into internationally successful businesses” (Ecker et al., 2019), which has been founded by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology.
- The COIN program by The Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG) facilitates the technology transfer between the higher education institutions and businesses in Austria by providing funding for the output-oriented project focusing on developing innovative products and processes (COIN – Cooperation and Innovation, n.d.).
- Research Studios Austria are “small, flexible research units mostly attached to existing facilities. RSA can be set up alone or in cooperation with a partner - with the aim of converting research results into marketable products and services as quickly as possible” (Research Studios Austria, n.d.).

These policies and initiatives are examples of the entrepreneurial direction of community engagement in policy making in Austria. While there is a significant number of policies on entrepreneurship and knowledge transfer in Austria, not all of them necessarily resonate with the

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<sup>2</sup> Further information can be found in the background report on the “Entrepreneurial Agenda at Austrian Universities” (Ecker et al., 2019).



understanding of community engagement presented within the SHEFCE project, as some of them more prominently address economic profit rather than societal needs.

The next section discusses the connection between the socially-oriented and entrepreneurship-oriented policies, and their relation to the concept of community engagement.

## 2.2. Connection between socially-oriented and entrepreneurship-oriented policies and their relation to community engagement

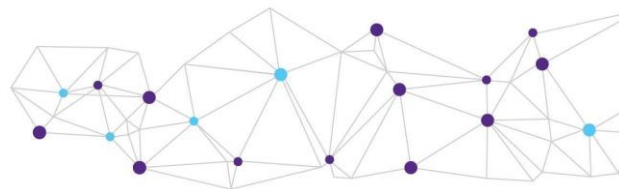
Both policy streams in Austria described above have the following in common: They aim at connecting higher education institutions with their external environment in order to positively impact society. However, there might be an opportunity to improve the alignment and interconnection of these two directions. For instance, Trippel et al. (2015) describe: “In Austria, there is an obvious difference between policy mandates (community oriented) and the incentives actually in place (more entrepreneurship focused)” (p. 1736).

Coming back to the definition of community engagement within the SHEFCE project, Austrian policies seem to have relatively less focus on the community engagement as “joint activities that can be undertaken by university staff or students, whether as a part of their teaching and research, as a part of joint projects and initiatives” (Farnell et al., 2020, p. 5). For instance, service learning is not a common term used among the Austrian policies. It is being practiced by higher education institutions on an institutional level, but it has not yet been included in national policies (Resch et al., 2020).

Some community engagement initiatives taken by Austrian higher education institutions that are related to service learning or projects/initiatives by students and academics are:

- *Volunteering@WU* is an interdisciplinary community service-learning programme initiated by the Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU Vienna) in 2010. It is the largest university led community service-learning programme in Austria (Rameder et al., 2019). Within this programme, students at WU Vienna serve as “learning buddies” or study assistants to children and teenagers from disadvantaged groups such as those who come from families with low socioeconomic status or who are first-generation immigrants. The programme includes voluntary and mandatory elements for students, a combination of which relates to a number of ECTS. The programme is realised in collaboration with major NGOs such as Caritas Vienna (an NGO engaged in social work, nursing, care for people with disabilities, education, youth work and disaster relief (EPALE, n.d.)) or other businesses, such as REWE International AG (an international retail and tourism company). Since the beginning





in 2010, more than 770 WU students have been engaged as volunteers, performing over 7,000 hours of volunteer work each semester.

- *Vienna University Children's Office* is a non-profit academic spin-off company of the University of Vienna operating since 2006 and conducting various projects in the fields of science, media and democracy with children, young people, families and educational institutions (Vienna University Children's Office, n.d.). Examples of the projects include outreach programmes with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, media education for children, dissemination of science for children and others.
- *Civic Engagement Education and Service Learning in Teacher Education* at the University of Education Upper Austria is a field work for prospective teachers (pre-service teachers) where they get involved in social work, after-school and tutoring programs (Grogan & Fahrenwald, 2018, cited in Resch et al., 2020).

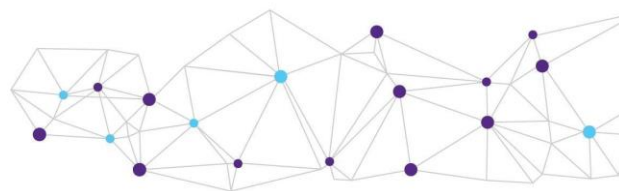
These examples indicate that there are a lot of activities that are related to community engagement at the institutional level. However, these initiatives are fragmented and scattered across the higher education sector and there is an absence of a unified policy or a national strategy aimed at steering community engagement in higher education in various ways (Resch et al., 2020).

### 2.3. Summary

Higher education in Austria is characterised by a high level of diversity, which can partly be explained by the different contexts and functions of the four higher education sectors (public universities, private universities, university-colleges of teacher education and universities of applied sciences).

With regard to community engagement, there are two evident directions in Austrian higher education policy: the policies on social inclusion in higher education aimed at including underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students (i.e. socially-oriented policies), and policies on steering entrepreneurship and technology transfer between higher education institutions and industry (i.e. entrepreneurship-oriented policies).

Considering the Austrian context and community engagement-related activities described above, several opportunities for improvement can be identified. One of them might be a closer alignment of the two types of policies – the socially-oriented and the entrepreneurship-oriented. Additionally, community engagement activities that are done by higher education institutions at the institutional level might serve as a source of improvement regarding the country's community engagement policies on the national level. Section 3 provides a more detailed list of challenges and opportunities for community engagement improvements in Austria.



### 3. Assessment of the main challenges and opportunities for the community engagement improvements in Austria

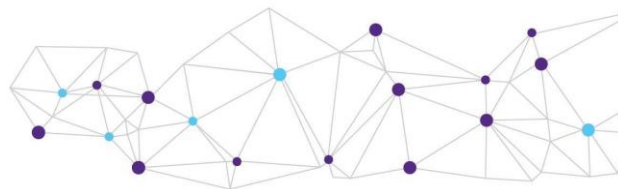
Based on the context and policies in place, described above, we identified challenges and opportunities in Austrian higher education that form the basis of the proposed policy recommendations in Section 4.

#### 3.1. Challenges

The following table highlights some of the main challenges for improving community engagement in Austria:

Table 1: Challenges for the community engagement improvements in Austria

No.	Title	Description
1.	<b>Overlap with other concepts</b>	High overlap with other related concepts (e.g. third mission, student engagement, social dimension, academic community engagement, etc.) and loose connections between these concepts.
2.	<b>Different understandings of community engagement</b>	No system-wide common understanding of community engagement and/or a national strategy on community engagement in higher education.
3.	<b>Level of institutionalisation of community engagement</b>	Community Engagement is not broadly institutionalised at higher education institutions (e.g., rare existence of community engagement offices).
4.	<b>Competition with other strategies</b>	Other higher education institutions' strategies that are in place, might "compete" with community engagement in terms of resources, visibility and recognition (e.g., Science and Technology Transfer, Excellence Initiatives, SDGs).
5.	<b>Level of allocated resources</b>	Higher education institutions face financial difficulties according to rising costs and this might lead to cuts on community engagement activities.
6.	<b>Heterogeneity of Austrian HE-sector</b>	Heterogeneous interests and funding mechanisms of the four higher education sectors (e.g., performance agreements for universities) might lead to difficulties in translating national recommendations into action.
7.	<b>Lack of community engagement as a performance indicator for public universities</b>	There are currently a variety of projects at universities and funding programs (e.g., at the OeAD) that serve to promote social commitment. However, social commitment could be taken into account even more as a performance indicator with regard to the financing mechanisms of public universities.
8.	<b>Incentives and recognition for</b>	The level of incentives and funding academic staff receive to undertake community engagement initiatives (projects, service learning) and the



	<b>academic staff who are committed to community engagement</b>	recognition of such activities could be increased. Some universities have already developed projects to integrate such incentive systems into the career development of academics.
<b>9.</b>	<b>Lack of community engagement as a prerequisite for academic career progression</b>	Dedicating one's time and resources to community engagement activities is not recognized in relation to career prospects and career progression in academia (e.g., guidelines for habilitation).
<b>10.</b>	<b>Low research and evaluation on community partners' perspectives</b>	There is little research on community engagement, its effects and how the community partners experience the collaboration with higher education institutions.
<b>11.</b>	<b>Student volunteering might be taken for granted</b>	Voluntary work (by students) – as a form of expression of social commitment – could be taken for granted and “conceal” the fact that other (political) support structures should also be expanded.
<b>12.</b>	<b>Limited scope of recommendations in general</b>	Existing recommendations and policies focus mostly on higher education. In order to develop societal engagement into a more sustainable practice, individual activities could be expanded beyond individual sectors (e.g., other ministries, interest groups or sectors could also be involved).
<b>13.</b>	<b>Limited transparency on how community partners are selected for cooperation</b>	Community engagement tends to happen in a selective manner, meaning that some community partners are more involved than others (complexity vs. focus). Often, it is not clear, how institutions decide on working with what partners.
<b>14.</b>	<b>Facilitation and evaluation of partnership</b>	There is a challenge in facilitating the practicalities of community engagement partnerships (e.g., in terms of contracts, managing the partnership).

### 3.2. Opportunities

The following table highlights the main opportunities for deepening community engagement in Austria. Please note that every opportunity is related to one or more of the challenges described above (see their relation represented in the matching numbers in the left column). For example, the first opportunity described in the following table is related to challenge No. 1, 4, 6 and 12.

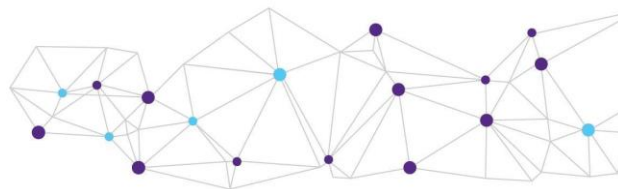
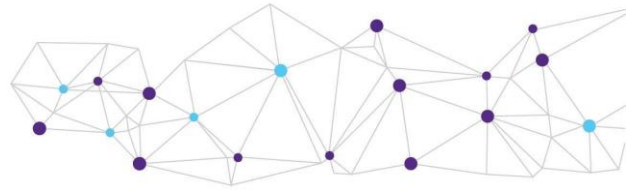
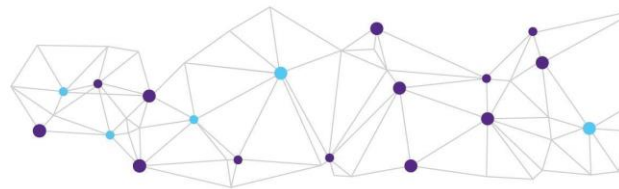


Table 2: Opportunities for the community engagement improvements in Austria

No. of rel. challenges	Title	Description
1., 4., 6., 12.	<b>Political commitment to related topics</b>	Political commitment in Austria on related topics such as the social dimension in Higher Education and the third mission (e.g., via The National Strategy on the Social Dimension of Higher Education, indicators in performance agreements related to the third mission) might increase the possibility of putting community engagement on the political agenda.
2.	<b>Linking theory and practice</b>	Increasing relevance of connection between theory and practice in higher education in general, whereby community engagement could serve as a link between the two.
3., 9.	<b>Engaged higher education institutions</b>	Some higher education institutions in Austria are highly engaged with their communities, and they individually develop incentives to motivate staff to collaborate with community partners (e.g., stories of impact; guidelines for habilitation). Their experience can be used to enhance community engagement in other institutions.
5., 7.	<b>Performance agreements as steering instruments</b>	Next round of performance agreements offers the possibility to include community engagement as a strategic goal for universities.
8.	<b>General interest and engagement from academic staff</b>	Many community engagement activities are already in place, facilitated by highly motivated academic staff (e.g., via service learning). The existing interest among the academic staff may become a basis for further enhancement of community engagement on an institutional level.
10.	<b>Bottom-up knowledge</b>	There is an opportunity for higher education institutions to gain knowledge of specific societal needs via community partners, who are directly involved in different projects, e.g. refugee programs.
11.	<b>Attractiveness for students</b>	Declining student numbers and increasing competitiveness between higher education institutions might lead them to sharpen their profile and attract prospective students via a more elaborated community engagement strategy.
13.	<b>Engaged community partners</b>	There is a high interest of community partners to collaborate with higher education institutions and students.
14.	<b>Networks as facilitators of community</b>	Establishing and growing networks focusing on community engagement (e.g., Hochschulnetzwerk Bildung durch Verantwortung) could be an opportunity to enhance community engagement. Also, the higher education conference (HSK) in Austria could be used as a



	<p><b>engagement collaborations</b></p>	<p>forum to facilitate the exchange and dialogue between the different higher education sectors and unite different advocates for community engagement, inclusion, gender equality, widening participation, the social dimension etc. to create possible synergies.</p>
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## 4. Policy recommendations for the enhancement of community engagement in higher education

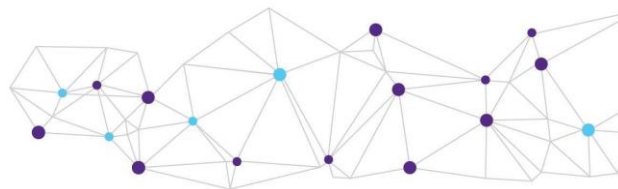
In this section, we present national policy recommendations related to system-level improvements. The proposed policy recommendations address the key challenges and the related opportunities described earlier in chapter 3. They are divided into (a) long-term, (b) medium-term, and (c) short-term recommendations.

### 4.1 Long - term (8 -10 years)

<b>Title a.1.</b>	<b>Sustainable funding for community engagement</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	Community engagement is not (yet) prominently represented as a performance indicator in the funding mechanisms of higher education institutions.
<b>Approach</b>	Policymakers should include community engagement as a strategic goal for higher education institutions via various funding schemes.
<b>Proposed actions</b>	Implement long-lasting funding mechanisms (e.g., in performance agreements) to sustainably strengthen community engagement in higher education and beyond.
<b>Risks management</b>	Ongoing (inter)national crises, rising costs and a limited budget could become a challenge for the implementation of community engagement activities.

<b>Title a.2.</b>	<b>Scope of recommendations</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	When it comes to community engagement, the limited focus on higher education is narrowing the perspective on community engagement as an integral part of cooperating and coexisting in society beyond higher education.
<b>Approach</b>	Community engagement should be understood in a much broader sense than focusing on higher education alone, other perspectives (e.g., schools, NGOs) should be included as well to make community engagement more sustainable.

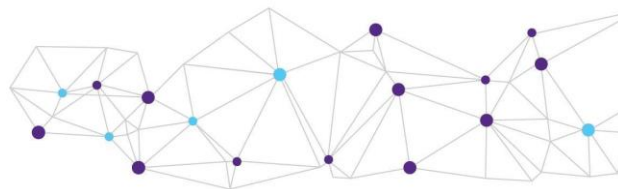




<b>Proposed actions</b>	Involve other ministries and sectors in the process of steering community engagement within society as a whole.
<b>Risks management</b>	There might be a resistance to change in terms of accepting new perspectives and approaches to community engagement and recognizing its value for society.

<b>Title a.3.</b>	<b>Exchange between different types of HEIs</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	Heterogeneous nature, orientation and funding mechanisms of the four higher education sectors might lead to difficulties in translating recommendations into action.
<b>Approach</b>	Policy makers, higher education stakeholders and managers should commit to and align with an idea of how community engagement can be translated into action beyond a sectoral divide.
<b>Proposed actions</b>	Steer political commitment to community engagement as a key priority. Implement a structured process as well as a sustainable general strategy dedicated to community engagement that includes all relevant stakeholders.
<b>Risks management</b>	Due to other related topics and strategies as well as varying higher education institutions' strategies already in place, aligning all relevant players might be difficult.

<b>Title a.4.</b>	<b>Academic careers</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	Embedding community engagement into academic careers is challenging, since community engagement activities are not (yet) recognized and valued in relation to career prospects and progression in academia.
<b>Approach</b>	Policymakers and higher education institutions need to think about ways to increase the value of community engagement activities in academia and in relation to career prospects of academics.



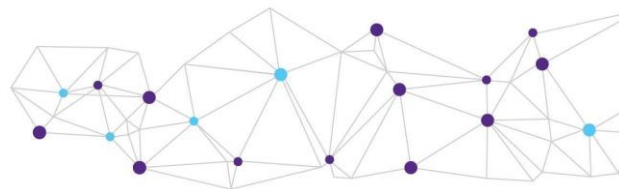
<b>Proposed actions</b>	Continue to institutionalize community engagement at higher education institutions, develop incentives to motivate staff to collaborate with community partners (e.g., guidelines for habilitation), aim at critically reflecting upon what activities are valued in academia (i.e., open the narrow focus of publishing as the most important activity regarding academic careers).
<b>Risks management</b>	A number of initiatives such as Erasmus+ or the European University Initiative promote university cooperation. However, international competitiveness and the dominant research imperative in science (e.g., orientation towards publications in high-quality journals instead of community engagement activities) seem to prevail. This could limit the goal of making social commitment a central activity in science.

<b>Title a.5.</b>	<b>Including the regional perspective in policies on community engagement</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	The regional challenges are often not known or are only identified selectively.
<b>Approach</b>	The stakeholders emphasized the regional perspective for the further development of the topic. The objectives of community engagement should be developed and reflected together with regional partners.
<b>Proposed actions</b>	It is important to invite different stakeholders to an exchange in a democratic process.
<b>Risks management</b>	Difficulty of bringing in all interests, especially against the background of power asymmetries and different political parties.

#### 4.2 Medium-term (4-7 years)

<b>Title b.1.</b>	<b>Evaluating community engagement and continuing research on this topic</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	There is a lack of evaluative research on community engagement that analyses its effects and how community partners are experiencing collaboration with higher education institutions.

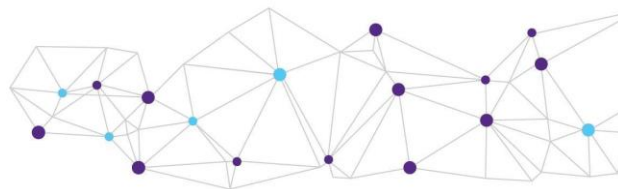




<b>Approach</b>	Broadly funded research and evaluation is key in developing and improving community engagement activities among all four higher education sectors; policies need to be aligned with what is already in place at the institutional level.
<b>Proposed actions</b>	Provide funding for evaluating effects of (financial) incentives aiming at strengthening community engagement activities at higher education institutions; also, the experiences of higher education institutions' regarding community engagement (e.g., service learning) should be considered and included in further developing community engagement policies.
<b>Risks management</b>	Difficulty to measure the value of community engagement activities and its effects; lack of consequences if goals that are dedicated to strengthening community engagement are not fulfilled by higher education institutions.

<b>Title b.2.</b>	<b>Institutionalizing community engagement</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	Community engagement is not (yet) broadly institutionalized at higher education institutions (e.g., rare existence of community engagement offices).
<b>Approach</b>	Institutionalization is key in order to anchor community engagement at all higher education institutions; policy makers and representatives of higher education institutions should enter into a dialogue about institutionalizing community engagement.
<b>Proposed actions</b>	Broadly institutionalize community engagement at higher education institutions via offices and staff that is dedicated to coordinate community engagement activities (e.g., strategic focus, monitoring, advising, evaluation and evolution of partnerships).
<b>Risks management</b>	Competing strategies and limited resources might challenge a broad institutionalization of community engagement at all higher education institutions.

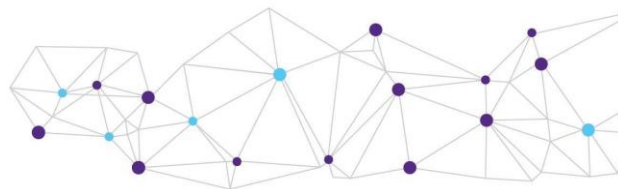
<b>Title b.3.</b>	<b>Alignment of overlapping concepts and strategies</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	No clear differentiation from other related concepts (i.e., third mission, student engagement, social dimension, academic societal engagement, etc.) and possible competition with other strategies in place (e.g., Science and Technology Transfer, Excellence Initiatives, SDGs).
<b>Approach</b>	Work on uniting and aligning the socially-oriented policies with the entrepreneurship-oriented ones and focus on commonalities between different



	concepts (e.g., connecting higher education with external partners and environments).
<b>Proposed actions</b>	Political commitment in Austria needs to be broadened and aligned with other related topics, such as the social dimension, the third mission and the knowledge and technology transfer.
<b>Risks management</b>	The heterogeneity of related concepts and strategies creates a complexity that might be difficult to overcome.

<b>Title b.4.</b>	<b>Supporting academic staff</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	There is a lack of incentives and funding available to academic staff in order to engage with community engagement initiatives (e.g., projects, service learning) and a lack of recognition for such activities.
<b>Approach</b>	Policy makers and higher education managers should engage in a discussion to develop ways in which academic staff can be supported/incentivized in community engagement activities.
<b>Proposed actions</b>	The many community engagement activities that are already in place – e.g., via service learning – and that are facilitated by highly motivated academic staff should be intensified by recognizing their work and providing tailored funding schemes (including personnel development opportunities).
<b>Risks management</b>	Community engagement is not (yet) embedded into academic careers, and the lack of recognition of such activities in relation to career prospects and progression in academia might hinder academics from broadly engaging in such activities; lack of financial resources might limit the implementation of incentives.

<b>Title b.5.</b>	<b>Considering perspectives of community partners and students</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	Community engagement happens in a selective manner, meaning that some community partners are more involved and/or valued than others; and volunteering (of students) in community engagement activities might be taken for granted.
<b>Approach</b>	Higher education institutions might be supported in orientating their community engagement activities not only on governmental policies (e.g., knowledge and technology transfer), but also in alignment with other stakeholders' perspectives (e.g., students).

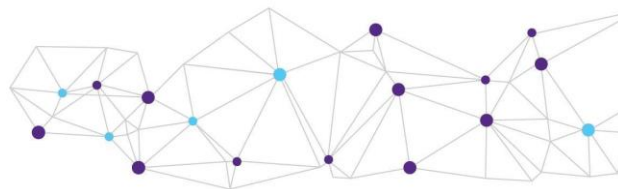


<b>Proposed actions</b>	Policies should include valuing and centering the perspectives and experiences of community partners as well as students; reflecting upon how to decide on working with what partners and how to reward or acknowledge students for their work.
<b>Risks management</b>	There might be a lack of communication or even miscommunication between higher education institutions and different stakeholders.

<b>Title b.6.</b>	<b>Including community engagement in curriculum</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	It can be assumed that the inclusion of community engagement in the curriculum is discipline specific. In addition, there are different interests on the part of the teachers to elaborate on this topic.
<b>Approach</b>	Universities of applied sciences and continuing education courses in particular have an obligation to ascertain the societal and economic needs when developing curricula; they are therefore already community-oriented; in sum, cooperation already exists in many areas, without this necessarily being subsumed under the term social engagement.
<b>Proposed actions</b>	As community engagement is also a question of disciplines, differences between the faculties should be taken into account. An exchange between disciplines on different community engagement initiatives could be beneficial.
<b>Risks management</b>	This topic being taken up only by certain disciplines could create an imbalance in community engagement practices.

### 4.3 Short - term (1-3 years)

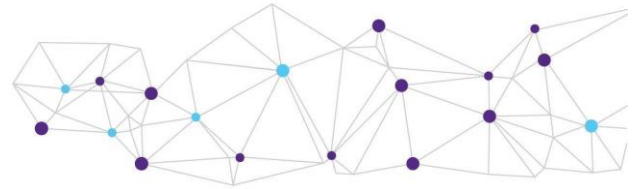
<b>Title c.1.</b>	<b>Understanding community engagement and increasing awareness on its value</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	Lack of a shared and common understanding of community engagement and its value for educational institutions and society.
<b>Approach</b>	Policy makers, stakeholders related to higher education and others should discuss what is meant by community engagement and why it is important for Austrian higher education.



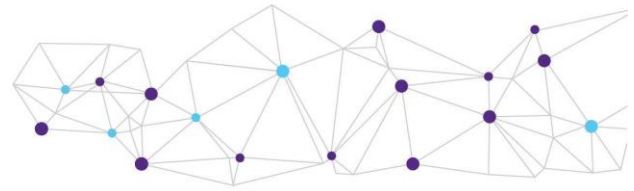
<b>Proposed actions</b>	Initiate a process (e.g., project, event, etc.) aiming at creating a shared and common understanding of community engagement, establishing ways to interact and collaborate, and develop indicators to measure community engagement and its development.
<b>Risks management</b>	Different perspectives (e.g., social vs. entrepreneurial perspectives) might be difficult to align during this process.

<b>Title c.2.</b>	<b>Fostering research</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	Lack of research on community engagement in higher education and society.
<b>Approach</b>	Policy makers should encourage higher education institutions to conduct more research on community engagement in Austria.
<b>Proposed actions</b>	Establish research/project calls that facilitate research and collaboration among the higher education sectors related to community engagement in order to create more empirical evidence.
<b>Risks management</b>	Such calls and funding schemes might enhance competitiveness between higher education institutions and increase the divide of the sectors; therefore, collaboration among the sectors should be facilitated via such calls.

<b>Title c.3.</b>	<b>Providing resources and incentives, for instance through project calls</b>
<b>Challenge</b>	Lack of resources and lack of community engagement in funding mechanisms (e.g., performance agreements).



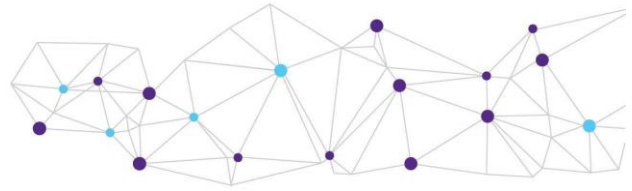
<p><b>Approach</b></p>	<p>Policy makers and higher education managers might aim at creating resources for steering community engagement. In order to further advance the topic, it is important to integrate community engagement into project proposals (e.g. the gender aspect is in many calls already obligatory; possibly also conceivable for community engagement e.g. citizen science add-on).</p>
<p><b>Proposed actions</b></p>	<p>Include financial incentives (e.g., into performance agreements) to facilitate and strengthen community engagement activities at universities, award and reward those higher education institutions that are already dedicated to community engagement.</p>
<p><b>Risks management</b></p>	<p>Rising costs, other (inter)national crisis and budget deficits might negatively affect the possibility to create resources dedicated to community engagement.</p>



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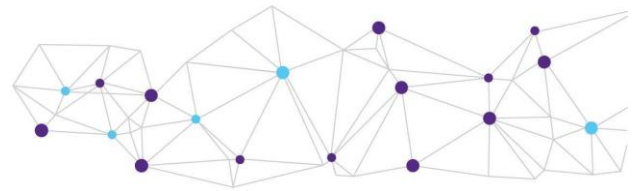
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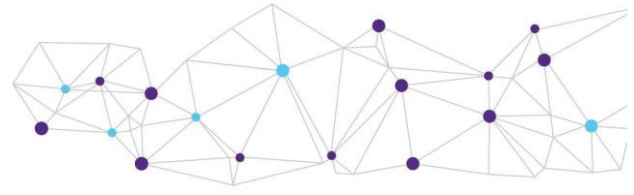
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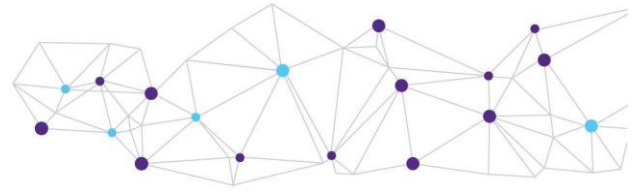
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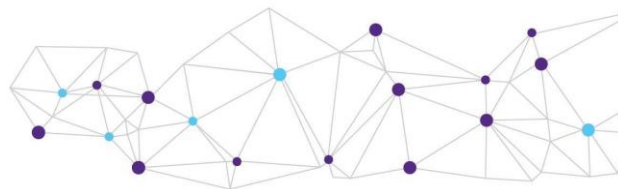
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## Appendix

### Key information on the SHEFCE project

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	<a href="https://community-engagement.eu/">https://community-engagement.eu/</a> ; <a href="https://www.shefce.eu/">https://www.shefce.eu/</a> ; <a href="https://en.iro.hr/2022/05/12/steering-higher-education-for-community-engagement/">https://en.iro.hr/2022/05/12/steering-higher-education-for-community-engagement/</a>

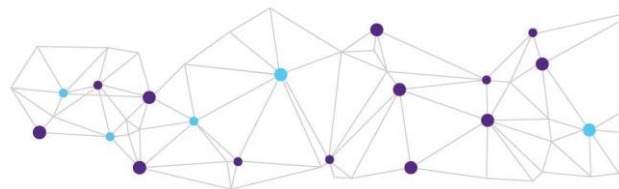
### Project partners

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

### 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