



**SPACE**

Supporting Professionals and Academics  
for Community Engagement

# **Community Perspectives on Partnerships with Universities: Survey and Dialogue Report – Brussels (Belgium)**

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This publication presents the findings of surveys and interviews carried out with community representatives working in partnership with Vrije Universiteit Brussel. We are deeply grateful to all participants—both community partners and institutional brokers—for the time they provided to take part in this process and for the invaluable insights they have provided.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### ***About the SPACE project***

Community engagement in higher education refers to how universities address societal needs in partnership with their external communities. Community engagement is emerging as a policy priority in higher education, reflecting increasing pressure on universities to demonstrate how they deliver public benefits. At the European level, the European Commission's key policy document *Towards a European Education Area* features 'service to society' as the 'fourth mission of higher education', and there is increasing expectations for universities to contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), an expectation that is now reflected in a special university ranking for SDGs (the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings).

Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) is participating in the EU-funded project *Supporting Professionals and Academics for Community Engagement in Higher Education* (SPACE), a three-year project (2023-2026) that aims to build the capacities of academics, professional staff, and community partners to strengthen community engagement in higher education across Europe. The SPACE project is a follow-up to the successful projects *Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education* (TEFCE, 2018-2020) and *Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement* (SHEFCE, 2020-2023), whose results are gathered on the European web platform [www.community-engagement.eu](http://www.community-engagement.eu). The project is led by the Institute for the Development of Education (IDE, Croatia) and involves nine partners from four countries (Belgium, Croatia, Ireland, and Spain). The project is also supported by four European-level associations and university alliances, as well as by two university networks from Catalonia and Ireland.

One of the approaches the SPACE project to achieve its objectives is to listen to the perspectives of community partners on the success factors and obstacles to effective collaboration with universities, and subsequently to formulate recommendations to assist universities in enhancing these partnerships. We therefore invited representatives of 35 organisations that are currently involved or have previously worked in a partnership with our university, of which a total of 18 participated. They provided us with open and critical reflections on how these partnerships have worked, what their successes and pitfalls were, and how we can improve our engagement with community organisations for mutual benefit in the future. These reflections were collected via a university-community partnership survey and through discussions in the form of in-depth interviews held in November 2024.

### ***Community engagement at Vrije Universiteit Brussel***

As an Urban Engaged University, VUB strives to connect with its urban environment, taking up its role as a lever for the region, an active place-maker and facilitator. The Brussels region is envisioned as a unique, intellectually challenging and rich learning environment. VUB embraces the city's social, cultural and institutional diversity. Being an anchor environment for various international organisations, EU institutions, and a wide array of

NGOs, Brussels offers diverse opportunities to develop attractive, relevant and engaged educative experiences. However, VUB's metropolitan environment also comes with a number of challenges (e.g. superdiversity, risk of fragmentation in partnerships, poverty, high unemployment rates, school dropouts, traffic jams, the complex governmental structure, and educational jurisdictions). VUB's mission is to enhance the Brussels region through education and research tailored to the city, its residents, professionals, and visitors. The university places a strong emphasis on engagement, aligning with its core values of free inquiry, (world) citizenship, social responsibility, and sustainability. This commitment is evident in a wide range of community-engaged courses and research projects, and actively supported by university leadership and professionalisation initiatives.

VUB has spearheaded a range of supporting projects (weKONEKT.brussels, Science Shop, BRUTUS, #TheWorldNeedsYou, PACT, the EUTOPIA Connected Communities, Citizen Science Contactpoint, OpenLab), tools (webportal, e-learning platform, infosheets, knowledge clips, lesson templates, co-working/learning spaces, financial incentives, valorisation schemes), and structures (dedicated units and project teams) in order to bolster engaged teaching and research practices. In addition, there is a strong strategic orientation on civic/societal engagement embedded in various policy plans and vision/mission texts. These components create a robust and authentic institutional framework for the continued development of VUB's engagement agenda.

### ***Survey structure, cases-sampling and response rate***

The SPACE university-community partnerships survey was developed following a literature review on the key factors influencing inter-institutional collaboration, with a focus on university-community partnerships.<sup>1</sup> The SPACE survey contains two sections:

- **Section A: Case study:** this section includes questions relating to the partnership/collaboration that your organisation is currently (or has previously been) involved in with the university, its goals, activities, and results.
- **Section B: Assessment:** this section includes an assessment rubric allowing respondents to provide assessment scores (from level 1 to level 5) to a series of questions relating to 3 dimensions.
  - Dimension 1: Process (the way the partnership is planned and implemented)
  - Dimension 2: Ethos (attitudes and values that characterise the partnership)
  - Dimension 3: Outcomes (results of the partnership)

Respondents were requested to describe and reflect on one specific collaborative initiative/joint project with the university. The surveys were completed by a single member of a community partner organisation with direct experience of the partnership, or through a consultation within the organisation. Based on their experiences in the partnership, respondents were requested to complete an assessment rubric below, providing scores of 1 to 5 for each dimension/sub-dimension that is assessed. Scores are provided based on level

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<sup>1</sup> Farnell & Culum, 2024.

descriptors for levels 1, 3 and 5 (while level 2 and level 4 indicate “in between” levels). After collecting the data, pseudonymised data was used to calculate average scores.

In preparation of the partner survey, a mapping was carried out of potentially interesting partners to reach out to. We were able to identify 35 partners together with VUB staff from the Citizen Science Contactpoint, Crosstalks, House of Sustainable Transitions, weKONEKT.brussels, and Wetenschapswinkel. The aim was to do a partner sampling which is reflective of the diversity of campus-community partnerships developed at VUB, including partnerships in the field of Education, Research and Knowledge Exchange in diverse disciplinary fields and touching upon diverse societal issues. Our contact persons got in touch with their respective partners, meaning partners with whom they had been collaborating in the past. Five partners kindly informed us that they would not be able to participate in our survey due to a lack of time. A total of 18 community representatives successfully completed the survey.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that we worked with a small sample which may or may not be a reflection of the wide range of campus-community partnerships. The community partners from whom we did receive a response are generally highly engaged, a positivity bias is probable.

All responding partners are active in the social profit sector; five of them focus on education and mobilisation, while the others (13) are specialised in arts and culture. Their size ranges from small (less than 15 employees) to large (more than 50 employees), with one being a start-up and the others equally divided between developing and embedded organisations. All responding partners were involved in at least one initiative or joint project with the university, and 50% indicated participating in more than one over time. In addition, two partners are also involved in working groups or advisory bodies of the university. The contributions from both the university and the community partner varied in the different partnerships, although there were some similarities.

On the one hand, almost all community partners (with one exception) contributed to the partnership with (1) knowledge and expertise, as well as (2) organisational support. 14 out of 18 partners furthermore indicated contributing with (3) networks and contacts, of which seven also (4) provided funding. On the other hand, there is almost a general agreement (with again one exception) that community partners could count on the (1) support or mentoring of academic staff, provided by the university. (2) Organisational support as well as (3) communication and promotion (on media and social networks) were slightly less common, in 14 and 11 partnerships respectively. Finally, (4) funding from the university was received in a minority of cases, namely seven. The vast majority of responding partners indicated that they had been partnering to provide learning opportunities for students (through project work, internships, guest lecturing, site visits, amongst others). Partners involved exclusively in research-oriented collaborations responded significantly less to our call to participate in the study.

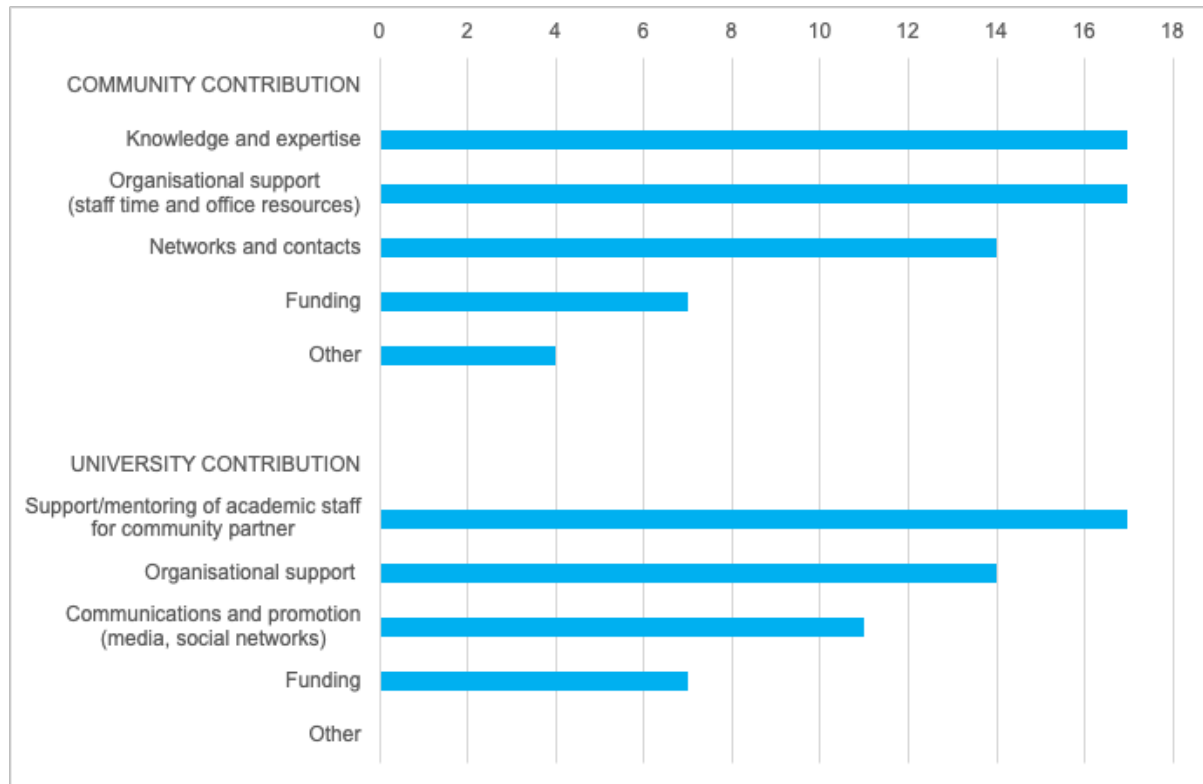
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<sup>2</sup> One community representative completed the survey for two separate partnership projects, which we therefore process as two separate inputs in the assessment of the different partnership dimensions (see section 2, p. 9).



### Chart 1: Survey results – Brussels

(Community partner vs. university partner contribution, n = 18)



### *In-depth interviews with community representatives*

To ensure a more balanced, nuanced, and in-depth understanding of the strengths and challenges of university-community partnerships, the survey was followed by a structured dialogue in the form of a focus group or interview with surveyed community representatives. A total of seven community representatives collaborating with Vrije Universiteit Brussel participated (CP04, CP06, CP09, CP13, CP14, CP16, CP17).

The structured dialogue that took place within these events focused on four questions that were asked of participants, with the aim of identifying both success factors and obstacles to quality partnerships.

1. “How would you assess the quality of **individual interactions** with your contacts at the university (e.g. to what extent is the communication and cooperation with your university partner contact constructive and fulfilling for all involved)? If it is not purely positive, what aspects are problematic?”
2. “To what extent do you think the scores you gave are also a result of **institutional factors**, rather than just individual ones: i.e. related to what **the university or your organisation as an institution** is able or not able to do?”

3. “Are there any **broader factors**, other than the individual relationships and institutional factors, that affect the possibility of setting up high quality university-community partnerships (e.g. social or political climate, economic situation, cultural differences)?”
4. “If you could suggest **the top three actions** that the university could take to improve university-community partnerships, what would they be? (They do not necessarily need to be realistic!)”

This report presents the results of the surveys as well as the in-depth interviews held with community representatives. The report concludes with key findings and recommendations to make concrete improvements to practices and policies for management staff at Vrije Universiteit Brussel to further improve community engagement partnerships.



## 2. UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS SURVEY

### Survey overview

As described in the introduction, a total of 18 community representatives completed the SPACE university-community partnerships survey. In this section of the report, we present a table describing the dimensions and sub-dimensions assessed by community representatives in the survey, followed by a summary of the scores provided.

**Table 1: Overview of the university-community partnerships survey**

Dimensions	Description of topic of assessment
<b>1. PROCESS</b>	
<b>1.1. Strategy / goal-setting</b>	Extent to which the goals of the partnership are jointly defined by the university and community partners.
<b>1.2. Decision-making</b>	Degree of shared influence in defining roles and making decisions across the partnership.
<b>1.3. Communication and interaction</b>	Frequency and quality of communication and interaction between all partners.
<b>1.4. Resources (e.g. time, expertise, funds)</b>	Fairness and balance in resource contributions relative to the benefits received.
<b>1.5. Disagreements in the partnership</b>	Presence and quality of mechanisms to acknowledge and manage disagreements constructively.
<b>1.6. Partner responsibilities</b>	Clarity and mutual agreement on the division of roles and responsibilities.
<b>2. ETHOS</b>	
<b>2.1. Mutual trust</b>	Level of trust that exists and is maintained between university and community partners.
<b>2.2. Openness and participation</b>	Degree to which community partners are actively involved in shaping decisions and processes.
<b>2.3. Acknowledgment of difference</b>	Extent to which differences in resources, needs, and motivations are recognised and addressed.
<b>2.4. Recognition</b>	Visibility and appropriateness of recognition given to community partners for their contributions.
<b>2.5. Tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty</b>	Flexibility and openness to navigate ambiguity and adapt during the partnership.
<b>2.6. Commitment and responsibility</b>	Strength of mutual commitment and shared responsibility for the success of the partnership.
<b>3. OUTCOMES</b>	
<b>3.1. Mutual benefits for partners</b>	Extent to which the partnership provides benefits to both the university and the community partners.
<b>3.2. Value for beneficiaries and/or society</b>	Degree to which the partnership generates value for intended beneficiaries and broader society.
<b>3.3. Institutional sustainability</b>	Extent to which the partnership is embedded in institutional structures and supported over time.
<b>3.4. Overall satisfaction</b>	Overall satisfaction of all partners with the functioning and results of the partnership.

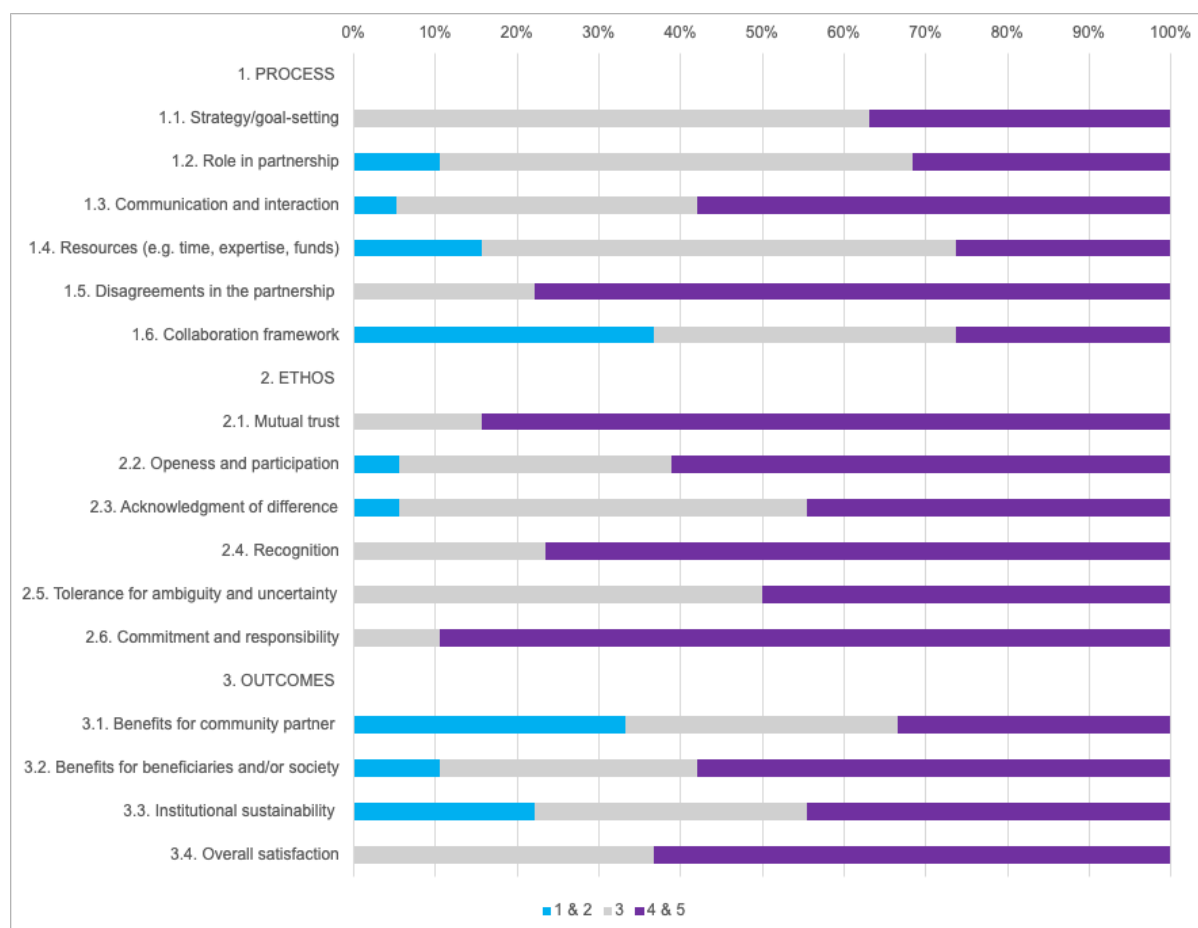
## Survey results summary

The chart below presents a summary of the average scores for each of the sub-dimensions of the university-community partnerships survey, showing the proportion of respondents providing scores for each dimension.

The full survey framework, including level descriptors and average scores received for each sub-dimension, is available as an annex to this report. It can provide more context on what each score represents in terms of success and/or challenges.

### Chart 2: Survey results – Brussels

(Proportion of respondents providing scores for each dimension,  $n = 18$ )



On average, the survey results suggest that partnerships between Vrije Universiteit Brussel and external community organisations have been appreciated by the survey respondents. Hereafter, we highlight some findings that are of particular significance.

On the first dimension, scrutinising the partnership and collaboration process, it appears that in most of the cases the partnership goals were defined either jointly by both university and community partners, or by the community partners themselves. This means that for most of the partnerships included in this survey, the university did not define partnership goals

without considering the community partners, which was highlighted to have ensured more equal influence over how roles are defined and allocated beforehand or throughout the collaboration. None of the responding partners deemed it necessary to formally outline a comprehensive collaboration framework, with most of our respondents stressing that they felt comfortable with quite a generic framework (for example in the form of a written agreement). The amount of time and resources invested by the community partners seemed in line with their perceived benefits. Furthermore, communication and interaction throughout the partnership remained rather regular and frequent, resulting in a satisfactory cooperation where disagreements were always acknowledged.

The second dimension, which looks at the attitudes and values that characterise the partnership, was positively evaluated by the survey respondents. In particular, the amount of trust of all parties involved appeared to be quite high, with most partners also demonstrating sufficient commitment and responsibility. From the collected data it appears that the university tends to take the lead in many partnerships. Yet, the survey indicates that the responding community partners felt enough openness to include their needs and expectations. In some cases, community partners indicated to have had the chance to actively contribute throughout the partnership. The collaborations were nevertheless not flawless. While it was certainly acknowledged that community partners have different resources, needs and motivations compared to the university, there is still room for improvement in addressing identified needs and dealing with or acknowledging existing inequalities. However, uncertain situations and ambiguous processes were successfully dealt with in a flexible and exploratory way, even though there remained a slight preference for predictable and well-defined processes. Finally, all community partners that participated in our survey indicated that they felt recognised for their role in the partnership.

The partnership outcomes, the third and final dimension, show the highest diversity in survey responses. Collected data show that both university and community partners gained certain benefits from partnering with one another, albeit to different degrees. In addition, the vast majority of responding community partners indicated that the partnership they had been collaborating in had some value to extra-institutional beneficiaries and/or society at large. The sub-dimension with the most diverse responses was institutional sustainability, with responses ranging from one-off initiatives to long-standing commitments. This range results from the heterogeneous partner-sampling that was used for this study, as described in the introduction.

### 3. COMMUNITY DIALOGUES: MAPPING FACTORS THAT SHAPE PARTNERSHIPS

After filling out the survey, a total of five in-depth interviews took place with seven community partners of VUB. More specifically, we carried out two interviews with two community partners participating, and three individual interviews. All interviews were organised online throughout November 2024. The interviews lasted 45 minutes on average. For transcription and analysis purposes, and after the agreement of the interviewees, interviews were recorded. The dialogues followed an open structure based on four guiding questions (see introduction). Both challenges and good practices were discussed per question. In what follows, we discuss the main findings, where we focus on the positive and negative impact of individual, institutional, and societal factors on university-community partnerships.

#### Factor 1: Individual factors

##### **Good practices**

A common thread through all the interviews, is the importance interviewees attributed to the quality of **interpersonal relationships**—with academic or support **staff members**—as a stepping stone for meaningful collaborations and partnerships. According to community partners, it is usually the individuals involved that make a partnership successful, spurring enthusiasm on all fronts. A confidential personal relationship based on **mutual interest** was highly valued. Moreover, the interviewees highlighted the importance of **regular contact** between all parties involved in the partnership, as well as mutual commitment to making the partnership work by putting in **effort** throughout the process. As one respondent put it:

*“It’s very simple. Without those individual contacts, the collaboration would not have gone so smoothly, I think. It’s thanks to personal relationships, or thanks to personal investments . . . that we can do that. Without people taking the project upon themselves, believing in it, defending it within the university, I don’t think we could have done that.” (Interviewee CP16)*

Several interviewees furthermore described positive experiences regarding their interactions with **students**, for example when their partnership was framed within a specific course or project. The support provided behind the scenes by the educational team promoted smooth and enjoyable collaborations, without institutional factors getting in the way. Continuous and efficient **communication** was highlighted as an essential requisite in this regard. The quality and relevance of the deliverables that students produced were brought forward as highly valuable sources of inspiration and guidance for the community partners.

##### **Challenges**

According to our interviewees, the more challenging aspects of university-community partnerships in terms of individual factors were related to **communication**. Some of the partners indicated that **practical arrangements** regarding the collaboration framework were

not always clearly defined in the beginning, resulting in some misunderstandings or frustrations later on. One respondent described their partnership as being too reactive, pleading for more pro-active planning and expectation management.

*“We always forget to do the basics, which is when we start a collaboration or cooperation or partnership is: where do we want to go, what’s in it for us, what’s in it for them? How do we make sure that we’re both on the same side of the chord, and not opposites? And because we’re always such in a hurry, we just feel enthusiastic about oh, great, I can work with them. You don’t take the time to think, okay, but can we actually take the time to see this is what I can offer, this is what you can offer. Let’s try to organise a clear timetable, a clear agenda, and then we will build upon this.” (Interviewee CP06)*

In another interview, it was brought forward that the strength of personal relationships also implies a vulnerability, especially when this is not adequately matched with institutional support or engagement. One interviewee stressed the importance of strengthening personal networks and supporting them institutionally. Working with societal partners should be an **explicit policy choice**, which therefore also implies **budgetary choices and commitments**. This brings us to the influence of institutional factors.

## Factor 2: Institutional factors – university

### Good practices

Effective university-community partnerships rely not only on the commitment of individuals, but also on institutional structures that support and sustain collaboration over time. Interviewees emphasised that partnerships are most valuable when they extend beyond short-term projects, allowing universities to develop a **deep understanding** of their partners’ working methods, needs, and challenges. While partnerships thrive on personally engaged, empathetic, and loyal individuals, they also require **formal institutional backing** to ensure continuity beyond personal networks according to the respondents in our study. They stressed the added value of **dedicated liaison officers** or partnership coordinators who act as stable points of contact and facilitate sustained relationships.

*“Because we actually rarely work directly with VUB but always mediated by Crosstalks, we also manage to avoid, for example, administrative concerns or those very bureaucratic rules. To then see in collaborations, okay, we take this on ourselves and another part of the collaboration or of the funding is taken on by Crosstalks.” (Interviewee CP13)*

Meaningful collaboration requires universities to actively invest time in understanding the operational realities, priorities, and challenges of their community partners. Actively **showcasing successful partnerships** within and outside the university raises awareness of their impact and helps attract further engagement from faculty, students, and external stakeholders.

## Challenges

One area of improvement for the university that several interviewees put forward is without a doubt its **institutional structure**. Especially when community partners enter a partnership with VUB as a large entity, a **single point of contact** or mediator often appeared to be lacking. When it is unclear where or with whom the ownership lies, it can result in chaotic and unstructured situations where it feels like the community partner is operating in a void. In this regard, the **bureaucratic character** of VUB—with its maze of structures and procedures—appeared to create thresholds for some partners. **Institutional inertia** and **role ambiguity** were particularly challenging for smaller partner organisations.

*“It’s a bit of a double-edged sword, I think, of such a large institution. And sometimes there are things that you are sent from pillar to post or that it is not clear at all who has ownership of them, but at other moments it can indeed also go surprisingly fast. And I think, yes, that is somewhat inevitable when you are dealing with such a large institution, that your bureaucracy is always somewhere around the corner.” (Interviewee CP09)*

*“So that was a very strong wall that we came across. Because for us . . . we’re independent and . . . we don’t have an agenda, and you know we’re just doing what we see and where the gaps need to be filled. But I think then we come across an institution that is representing an ideology or, you know, that needs to comply to many different things. So, I think that’s probably the biggest barrier or the biggest realization that when you feel so small that you okay, we can’t do anything else, it’s out of our hands. And you know, if the university says no, it’s no. And then there is no, the discussion is too big to have. It’s not really going to be at the people level . . . it’s at the political level and there you can’t really do anything. I mean, when you are dealing with the organ, with the university, you are dealing with different types, different people as well . . . there is a person for everything. So, I guess that also has an impact because you have too many contacts to kind of keep track of.” (Interviewee CP17)*

Besides, community partners sometimes felt that the main interests and priorities of the university lie with **education and research**. This was perceived as a downside, because many community partners stress the importance of building bridges between the academic world and other sectors, such as the socio-cultural scene in Brussels. Institutional expectations often originate from an institution-specific—and often political—**agenda**, which does not always easily align with the vision, mission, focus or ambitions of the partner organisation.

*“We do feel there that the interests of the VUB, and of education and research, are sometimes not entirely in line with an offer of cultural activities for a student audience and for young people. Yeah, that it is indeed sometimes a bit of a search for a common ground.” (Interviewee CP09)*

Some interviewees shared a common concern regarding **austerity measures** at VUB. For example, as socio-cultural partnerships are often not considered core tasks of the university, they are the first to suffer the consequences. It is, however, important that such investments remain on the agenda of the university. One respondent summarised it as follows:



*“VUB is a university with a mission to become more financially healthy. And that is of course accompanied with screening such an entire operation and seeing what you can cut back on and so on. And I can imagine that there, the kind of projects with partners from the cultural world or from civil society—projects that do not very directly actually support the ‘core business’—that those seriously come to lie on the scale. I understand that. And at the same time, I think it’s very important to keep investing in bridges. And by that, I mean also literally the bridges between the site of the VUB and the city . . . In those austerity exercises, you do see where the first resources will fall off the table, those so-called ‘nice-to-have.’ But surely those ‘nice-to-have’ also have a very crucial role as well; also just for that broader education of students.” (Interviewee CP13)*

An additional challenge highlighted during the interviews was the strict **timeline** that university courses must adhere to, or the rigidity of the **academic calendar**, and its occasional mismatch with the timelines of partner organisations. For instance, some partner organisations also rely on funding schemes with rather strict schedules. Nevertheless, our interviewees did realise not much can be done about this particular challenge.

*“The fact that something has to take place within the scope of an academic year or even just a semester, that will be a problem on many levels, in a lot of areas, and I don’t have an answer to that right now.” (Interviewee CP04)*

### Factor 3: Institutional factors – community partner

#### Good practices

According to our interviewees, one of the most valuable contributions that community partners bring to university-community collaborations is their profound knowledge of fieldwork and practice. Their **hands-on expertise** complements the more theoretical and research-driven approach of universities, in fact enriching learning and research activities.

*“We have the experts at nothing and everything, if that makes sense. So that means that we are experts in not a sector. We are experts at a lot of, we are generalists, basically. We can talk about many different things and we perceive many different things. So we have our view of the society that a lot of researchers don’t have, because you know they work a bit in a silo, unfortunately.” (Interviewee CP06)*

Community partners, with their professional experience, also played a key role in **guiding students** through moments of friction or frustration. As experienced mentors and intermediaries, they helped students navigate complex urban environments—such as Brussels as a learning space—while challenging them to move beyond assumptions and stereotypical thinking.

*“With us, it was a very specific situation of Brussels. And students don’t always know Brussels well. They also sometimes come from, often or mostly, outside of Brussels, from Flanders. And I also had to warn them about that: look, this is the situation in Brussels, these are also the needs.” (Interviewee CP14)*

## Challenges

A few community partners found it challenging to combine the partnership with their other work duties. Sometimes partners need to prioritise, which unfortunately results in **less time and resources** for certain engagements. In some cases, it might be helpful to receive some sort of financial support from the university, to cover the time invested in the partnership.

*“Perhaps it would be interesting to have financial support from VUB . . . when they want, for example, external organization to work with them. I’m not saying fund, but like just help. If I had to, for example, come and give a course or give a class or basically something that helps them do less work. Perhaps we can, we could see a financial compensation on their behalf. I don’t know what the finance of the VUB is, but I’m definitely sure that it’s better than ours.”*  
(Interviewee CP06)

Another aspect brought forward by the interviewees was the issue of recognition and equity in community-university partnerships. Many community partners expressed concerns about how their contributions—often based on deep, place-based knowledge and lived experience—are acknowledged and valued within academic settings. A recurring question was: *Who owns this knowledge?* Participants highlighted that, while universities often take the lead in publishing findings or securing funding, the insights and data frequently originate from the community side. In commercial contexts, this imbalance becomes even more pronounced, as data management and intellectual property frameworks tend to prioritise institutional control, potentially marginalising the role of community partners. These dynamics raise critical questions about authorship, credit, and fair distribution of benefits in collaborative work.

## Factor 4: Societal factors

### Good practices

It was reflected in the interviews that the **challenging societal context** is an invitation for more collaboration, as well as knowledge and experience sharing. Here is an interesting role for university-community partnerships, as several interviewees highlighted the importance of tying links and **standing stronger together**. Clarity on the organisation’s ethical framework and positioning is valuable for effective collaboration.

*“Equitable sustainability is not just a story of the social sector. Environmental issues are also not a story of the environmental sector alone. Communication and marketing is not a story of the corporate sector alone. So actually we do need all that expertise to help turn that big tricky tide of climate, of climate issues, or actually just shut it down. So yes, that actually, that looking over the wall and actually also getting different disciplines to work together a bit.”*  
(Interviewee CP14)

Interviewees pointed out that campus-community partnerships are uniquely positioned to bridge diverse forms of knowledge, practice, and influence, allowing for more adaptive and resilient responses to systemic challenges. Several partners emphasised that the **traditional**



**silos** between sectors—academic, governmental, civil society, and business—often hinder meaningful progress. By creating intentional spaces for dialogue, mutual learning, and co-creation, university-community collaborations can help dismantle these silos and foster shared ownership over solutions.

## Challenges

In addition to the incentives for strengthening partnerships mentioned above, several interviewees expressed concerns about the increasingly challenging societal context.

**Budgetary constraints** were, in particular, highlighted as a major threat to open-minded collaboration and critical thinking. Some feared that the time and effort invested in building strong networks with societal partners over the past years could be undone quickly, jeopardising established relationships. In recent months, significant funding cuts have reduced support for maintaining and nurturing these partnerships. This trend was seen as particularly concerning, as it risks pushing institutions toward more insular, siloed ways of working, rather than fostering openness and cross-sector collaboration.

Moreover, broader **research trends** in society also influence university-community partnerships. One respondent said that “research at the moment is going in a very wrong way,” because there is constant pressure to publish as much as possible. As a result, some researchers might prioritise easily accessible data, effectively putting aside knowledge development and research practices where non-governmental organisations and smaller partners can be an added value.

*“We are using performance indicators as a way of quantifying and evaluating if a research is good or not. And this is pushing research into a big business and just producing, producing, producing, whether it’s qualitative or not. And we are not doing any more citizen science, anymore . . . So, we’re just constantly looking at our impact factors or the amount that we publish. And we don’t stop to think, okay, is what we’re doing really going to help society? And should we actually just spend more time working on the field with people, with bringing my students outside, and just observing instead of producing, producing, producing.”*  
(Interviewee CP06)

## Other findings

A number of other important areas for improvement emerged from the interviews.

- A recurring concern was the need to deliberately **define the scope of the partnership** (for example in terms of number of students per project) to ensure meaningful engagement and manageable collaboration.
- Effective collaboration also hinges on **balancing flexibility with clarity**; while informality can help build trust, interviewees emphasised the importance of sharing timelines and expectations in advance while allowing room for adaptation.
- Setting **realistic expectations for students** was another point of attention, given the limited time they have available to contribute to projects.

- Additionally, **fostering interdisciplinary interaction** was highlighted as a gain, with a strong call for initiatives that bring students and partners together in unconventional ways—encouraging cross-pollination between fields like engineering, architecture, and environmental science on the one hand, and care, education, and social sectors on the other.
- **Sustainability** of partnerships emerged as a broader concern, prompting suggestions for creative strategies to ensure long-term viability.
- Improved **communication and visibility** of collaborations—both within institutions as well as to the outside world—were identified as crucial for fostering engagement and recognition.
- Lastly, respondents stressed the importance of assigning clear mandates to individuals who can take **ownership of projects**, serving as dedicated points of contact to bridge education, research, and societal needs effectively.

These insights collectively underline the need for thoughtful structuring, enhanced interdisciplinary exchange, and sustained commitment to ensure impactful and lasting university-community collaborations.

## 4. LESSONS LEARNT AND WAYS FORWARD

### Lessons learnt

In summary, what we take away from this partner survey, first of all, is that the surveyed community partners mostly look back on the collaboration with satisfaction, both in terms of the collaboration process as well as its outcomes. The importance of structuring university-community collaborations in a way that balances flexibility and clarity about expectations and roles came to the fore, as was the need to accommodate differences in terms of availability, resources, and areas of expertise. Making sure that expectations and partnership design are well aligned with the capacities of the involved parties is a must, while fostering interdisciplinary interaction—especially between technical and social fields—remains an area for growth. Transparent but adaptable timelines, realistic expectations for students, transparent and continuous communication, and creative strategies for long-term sustainability were highlighted as key factors for success. Additionally, increasing visibility around partnerships, both within one's institution and externally, can strengthen their impact. Assigning clear mandates to dedicated individuals further enhances collaboration by ensuring continuity and proactive bridge-building between education, research, and society.

The very process of carrying out the partnership surveys and structured dialogues in our research project proved valuable in terms of strengthening relationships. Interviewees appreciated the opportunity to reflect on collaborations, emphasising the importance of taking time to assess and acknowledge their mutual efforts. Furthermore, the mixed-method survey design—combining an online survey with in-depth interviews—was a clear added value, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the complexity and multilayered nature of university-community partnerships. The complementary perspectives gathered through both methods provided a richer, more comprehensive reflection on the strengths and areas for improvement in these collaborations.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights that are highly relevant for strengthening university-community partnerships. While the specific challenges and recommendations stem from the surveyed partners, many of the underlying principles—such as the need for structured yet flexible collaboration, interdisciplinary exchange, and clear communication—are widely applicable across different contexts. The study's mixed-method approach also underscores the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative data to capture the complexity of such partnerships, making this methodology transferable to similar evaluations elsewhere. However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The insights are shaped by the specific institutional and regional context in which the survey was conducted, meaning that some findings may not fully align with different educational or community settings. Additionally, while the combination of an online survey and in-depth interviews provided a rich dataset, further research with a broader sample size or longitudinal approach could deepen the understanding of long-term partnership dynamics.

## Ways forward

### *Considerations for community partners*

- 1. Advocate for clear yet flexible partnership agreements**  
Define roles, expectations, and timelines in advance and in dialogue with the academic partner while allowing room for adaptation to ensure productive and sustainable collaboration.
- 2. Explore interdisciplinary cooperation**  
Seek opportunities to engage with students and researchers from diverse academic backgrounds, fostering cross-sectoral exchanges between technical, social, and environmental disciplines.
- 3. Embrace realistic student engagement and outputs**  
Acknowledge the time constraints of students and design projects that allow for meaningful yet feasible contributions. Codesign realistic requests in dialogue with the academic partner.
- 4. Commit to long-term collaboration**  
When desirable, explore creative ways to maintain partnerships beyond individual projects, ensuring continuity, deeper impact, and trust building.
- 5. Communicate and showcase partnerships**  
Actively share insights and successes within your own network and with the wider public to highlight the value of university-community engagement.

### *Considerations for academic staff*

- 1. Advocate to embed partnerships in institutional structures**  
Advocate for policies in your academic institution that integrate community engagement into curricula and research agendas to foster long-term collaboration and aid in the development of support tools.
- 2. Balance formality with informality**  
While clear agreements help align expectations, maintaining an element of flexibility allows trust and organic collaboration to flourish.
- 3. Support student engagement thoughtfully**  
Guide students in setting realistic objectives, ensuring their contributions remain valuable to both their learning experience and the partner organisation. Promote critical reflection throughout the learning process.
- 4. Promote interdisciplinary learning**  
Design projects that encourage students to work across different disciplines, broadening their perspectives and problem-solving skills.
- 5. Enhance visibility and recognition**  
Actively communicate about successful collaborations, internally within the university and externally to policymakers, funders, and the broader public.

### ***Institutionalising university-community partnerships***

1. Appoint a **dedicated liaison officer** or partnership coordinator.
2. Develop a **university-wide framework** for partnerships, ensuring a strategic and structured approach rather than ad hoc collaborations.
3. **Recognise and reward** engaged pedagogies and community-based research in academic career progression, making collaboration with societal partners a valued part of faculty assessment.
4. Create **dedicated funding streams** to support partnership projects, ensuring financial sustainability beyond individual initiatives.
5. Develop **interfaculty and interinstitutional partnerships** that encourage joint research and education programs with societal relevance.
6. Promote **living labs and co-creation spaces** where students, researchers, and external partners collaborate on real-world problems in innovative settings.

### ***Considerations for future research and monitoring***

1. **Leverage data-driven insights**  
Strengthen institutional monitoring by tracking partnership trends over time, identifying impact areas, and refining engagement strategies based on data-driven findings.
2. **Utilise a mixed-method approach**  
Combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and nuances of university-community collaborations.
3. **Adopt a collaborative and iterative data analysis process**  
Engage both university and community stakeholders in interpreting research findings, ensuring that insights are co-created and directly applicable to practice.
4. **Expand longitudinal studies**  
Consider follow-up assessments and long-term impact evaluations to better understand how partnerships evolve and what factors contribute to their sustainability.
5. **Facilitate knowledge sharing**  
Develop platforms or networks where institutions can exchange best practices and lessons learnt in fostering effective university-community partnerships.

## ANNEX: SURVEY RESULTS

DIMENSION 1: PROCESS (the way the partnership is planned and implemented)						
Sub-dimensions	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Achieved level
1.1. Strategy/goal-setting	Partnership goals are defined by the university, and do not consider community partner goals.	Partnership goals are jointly defined by both university and community partners.	Partnership goals are defined by the community partners.			3,4
1.2. Role in partnership	Community partners have little influence over how the partnership roles are defined and allocated.	The university and community partners have shared influence over how the partnership roles are defined and allocated.	Community partners take the lead in defining how the partnership roles are defined and allocated.			3,2
1.3. Communication and interaction	Partners do not meet and communicate enough, resulting in disengagement from the partnership.	Partners meet and communicate regularly, resulting in satisfactory cooperation.	Partners meet and communicate regularly and frequently, resulting in a high level of engagement in the partnership.			3,8
1.4. Resources (e.g. time, expertise, funds)	Community partners invest more time and resources than is appropriate considering the benefits of the partnership.	Community partners invest significant time and resources in the partnership, but with a satisfactory level of mutual benefit.	The benefits of the partnership outweigh the resources invested by community partners.			3,2
1.5. Disagreements in the partnership	Disagreements between partners remain unnoticed and/or unacknowledged.	Disagreements between partners are acknowledged and partly managed, but underlying issues remain unresolved.	Disagreements are openly discussed and become a catalyst to generate new possibilities for the partnership.			4,0
1.6. Collaboration framework	The partnership works on an informal basis, with no formal definition of expected tasks of community partners.	The partnership has a basic framework (e.g. written agreement) defining the expected tasks of community partners.	The partnership has a comprehensive framework defining expected tasks of all partners, as well as guidelines and support mechanisms.			2,7

DIMENSION 2: ETHOS (attitudes and values that characterise the partnership)				
Sub-dimensions	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Achieved level
<b>2.1. Mutual trust</b>	There is insufficient trust between the university and community partners.	There is sufficient trust between the university and community partners.	There is full trust between the university and community partners.	<b>4,2</b>
<b>2.2. Openness and participation</b>	The partnership is led in a top-down manner by the university, with little space for community partners to take part in decision-making.	The partnership is led by the university, but community partners are regularly consulted to influence its development.	The partnership works on a participatory basis, with community partners playing in equal role in decision-making.	<b>3,8</b>
<b>2.3. Acknowledgment of difference</b>	There is no specific acknowledgement in the partnership that community partners have different resources, needs and motivations compared to the university.	Differences in community partner resources, needs and motivations are acknowledged, but not enough is done to address identified challenges.	The partnership critically discusses differences in partner resources, needs and motivations, and takes steps to mitigate those differences.	<b>3,5</b>
<b>2.4. Recognition</b>	Community partners are not provided with adequate recognition (formally or informally) for their role in the partnership.	Community partners are provided with informal recognition for their role in the partnership, and with some degree of formal recognition.	The partnership is provided with high-level, formal recognition for its achievements, and community partners are highlighted in this recognition.	<b>3,9</b>
<b>2.5. Tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty</b>	Uncertain situations and ambiguous processes are the source of dissatisfaction and disagreement among partners.	The partnership shows some flexibility and adaptability in handling uncertainty, but there is preference for predictable and well-defined processes.	The partnership works intentionally in a flexible and exploratory way, embracing ambiguity and uncertainty as a basis for defining new solutions.	<b>3,7</b>
<b>2.6. Commitment and responsibility</b>	Most partners do not demonstrate sufficient commitment and responsibility, which damages the partnership.	Some partners do not demonstrate sufficient commitment and responsibility, but the partnership remains stable.	All demonstrate clear commitment and responsibility, making the partnership highly cohesive.	<b>4,2</b>

DIMENSION 3: OUTCOMES (results of the partnership)						
Sub-dimensions	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Achieved level
3.1. Benefits for community partner	The partnership brings significantly more benefits to the university than to the community partners.	Both the university and community partners share certain benefits.		Community partners have significant benefits thanks to the partnership.		3,1
3.2. Value for beneficiaries and/or society	The results of the partnership are not of great value to beneficiaries and/or society.	The results of the partnership are of some value to beneficiaries and/or society.		The results of the partnership are of great value to beneficiaries and/or society.		3,7
3.3. Institutional sustainability	The partnership is a one-off initiative and there is no indication of its continuation and sustainability.	The partnership is sustaining its activities, but primarily due to individual drive rather than institutional support.		The partnership is long-standing and there is institutional commitment by all partners to ensure resources to sustain it for the foreseeable future.		3,3
3.4. Overall satisfaction	Community partners are dissatisfied with this partnership.	Community partners are satisfied with this partnership, but improvements could be made.		Community partners are completely satisfied with the partnership.		3,8