SPACE
Supporting Professionals and Academics for Community Engagement

Framework Conditions for Institutionalising Community Engagement in Higher Education: A Current State Review

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this report is to provide a comprehensive review of academic literature and policy reports on institutionalising community engagement in higher education. The report addresses three interconnected areas and advances three central arguments:

- **Community engagement:** Community engagement in higher education refers to 'how universities address societal needs in partnership with their external communities' (Farnell et al., 2020, p. 5). Beyond being a valuable *type of activity*, this report argues that community engagement can function as an overarching *approach* to all university activities, contributing to broader debates about universities' societal roles in innovation and regional development.
- **Institutionalisation:** Institutionalising community engagement involves establishing supportive structures, policies, and cultures that embed engagement systematically across university operations (Furco et al., 2009; Holland, 1997). The report demonstrates that successful institutionalisation requires addressing both external framework conditions (policy environment, funding structures, regional contexts) and internal organisational factors (leadership, resources, recognition systems).
- **Third mission and systems thinking:** Traditional approaches to institutionalisation have reached certain limitations, particularly in addressing the complexity of contemporary societal challenges. This report considers the broader frame of the third mission of universities and introduces a systems lens that positions universities not as external service providers but as embedded actors within collaborative knowledge ecosystems (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010; Goddard & Vallance, 2013).

The report synthesises findings from recent European initiatives, particularly the TEFCE and SHEFCE projects, while incorporating insights from systems theory, innovation studies, and transdisciplinary research, based on the experience of UCC in the implementation of initiatives within the UNIC European University Centre for City Futures (https://www.unic.eu/hr/city-futures) and the CATALISI initiative (*Catalysation of institutional transformations of Higher Education institutions through the adoption of acceleration services*, https://catalisi.eu). The analysis reveals that effective institutional transformation requires moving beyond linear implementation models toward adaptive, networked approaches that recognise universities as integral components of regional innovation systems.

The document informs the development of a methodology and support programme for institutional change, to be piloted at four participating universities: University College Cork (Ireland), Universitat de Girona (Spain), University of Rijeka (Croatia), and Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Belgium).

1. THE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED UNIVERSITY: TOWARDS AUTHENTIC AND EMBEDDED ENGAGEMENT

Before universities can reflect on how to institutionalise community engagement, it is essential to establish a shared understanding of what constitutes community engagement in higher education and what characterises a community-engaged university. This includes defining what we mean by the concept of community engagement, defining *what* a community-engaged university does in practice, and *how* it can do it. This section is based primarily on the publications of the previous European projects, the TEFCE and SHEFCE projects[1] (e.g. Benneworth et al., 2018; Farnell et al., 2020, Farnell, 2020).

1.1 New European tools for supporting community engagement

Since 2018, a team of European universities, experts and community partners from 15 countries has led a series of Erasmus+ projects developing tools to support both universities and policymakers in strengthening community engagement. This has resulted in an **institutional self-reflection framework** (the so-called 'TEFCE Toolbox') supporting universities to identify and assess their level of community engagement (Benneworth et al., 2018; Farnell et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2022) and a **methodology for action planning** for community engagement (Farnell, Cooney & Brophy, 2023; Cooney et al., 2024), as part of the 'SHEFCE' project. The tools and additional practitioner resources are available on the European web platform for community engagement www.community-engagement.eu. These tools have proven to be immensely valuable to higher education institutions worldwide, as well as university alliances, committed to prioritising community engagement within their missions and strategies. Namely, the tools identify good practices of community engagement, provide a critical reflection on areas in need of improvement and identify priority areas for future action.

As a follow-up to these projects, the SPACE project (Supporting Professionals and Academics for Community Engagement in Higher Education; 2023-2026) aims to further build the capacities of academics, professional staff and community partners to strengthen community engagement in higher education across Europe. The SPACE project is developing resources to address three key target groups, with specific objectives for each:

- developing a methodology for team-based co-learning to integrate community-based learning into curricula.
- providing guidance and tools to help structure partnerships effectively and ensure mutual benefits.
- offering guidance and tools to strengthen institutional policies and practices for establishing sustainable and mutually beneficial community engagement partnerships.

[1] The EU-funded Erasmus+ projects *TEFCE - Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education* (2018-2020), and *SHEFCE - Steering Higher Education and Community Engagement* were led by the Institute for the Development of Education, and include most partners from the current SPACE project.

1.2 Key terms: 'community', 'engagement' and 'societal needs'

In both the literature and practice, a variety of terms are used to describe how universities interact with society. Often framed within the overall concept of the 'third mission' of higher education, the terms include *community engagement, civic engagement, public engagement, regional engagement, societal engagement, knowledge exchange* and *knowledge transfer*. In our work, we primarily use the term community engagement, as it has become widely used internationally, and in this section we present a brief definition, as well as distinctions with other terms.

Community engagement in higher education is about 'how universities address societal needs in partnership with their external communities' (Farnell, et al., 2020). To better understand this concept, it is useful to define three key terms:

- **Engagement**: A process whereby universities undertake joint activities with external communities in a way that is mutually beneficial, even if each side benefits in a different way. These joint activities may involve staff or students and may take place within teaching, research, joint projects, university governance, or extracurricular initiatives.
- **Community**: Defined broadly as communities of place, identity, or interest. This includes organisations from government, business, civil society, as well as citizens. While many partnerships focus on geographically local communities, community engagement can also take place at regional, national, or international levels.
- **Societal needs**: Encompassing political, economic, cultural, social, technological, and environmental factors that influence quality of life. While community engagement is often associated with social justice and inclusion, the term is used here more broadly to reflect diverse context-specific challenges identified by each university and/or their community partners.

The distinctions between community engagement, as defined above, and other commonly used terms are subtle and mainly overlap with this understanding (Farnell, 2020):

- **Civic engagement** often emphasises the university's role in promoting active citizenship, democratic participation, and civic responsibility.
- **Public engagement** emerged initially in science communication but now refers more broadly to engagement with multiple publics across disciplines.
- **Regional engagement** focuses on partnerships that strengthen the economic, social, and cultural development of the university's surrounding region.
- **Societal engagement** is a more general term sometimes used to highlight the university's wider contribution to society.
- **Knowledge exchange** is also a broader term referring to generating, sharing and/or using knowledge between universities and non-academic communities, although its use is often related to the economic sphere.

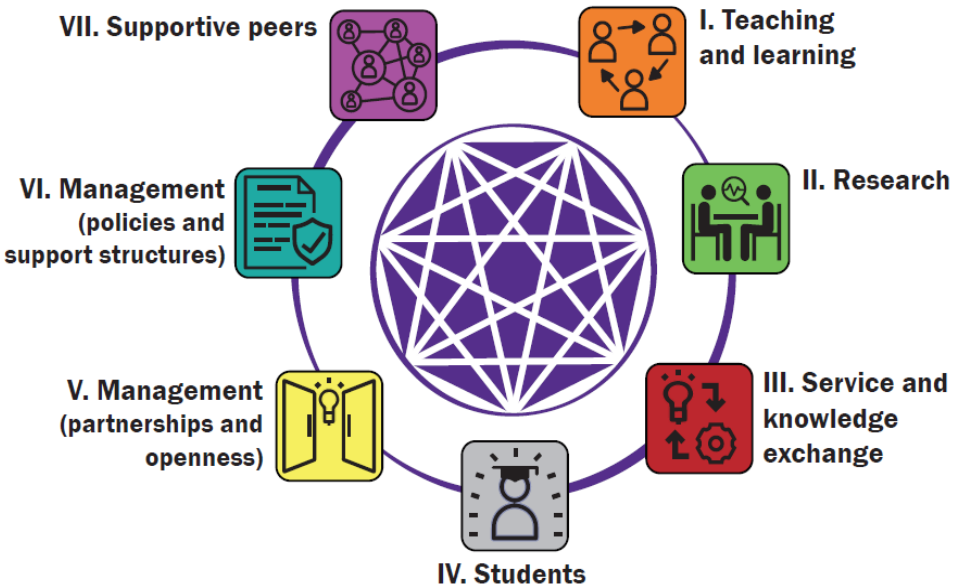
As such, in different national or local contexts different terms may be used to discuss universities' interactions with society. While these terms reflect different emphases, they share a common concern with universities addressing societal needs in partnership with external communities. In this way, our approach to community engagement remains intentionally broad and flexible, while recognising that local context plays a crucial role in shaping engagement activities.

It is important to recognise therefore that community engagement in higher education represents a philosophical orientation, pedagogical approach, and institutional commitment to collaborative knowledge creation that bridges academic expertise with community wisdom. Moving beyond traditional conceptualisations of knowledge transfer or service provision, contemporary engagement frameworks emphasise reciprocal partnerships characterised by mutual benefit, shared authority, and co-created outcomes addressing community-identified priorities while advancing academic missions (Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

1.3 Dimensions of community engagement

Community engagement can take place across virtually all areas of university activity. The resources developed through the Community-Engagement.eu platform reflect this broad scope, identifying **seven thematic dimensions** of community engagement in higher education:

Figure 1: Dimensions of community engagement in higher education (TEFCE Toolbox)



Source: Farnell et al. (2020)

Dimensions	Brief description
I. Teaching and learning	Extent to which study programmes reflect societal needs, include community-based learning and involve external communities in teaching and learning.
II. Research	Extent to which research is carried out *about* and *with* external communities.
III. Service and knowledge exchange	Extent to which academic staff is involved in joint initiatives supporting external communities' development and empowerment.
IV. Students	Extent to which students lead their own projects and initiatives with external communities (outside the framework of their study programmes).
V. Management (partnerships and openness)	Extent to which the university establishes mutually beneficial partnerships with external communities and provides them with access to facilities and resources.
VI. Management (policies and support structures)	Extent to which the university management reflects its commitment to community engagement in policies and institutional support structures.
VII. Supportive peers	Extent to which the academic and administrative/professional staff actively support community engagement.

Assessing the extent to which a university addresses these dimensions is the purpose of the institutional self-reflection process (the TEFCE Toolbox). This process is based on participatory dialogue and self-assessment, supported by evidence, and involving both university staff and external community partners.

1.4 Key principles of engagement

Community engagement is not only about *what* universities do, but also *how* they collaborate with external communities authentically and with integrity. Based on the work of the TEFCE and SHEFCE projects, four key principles have been identified:

- **Context-specific:** Community engagement activities depend heavily on the specific institutional, historical, socioeconomic, and cultural context in which each university operates. There is no single model that can be applied to all institutions. Instead, engagement must be tailored to local realities, reflecting the needs of external communities, institutional capacities, and existing partnerships. This ensures that engagement remains meaningful and appropriate for each unique setting.
- **Authentic:** Authentic engagement goes beyond superficial or symbolic collaborations. It is characterised by relationships that are reciprocal, inclusive, and based on trust. Partners jointly identify challenges, co-create knowledge, and share the benefits of collaboration. Authentic engagement fosters long-term partnerships that serve both academic goals and societal needs, while respecting the interests and expertise of all parties involved.
- **Multifaceted:** Community engagement can take many forms and involve a wide range of external partners. These include not only large, well-resourced public institutions and

businesses, but also smaller or less resourced organisations such as NGOs, schools, social enterprises, cultural organisations, and vulnerable or underrepresented groups. A multifaceted approach encourages universities to broaden the diversity of their partnerships and the range of societal issues they address, from economic development to global challenges and local social inclusion.

- **Embedded:** For community engagement to become sustainable, it must be embedded into the university's core academic, organisational, and strategic activities. Embedded engagement is supported by clear institutional policies, leadership commitment, dedicated structures, and stable resources. It is not an optional or peripheral activity but integrated into teaching, research, management, and governance across the institution.

1.5 A growing movement of engaged universities

In recent years, a growing number of universities and university networks have made community engagement an explicit part of their missions and activities. The development and implementation of the TEFCE Toolbox illustrates this growing interest. Since its initial development, 34 higher education institutions from across Europe contributed to shaping and refining the TEFCE Toolbox. So far, the Toolbox has been fully applied by seven universities in seven European Union countries as part of institutional self-reflection processes. Moreover, three European University alliances (YUFE, UNIC and EUNICoast — involving more than 30 universities) have applied the TEFCE Toolbox as part of their alliance-level strategies for strengthening community engagement. An additional 25 universities worldwide have expressed formal interest in adopting the Toolbox. Several articles have documented the results of the Toolbox implementation and its value for stakeholders (e.g. Cooney et al. 2024; Carles, 2023; Ćulum Ilić, 2024; O'Brien et al., 2022; Sitku, 2022; Farnell, Veidemane & Westerheijden, 2020).

Beyond individual institutions, numerous university networks and international organisations have contributed to the momentum for community engagement. Over the past two decades, an increasing number of universities, university networks and stakeholders have emerged to support community engagement in higher education, including international networks such as the Global University Network for Innovation, Talloires Network of Engaged Universities, the CLAYSS – the Latin American Centre for Service-Learning, the Living Knowledge Network, the UNESCO Chair for Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education and the European Association of Service Learning in Higher Education and Universitate network for service-learning in Catholic higher education.

Overall, these developments demonstrate a growing diversity of institutions, alliances and networks committing to become community-engaged universities. In the following chapters, we examine how universities can strengthen and institutionalise community engagement, drawing on insights from the literature. We first explore external conditions and the complexity of achieving institutional change, then review institutional conditions and supportive measures that can enable universities to advance engagement. We then explore how the university third mission and systems thinking influence approaches to institutional change, and their implications for community-engaged higher education.

2. EXTERNAL AND STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS SHAPING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Many universities worldwide identify as community-engaged, while international policy initiatives and networks show growing interest in this agenda. These developments create opportunities for wider institutional change. Progress remains uneven because higher education policy, funding arrangements and organisational priorities shape whether community engagement receives sustained attention. Local contexts and university-level constraints add further complexity.

Below is a summary of findings from existing literature on framework conditions that make institutional change toward community engagement complex, with a special focus on external conditions (at the global, national and local level) and structural conditions (at the level of higher education systems). The section ends on a positive note, emphasizing opportunities ahead.

2.1 Global and national public policy pressures

The contemporary policy environment creates both opportunities and constraints for community engagement institutionalisation. At global levels, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide legitimating frameworks for engagement activities, particularly SDG 17 emphasising partnerships for sustainable development. UNESCO's vision for higher education emphasises universities' responsibilities for addressing societal challenges through collaborative approaches that bridge disciplinary and sectoral boundaries (UNESCO, 2021).

However, Farnell (2020) identifies the following global trends, that inevitably steer university priorities away from community engagement:

- **Globalisation and higher education** – International competition and the rise of transnational institutions (EU, OECD, Bologna Process) are increasingly influencing higher education policy priorities (Marginson and van der Wende, 2007; Rizvi and Lingard, 2009), and international university rankings now play an important role in steering university behaviour (Hazelkorn, 2009). In the global context, universities may (erroneously) perceive that they can either be ‘world-class’ or locally/regionally engaged, but not both (Goddard and Puukka, 2008, p. 26).
- **Pressures to diversify funding** – Growing demand for higher education has strained public budgets, leading to tuition fees, student loans, competition for international students. Universities have adopted more entrepreneurial and 'tactical' approaches to their management (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Clark, 1998; Marginson, 2004), leaving topics such as community engagement on the periphery.
- **Governance of higher education** – National authorities use performance frameworks and audits to steer university behaviour, linking funding to national objectives and a growing number of stakeholders influence university priorities

(government, local authorities, business) (Ozga, 2012; Broucker and De Wit, 2015; Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008; Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010).
- **Higher education and the knowledge economy** – The rise of a knowledge-based economy has increased pressure on universities to prepare students for the labour market, engage with business through research and carry out technology transfer (Trow, 1974; Brown and Lauder, 2001; van Vught, 2009; Zomer and Benneworth, 2011).

These trends have driven universities to align with national objectives, often to prioritise research over other missions (due to funding and ranking pressures), and focus on entrepreneurial activities rather than non-commercial societal needs.

Here we also find national policy contexts reveal significant variation in embedding policy support for engagement. Ireland's National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 explicitly identifies engagement as the 'third mission' requiring institutional support and recognition. The Dutch Recognition and Rewards programme fundamentally reconceptualises academic career structures to value engagement alongside traditional research and teaching contributions.

Benneworth et al. (2018) further identify unintended effects of policy changes in areas that appear unrelated to university-community engagement but nevertheless hinder its development. According to Benneworth, universities face a range of demands to produce different kinds of behaviours depending on policy priorities, which can result in 'perverse incentives and inadvertent outcomes'. For example:

- defining research excellence to reward volume of publication in top journals discourages community-relevant research and national language publishing (Benneworth, Young & Normann, 2017)
- quality systems emphasizing international teaching standards make it harder to integrate local practitioners into the classroom or include external project work
- existing criteria for validating or rewarding excellent teaching and research usually fail to recognize the value of community engagement (Benneworth, Jongbloed, & De Boer, 2015).

Whilst these present challenges and obstacles, we can also see European funding and policy frameworks demonstrate increasing recognition of and imperative for societal engagement. The European Universities Initiative, for example is central to EEA and ERA, explicitly incorporates civic engagement dimensions, requiring participating alliances to demonstrate community partnerships and societal impact. Similarly, the New European Bauhaus initiative links cultural, social, and environmental objectives through place-based collaboration involving universities as key partners in sustainable transformation and with multi-level engagement explicitly referenced as one of three working principles.

2.2 Local geographical, historical and sociopolitical context

The geographical, historical, and sociopolitical context in which a university operates plays a foundational role in shaping the prospects of a university to be community-engaged.

Benneworth et al. (2018) highlight that certain models of community engagement assume that successful engagement results primarily from the strategic decisions and institutional entrepreneurship of university managers and champions, while overlooking the crucial role of local conditions. In reality, universities are embedded in specific localities with unique social structures, economic conditions, and historical relationships with their surrounding communities. According to Benneworth, these contextual elements can either foster or hinder engagement:

> 'Different places have different histories of university engagement, different cultures (that are more or less respectful of university knowledge), and different communities (that are more or less sophisticated and able to absorb that knowledge). And ultimately, those contextual factors will play an equal role to the universities' own interventions in determining the eventual impacts of community engagement' (p. 38).

Benneworth therefore cautions against relying too heavily on 'best-practice approaches' and 'paradigmatic success stories,' which often reflect favourable local conditions rather than genuinely transferable strategies. The tendency to promote 'ideal model types' that all universities should replicate risks ignoring local complexities and undermining engagement efforts.

For example, regions with strong traditions of civic participation, inclusive public discourse, or historical cooperation between universities and local authorities may provide more fertile ground for engagement initiatives. Conversely, in areas marked by social fragmentation, political instability, or distrust in public institutions, universities may face resistance or indifference from local actors (and vice versa). The perceived legitimacy of the university within its surrounding communities also plays a critical role: if a university is seen as an elite or extractive institution, this can undermine partnership efforts.

The effectiveness of institutional efforts to embed community engagement initiatives therefore fundamentally depends upon understanding and responding to local contexts that shape partnership possibilities and constraints. Consequently, the field of community engagement has evolved an increased intentional focus on place, with institutions using a paradigm of place to guide their community engagement strategy (Yamamura and Koth, 2019). This place-based perspective is also reflected in the concept of universities as 'anchor institutions': institutions that, because of their enduring presence and deep economic, social and institutional ties to a particular locality, have both the capacity and opportunity to contribute to the development of their surrounding communities (Birch et al., 2013; Harris & Holley, 2016). From this perspective, universities are not simply located in particular places,

but can become embedded actors within them, mobilising their knowledge, resources and relationships in partnership with local stakeholders.

2.3 University-level organisational obstacles

Farnell (2020) notes how it is tempting to consider universities as 'classic organisational structures that respond to and can be transformed by internal leadership and external policy reforms' (p. 50). In reality, universities are complex organisations with distinct structures, cultures, and practices (Clark, 1998; Fumasoli and Stensaker, 2013). As Benneworth et al. (2018) put it: 'Universities are by their nature diverse knowledge communities that are held together by an organisational ‘glue’ of internal compromises’. They consist of autonomous academic departments with differing norms and standards in teaching and research, shaped by disciplinary differences. This has led to universities being described as ‘loosely coupled systems’ (Weick, 1976) or ‘organised anarchies’ (Cohen and March, 1974). As a result, central management struggles to steer universities, especially when encouraging academics to engage with external stakeholders (Pinheiro et al., 2012).

In addition, changing cultures and practices at the level of academics is also ‘a long-term process akin to a generational shift’ (Benneworth et al., 2018, p. 39), since academic values and practices are usually formed during the doctoral training phase, meaning that any attempt to introduce new approaches to teaching and research after this phase will require time, resources and space for individual experimentation and learning among academics.

Additional challenges face university leaders that may wish to prioritise community engagement. According to Benneworth et al. (2018), institutionalising community is a 'wicked problem', for some of the following reasons:

- **Centralisation risks** – Centralising community engagement risks narrowing definitions of what 'counts' as engagement and marginalising certain forms of engagement and excluding valuable activities.
- **Incentive misalignment** – Fast, top-down changes risk turning community engagement activities into 'tokenistic' activities with labels attached to favoured projects rather than a core institutional value.
- **Disciplinary differences** – Community engagement typically fits more easily into certain academic fields than others; for some, it is seen as a natural extension of academic work, while for others it is perceived as compromising academic standards.
- **Limitations of strategic tools** – Linked to the point above, incentives to increase engagement may not work uniformly across disciplines or institutions.
- **Wide diversity of activities** – The fact that community engagement cannot be narrowed down to a finite list of activities (or even activity categories), means that the task of structuring, planning, coordinating and evaluating community engagement across an entire institution becomes very complex.

In other words, efforts that focus on adopting ‘top-down and streamlined approaches’ are unlikely to actually result in the acceptance of community engagement among academics.

However, whilst top-down strategies face challenges, over reliance on bottom-up efforts can be problematic. Fragmentation and a lack of integration across the organisation can be an obstacle for sustained engagement within the local geographical, historical and sociopolitical context. This can result from a lack of resources as a barrier to long term cooperation or reduced capacity for meaningful improvements. It is therefore considered that it is not merely a question of top-down or bottom-up that matters, but rather the presence (or lack of) certain factors and conditions (Wahyuni et al., 2026).

2.4 Opportunities for change: policies and initiatives in higher education

While these challenges represent substantial obstacles, universities nonetheless possess institutional agency to pursue community engagement through deliberate strategies and leadership choices. Emerging policy trends and strategic opportunities provide a foundation for advancing community engagement. Since the early 2000s, universities have faced increasing pressure to engage with the 'third mission of higher education' by engaging society and addressing major social challenges such as climate change, migration, and inequality (Pinheiro, Langa and Pausits, 2015).

Policy responses to these issues have emerged at international, European, and national levels, reflecting a shift toward greater recognition of universities' societal roles. These include both 'top-down' policymaking to broaden universities' societal contributions and 'bottom-up' initiatives from university networks and stakeholders to strengthen community engagement. Internationally, UNESCO's 2009 communiqué (UNESCO, 2009) emphasised universities' social responsibility in building inclusive and diverse knowledge societies. The 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) positioned universities as key actors in achieving goals like poverty reduction and environmental sustainability (Salmi, 2016).

[2]*At the European Union level, since the 2017 Renewed Agenda for Higher Education explicitly prioritized societal engagement, encouraging universities to function as 'civic-minded learning communities connected to their communities' (European Commission, 2017) and the European strategy for universities for the first time names innovation as the third mission of higher education and 'service to society' as the 'fourth mission of higher education' (European Commission, 2022). Countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain have seen specific mention of engagement in high-level national strategies and policies (Farnell, 2020), and there have been recently documented (2023) analyses of policies supporting community engagement in higher education in Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Croatia, Spain (Catalonia), and Ireland.*

Additionally, as mentioned in the previous chapter, an increasing number of universities, university networks and stakeholders have emerged to support community engagement in higher education, including the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities, the Living

[2] See country reports at the following link: https://community-engagement.eu/knowledge-hub/#country_and_system

Knowledge Network, and the European Association of Service Learning in Higher Education among others.

In conclusion, while there are clearly obstacles to 'mainstreaming' community engagement in European higher education, community engagement is still gaining prominence in higher education. While progress has been uneven across countries and institutions, the shift toward broader recognition of universities' societal roles marks an important step in addressing societal challenges and strengthening universities' legitimacy and public trust. In the European context, through the sustained activities of the project teams connected around the TEFCE, SHEFCE and SPACE projects, a range of supportive resources have been developed to contribute to this process. In the next section, we further contribute to those resources by identifying key success factors for institutionalising community engagement at the level of universities.

3. INSTITUTIONALISING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: KEY INTERNAL CONDITIONS

While the previous chapter highlighted the complex policy and institutional environments in which universities operate, these external framework conditions do not fully determine whether or not community engagement becomes embedded. Even in challenging contexts, many universities have successfully developed engagement practices by building on favourable internal conditions or actively creating supportive structures. In this chapter, we turn to the institutional level to explore which internal conditions — within universities themselves — can facilitate authentic, embedded, and sustainable community engagement. We present favourable key institutional conditions identified in the literature.

3.1 University mission

The university's mission provides an essential reference point for how community engagement is positioned within the institution. The literature highlights that the mission operates at two levels: first, as a historically defined institutional identity; and second, as a dynamic strategic framework shaped by leadership decisions.

A. Foundational institutional mission

A university's foundational mission is historically embedded, reflecting its origins, societal role, and long-standing relationships with external communities. For some universities — such as the land-grant institutions in the United States — service to society was explicitly part of their original mandate, embedding community engagement into their institutional DNA (Fitzgerald et al., 2016; Benneworth et al., 2018). Such historical mandates, when actively maintained and renewed, create favourable conditions for authentic, sustainable engagement (Benneworth et al., 2018). However, not all universities share such explicit historical missions.

B. Strategic mission planning and alignment

While the foundational mission evolves slowly, universities also periodically revise their strategic missions through leadership decisions, typically in cycles aligned with rector terms or national policy frameworks. Here, the literature points to the importance of embedding community engagement explicitly into strategic plans, resource allocation, and academic priorities as a condition for meaningful institutionalisation (Furco et al., 2009; Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

As Holland (1997) emphasises, engaged universities demonstrate alignment between mission statements, leadership priorities, resource decisions, and faculty support mechanisms. This consistency ensures that engagement commitments extend beyond symbolic declarations and are visible in academic life.

Farner (2019), in a case study of institutionalisation processes, shows that explicit inclusion of engagement goals in strategic documents can drive cross-departmental collaboration, internal networks, and dedicated support structures. As an illustrative example, Farnell,

(2020) notes how Arizona State University, frequently cited as a leading example of such alignment, embeds community engagement into both its charter and strategic pillars, with concrete operational goals for co-developing solutions with local communities.

However, several authors warn that without operational mechanisms, strategic mission statements risk becoming rhetorical. Koekoek et al. (2021) observe that universities often adopt high-level commitments without translating these into department-level plans, faculty workload models, or evaluation criteria, leading to implementation gaps. To avoid this, strategic planning must inform performance systems, budgeting, and staff development to embed engagement across institutional levels.

Seeber et al. (2019) also argue, based on the UK context, that mission statements often function as identity narratives crafted to signal legitimacy to external stakeholders for reputational positioning rather than genuine institutional purpose.

In sum, institutional mission matters both as a long-standing cultural foundation and as a dynamic strategic tool. Effective institutionalisation of community engagement requires attention to both dimensions — maintaining long-term societal purpose while ensuring contemporary strategic alignment.

3.2 University leadership

Leadership is widely recognised as one of the most powerful enablers of institutional change in community engagement. Strong leadership—at both the central (rector/president) and faculty/department levels (dean/departmental chair)—can set expectations, allocate resources, and champion engagement internally and externally (Jaeger et al., 2012; Kelly & Given, 2024; Farner, 2019).

Leadership that views community engagement as central to institutional identity helps normalise it across academic cultures. Jaeger et al. (2012) demonstrate that land-grant and research universities with sustained leadership commitment tend to build more integrated engagement structures and policies. Similarly, Farner (2019) identifies the role of ‘change agents’ and ‘coalitions of the willing’ supported by leadership as essential for driving engagement forward.

Leadership is also needed to challenge the structural and cultural barriers that limit engagement. Kelly & Given (2024) argue that one-off initiatives often fail because they are not embedded in a long-term vision backed by leadership and connected to institutional performance frameworks.

However, effective leadership must also be relational and distributed, involving academic champions, middle managers, and communities of practice that embed engagement within everyday academic life. Without such distributed ownership, top-level commitments risk becoming symbolic (Saltmarsh, 2017), which leads back to the previous point on university

missions. Effective leadership for engagement must be relational, distributed, and supportive of experimentation and co-creation with both staff and communities.

Within place-based community engagement approaches, Yamamura and Koth (2019) highlight the recognition that professionals are needed at every positional level and call out the concept of next generation community engagement professionals (CEP) – which broadens from academics to include scholar-practitioners as well as non-academic knowledge experts. Their CEP model recognises positional leadership and makes the distinction between director or staff roles, while emphasising competencies and the need to continue to learn new skills, attributes at all levels to lead ethical and effective engaged higher education.

They highlight that although the community engagement field is over 40 years old, very little research has focused on the leadership and professional competencies in this area. They identify a movement towards professional standards for the field and increased attention on the leadership and administration of community engagement and call out a key current gap for the field and for leadership within universities:

> "Since place-based community engagement is a new and evolving subfield within the field of community engagement in higher education, there is not a fully refined leadership playbook for facilitating these complex efforts. The work of leading place-based community engagement requires continuous learning, political acumen, and a multidimensional skill set." (Yamamura and Koth, 2019; p.195).

3.3 Academic culture

Academic culture, or the shared values, beliefs, and practices among academic staff, plays a decisive role in whether community engagement is viewed as legitimate scholarly work. In traditional academic environments, engagement is often marginalised due to the dominance of research productivity and publication metrics (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Dempsey, 2010; Ćulum et al., 2013).

Saltmarsh (2017) calls for a 'collaborative turn' in academic culture, where co-creation with communities is seen as a valuable form of knowledge production. Yet, as the literature shows, academic disciplines vary significantly in how well they accommodate engagement. For instance, applied fields such as education, social work, or public health are more open to community collaboration than STEM or humanities disciplines that prioritise disciplinary autonomy (Benneworth et al., 2018).

Champions and 'boundary spanners' (individuals or organisational units that connect different groups or organisations within or beyond institutional boundaries) are key to shifting academic norms. Weerts & Sandmann (2010) show that these individuals bridge institutional silos and facilitate partnerships with external stakeholders. Their work often involves mentoring peers, building internal coalitions, and advocating for changes in evaluation systems.

However, this cultural shift takes time. Benneworth et al. (2018) suggest that transforming academic culture is a 'generational challenge' because academics' professional identities are shaped during their doctoral training and early career. Accordingly, building a supportive culture for engagement requires institutional patience and investment in long-term capacity-building.

3.4 Organisational infrastructure, staffing and funding

Dedicated offices, staff roles and sustained funding provide the organisational foundation for embedding community engagement across a university. Without these forms of support, institutional strategies are unlikely to be implemented consistently or sustained over time (Jaeger et al., 2012; Clifford & Petrescu, 2012).

Dedicated units, such as community engagement offices and coordinator roles, can connect activities across institutional levels, support partnerships and provide continuity. This coordinating function helps decentralised work at college or department level remain connected to wider institutional priorities (Saltmarsh et al., 2016). The *Community Engagement in Higher Education Manual* developed through the ENHANCE-GSL project describes further functions for such units, including supporting staff and students, connecting university expertise with community needs, and providing an accessible institutional point of contact for external partners (Ćulum Ilić et al., 2025).

Financial resources are equally important. Several studies (Kelly & Given, 2024; Johnson, 2020) report that the lack of earmarked funding remains one of the biggest barriers to sustaining CE. When financial support is limited to short-term project-based funding, engagement often remains ad hoc and vulnerable to leadership or funding changes.

The literature also points to the importance of building institutional memory—having stable staffing and documentation systems that allow engagement knowledge to accumulate over time. These structures help mitigate the 'start-over' syndrome that occurs when engagement efforts depend on individual champions who later leave.

3.5 Organisational policies

Organisational rules, incentives and coordination mechanisms can make community engagement a supported and recognised academic activity. A central theme in the literature is the disconnect between universities' stated values and the reward systems that shape academic behaviour (Furco et al., 2009; Saltmarsh, 2017).

Researchers (e.g. Fitzgerald et al., 2016; Kelly & Given, 2024) emphasise that unless community-engaged teaching and research count towards hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions, they will remain marginalised. These criteria should value outputs such as co-authored publications with communities, participatory research, and impact on social outcomes.

Another critical aspect of organisational 'software' is internal coordination. Universities are complex institutions with 'loosely coupled systems' (Weick, 1976), which means engagement efforts often remain fragmented across departments. Johnson (2020) notes the need for cross-institutional coordination bodies to harmonise community engagement practices and policies.

Professional development is also a recurring theme. As academic identities are shaped early in researchers' careers, engagement must be supported through targeted training and mentorship opportunities (Farner, 2019; Bender, 2008). This includes skill development in partnership-building, communication, and ethical co-creation.

3.6 Communication and recognition

Visibility and symbolic recognition are crucial to legitimising engagement within the institution and among external stakeholders. Public awards, annual community engagement events, and strategic communication campaigns help to normalise engagement as a valued part of academic life (Hollander et al., 2001; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

Dempsey (2010) critiques institutions that fail to adequately communicate the goals and values of engagement, resulting in misunderstandings about its role and worth. Positive examples include universities that celebrate community-engaged research alongside traditional publications or host showcases of student-led initiatives.

Recognition must also extend internally—through awards, promotion criteria, and inclusion in internal communications. This helps build a culture in which community engagement is not a niche or extracurricular activity but a visible and respected aspect of institutional life.

Kelly & Given (2024) stress that communication strategies should not just market outcomes but narrate the process of engagement, including the challenges, learning moments, and mutual contributions. Authentic storytelling can shift perceptions among hesitant academics and reinforce the university's civic mission.

3.7 Monitoring and evaluation

A widely cited gap in the institutionalisation of community engagement is the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Universities often struggle to define what counts as community engagement, let alone measure its quality or impact (Furco et al., 2009; Koekoek et al., 2021).

The literature stresses the importance of developing clear indicators that reflect both institutional activity (e.g. number of engaged courses or projects) and social impact (e.g. community satisfaction, co-produced outcomes). Furco et al. (2009) propose a rubric that covers mission, leadership, partnerships, and outcomes—widely used in the U.S. as a self-assessment tool.

However, many institutions limit evaluation to anecdotal evidence or reporting tied to specific funding schemes. This undermines both internal learning and external accountability. According to Clifford & Petrescu (2012), sustainable engagement requires regular feedback loops that include community voices and lead to strategic improvements.
In sum, institutionalisation of community engagement is shaped by both enduring structural conditions and institutional levers for action. Recognising this distinction can help universities develop **realistic pathways for advancing engagement**, tailored to their specific starting points. In the next chapter, we turn from identifying success factors to addressing the question of *how* universities can mobilise these levers to achieve meaningful institutional change. While structural conditions set important starting points, institutionalisation ultimately depends on deliberate strategies, leadership choices and capacity-building efforts that navigate both enabling and constraining factors in each university context.

4. FROM INSTITUTIONS TO ECOSYSTEMS

4.1 Universities as agents for transformation in collaborative ecosystems

The literature on community engagement in higher education analysed in Chapter 3 has provided a valuable foundation, but important questions remain as to whether it is sufficient for the challenges ahead. In our view, if universities are to sustain community engagement as a relevant and transformative force amid rapid societal change, they must look beyond traditional discourse and draw on broader scholarship - including work on the third mission of universities, (social) innovation, systems thinking, and societal transformation.

Doing so invites a shift in mind-set from institutions to ecosystems when considering strategies, leadership and capacity building for advancing community engagement in higher education settings. This arises in part from the growing recognition of the limitations of institution-centric approaches when addressing complex societal challenges that require collaborative responses across multiple organisations and sectors. The move toward community engagement is also driven by the recognition that inclusion of diverse and both academic and non-academic perspectives in multidisciplinary teams is essential to addressing complex societal problems (Lasker, Weiss & Miller, 2001).

As a post-pandemic world adapts to climate impacts and a fifth industrial revolution, change has become the new normal, presenting unprecedented challenges for institutions and leaders. Higher education faces transformative pressures driven by convergent forces: the climate crisis, democratic challenges, mainstreaming of Sustainable Development Goals, and the imperative for transdisciplinary approaches to complex problems (Trencher et al., 2014; Rinaldi et al., 2018). The momentum of this wider transformation is pushing higher education institutions beyond traditional knowledge transfer models toward authentic partnership approaches that recognise universities as embedded community actors rather than external service providers (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010).

This chapter points to policy, literature and practice that reconceptualises universities as nodes within collaborative networks rather than isolated institutions, emphasising relational dynamics, emergent properties, and collective impact rather than institutional outputs. These are informed by ecosystem approaches that draw from complexity science and recognise that system behaviour emerges from interactions among components rather than being determined by individual organisational strategies. This perspective shifts focus from merely institutional capacity building toward network strengthening, collaborative governance development, engagement competencies, place-based strategies and collective sense-making processes that enable coordinated action across organisational boundaries.

It suggests that community engagement should not be viewed as competing for priority within institutional complexity, but rather as an essential mechanism for managing complexity and enabling institutional adaptation, resilience and societal relevance (Checkland, 1999; Meadows, 2008).

The chapter is informed by desk research which employs what we term "theoretical archaeology": systematically excavating the intellectual foundations of current practice while identifying emerging paradigmatic shifts that may transform future approaches. This methodology enables identification of both continuities and ruptures in community engagement thinking, while providing foundational thinking for developing practical guidance for institutional transformation.

4.2 Theoretical foundations: third mission, innovation ecosystems and community engagement

As we have seen, community engagement in higher education is about 'how universities address societal needs in partnership with their external communities' (Farnell, et al., 2020). Across European higher education, community engagement has developed through multiple, often overlapping paradigmatic strands rather than a single, unified approach. These strands are reflected to varying degrees across institutions and national contexts and include:

- The Democratic Mission, emphasising Bildung, democratic participation, and civic responsibility.
- Social Innovation, focusing on addressing complex societal challenges through collaborative and cross-sector innovation.
- Knowledge Democracy, promoting participatory research, citizen science, and the co-production of knowledge with communities.
- Regional Development, positioning universities as anchor institutions that contribute to place-based development.

In this dynamic landscape, the concept of the third mission has emerged strongly within the European higher education context. Universities' third mission is a multidisciplinary, complex, evolving phenomenon (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020) which broadly sees universities having positive social, cultural, environmental and economic impact. Scholars have linked the rise of the third mission to reform of higher education and the role of universities in regional development activities towards stimulating innovation systems (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011; Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020; Haj Taieb, 2024). At the same time we can see universities evolving in their approach to managing social innovation (Planells-Aleixandre et al., 2025). Whilst the third mission does not directly equate to community engagement - encompassing a wider set of engagement activities and diversely conceived - community engagement is firmly rooted in the evolving literature and policy narratives. This chapter therefore extends the proposition that 'community engagement – a vital component of HE's third mission – can be a sustainable force of innovation' (Hazelkorn, 2010). The triple helix of university, industry and government (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000), widened to a quadruple helix by civil society, has since been extended into a quintuple helix, which adds the natural environment as a fifth dimension and explicitly connects knowledge and innovation with sustainability and socio-ecological challenges (Carayannis & Campbell, 2010; Carayannis et al., 2012). Such approaches are increasingly associated with transdisciplinary forms of knowledge production that bring together different academic disciplines and societal actors to address complex challenges.

Transdisciplinarity goes beyond disciplinary boundaries and seeks to integrate knowledge from various sources, including local communities, to generate holistic and transformative knowledge that can address complex real-world problems. In short, there are evolving dynamics of knowledge production towards being problem-oriented, transdisciplinary, and socially distributed (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001). The integration of transdisciplinary approaches represents a paradigm shift in how universities conceptualise knowledge production and societal engagement (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001). Emerging from diverse fields, including the innovation sciences, transdisciplinary conceptualisations of collaboration, openness and mutual learning are highly relevant for community engagement. Key elements complementary to community engagement include:

- **Mode 2 knowledge production:** Moving from disciplinary to applied problem-oriented research. This aligns with community engagement (CE) emphasis on societal or community needs and value.
- **Co-creation processes:** Involving stakeholders throughout research design and implementation. This aligns with CE active involvement of stakeholders in shaping research questions, methods, and outputs. In CE, co-creation ensures research and teaching respond to real societal needs.
- **Boundary work:** Negotiating the interface between different knowledge systems (academic, local, policy). This complements CE boundary spanning by emphasising the negotiation of legitimacy across systems.
- **Reflexivity:** Continuous questioning of assumptions and methods (Klein, 2008). In CE, reflexivity is central to ensuring partnerships remain equitable and relevant over time.
- **Place-based:** Regional innovation systems provide a complementary lens for place-based CE – where CE is an embedded, adaptive, and co-creative process that takes place within local geographical, historical and sociopolitical contexts.

Within the literature, scholars have also begun to relate systems theory, knowledge, and innovation more directly to each other “as a contribution to a dynamically evolving general discourse on the topics of knowledge and innovation” (Carayannis et al., 2016). Systems approaches break past traditional institutional silos and invite consideration of how universities operate as a node, or indeed an engine, within a regional innovation ecosystem. Systems thinking has been defined as “a holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way a system’s constituent parts interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems” (Checkland, 1999; Meadows, 2008). It provides a language for addressing complexity, highlighting interconnections and feedback dynamics. In the context of higher education, this involves reframing the university in the context of its wider ecosystem, going beyond internal and external conditions and including a greater focus on boundary enactment. As Vakkuri describes, ‘Third Mission is not only a regulatory regime but also a boundary enactment transaction, one through which universities endeavour to create a more favourable environment’ (Vakkuri, 2004). As a constituent part of third mission work, community engagement can profitably think about institutional processes and practices of boundary enactment within their local contexts and regions.

In today's rapidly changing world, knowledge can no longer remain contained within academic walls or specialised institutions. It moves, circulates, and evolves - and through this dynamic flow, it becomes innovation, practical know-how, and a shared resource for improving society. The quintuple helix framework (previously mentioned above, and presented in Figure 2 below), captures this spirit of movement and co-creation and underscores the necessity of coordinated action among all societal subsystems to co-create and mobilise knowledge in support of sustainable (local/regional) community development.

Figure 2: The quintuple-helix model/approach



Source: redrawn as a regular pentagon from Carayannis, Barth and Campbell (2012)

This approach invites us to see knowledge as something generated not by one system alone, but through the interaction of five interconnected pillars: education, the economy, the natural environment, civil society, and the political system. Each of these spheres brings a unique form of capital - whether human, financial, social, environmental or regulatory - and each plays a vital role in shaping a sustainable, resilient future. This approach is strongly reflected in the European Union's vision, which positions sustainable development and social innovation as core drivers of progress. The quintuple helix helps translate that vision into practice: it emphasises that transformative solutions emerge when multiple voices, capacities, and perspectives are brought together around shared challenges and common

opportunities. Importantly, it highlights the power of partnerships. Meaningful change rarely comes from isolated actors. It is the synergy between smaller, agile organisations and innovators - those who generate ideas and respond quickly to emerging needs - and larger institutions and governance systems - those able to provide stability, resources, and long-term implementation - that accelerates societal progress. By embracing this model, we create space for collaboration that is not only strategic, but deeply grounded in mutual learning, shared responsibility, and collective benefit. It represents a shift from transactional relationships to transformative alliances, where knowledge is not simply transferred, but co-created - and where community, environment, and future generations are recognised as central stakeholders in the innovation ecosystem.

This system shifts us from universities as closed systems with only top-down/bottom-up strategies at their disposal to open the door to boundary spanning work that can consider enacting strategies for sustained community engagement. Here it is useful to make explicit some of the foundational key systems-thinking concepts that resonate strongly with community engagement (CE) that can support unified thinking for embedding CE in higher education.

- **Feedback loops:** Feedback loops are a crucial aspect of systems thinking. Systems evolve through reinforcing or balancing feedback loops (Senge, 1990). CE advocates for recursive feedback between universities and communities, where joint initiatives shape mutual learning and adaptation. Below we point to European policy and practice that can be understood as attempts to enact feedback loops at scale across the EEA and ERA for systemic change and systems shifting.[3]
- **Emergence:** The idea of emergence challenges reductionism, a concept that suggests that complex systems can be understood by breaking them down into their individual parts and studying how each works in isolation. In systems theory, emergence refers to outcomes that cannot be predicted from the behaviour of individual components alone (Capra & Luisi, 2014). In CE, this aligns with the idea that partnerships often generate unexpected forms of social innovation that exceed the sum of academic and community contributions. Below we point to missions-oriented research and innovation which seeks to leverage and scale systems collaboration to solve complex challenges.
- **Adaptive capacity:** To be successfully adaptive, systems must build the ability to learn and evolve in response to shocks or pressures with adaptive cycles interacting across multiple scales. Adaptive capacity is considered a social component (Walker et al., 2004). In CE this corresponds to the need for distributed ownership and positional leadership and as such CE can play a key role in contributing to adaptive capacity. Below we point to key competencies frameworks that are contributing to building systems capacity through skills for transdisciplinary working.
- **Boundary spanning:** Systems require porous boundaries to interact with their environments. Aldrich & Herker (1977) highlight the importance of boundary spanning roles or structures that bridge subsystems. In CE, boundary-spanning roles—such as engagement officers or community liaisons— have been identified as essential to

[3] For more on feedback loops, see: https://deming.org/systems-thinking-feedback-loops/

bridge academic and societal knowledge systems (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Below we point to Campus Living Labs as new forms of complementary boundary spanning structures.

For each of the above, i.e. realising feedback loops at scale across European regions and higher education landscape; Missions-oriented research and innovation; building systems capacity through skills; and evolving the potential for living labs – community-engaged participatory practices and approaches are central and essential to successful systems.

4.3 Policy context: the European landscape for systems approaches

In previous chapters, we explored how EU higher education policy (e.g. the European Education Area, the European Universities Initiative) has emphasised universities' role in addressing societal challenges and in the 'fourth mission of universities' to serve society. But looking further we can see how the wider EU policy landscape has embraced complexity, systems approaches and co-creation to address societal challenges. These cut across research and innovation, regional development and future skills and competencies. We can view these as cross cutting efforts to evolve system capacity for transdisciplinary practice for systemic transformation to address our most pressing societal challenges.

Several EU funding programmes illustrate this revitalised focus on transdisciplinarity, engagement and the relationship between science and society. Community engagement can both leverage and, importantly, actively contribute to the current momentum and thought leadership in these efforts.

- **Horizon Europe** (Impact Pathways, Missions, WIDERA): Mission-oriented approaches explicitly tackle societal challenges (e.g. climate, cancer) through multi-stakeholder collaboration. Universities could align CE activities with mission agendas and promote missions-oriented research and innovation for societal impact.
- **New European Bauhaus (NEB):** The NEB is a policy and funding initiative that aims to ensure that green transitions in built environments (and beyond) are sustainable, aesthetically enriching and socially inclusive. NEB's three working principles are named as participatory process, multi-level engagement and a transdisciplinary approach. NEB is stimulating both policy and funding across Europe. CE can inform and contribute to this agenda for authentic and professionalised local community-university engagement in co-design processes for realising ambitions of European Green Deal.
- **Joint Research Centre (JRC) Science Hub and competences frameworks:** The JRC's work programme on skills and competences provides evidence and resources from the perspectives of both education and employment with multiple frameworks involving engagement competences (such as ResearchComp[4]). CE initiatives have a

[4] See: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/jobs-research/researchcomp-european-competence-framework-researchers_en

proven track record and community of practice that could play a key role in building engagement skills and competences that reflect the integrity of the field.
- **JRC Regional Innovation Playbook**: Considers societal wellbeing and environmental gains as essential purposes for innovation including citizens and civil society and an 'upgraded role for innovation' to foster social and economic transformation. CE could play a key role as thought leaders for institutions seeking to building trusted reciprocal partnerships with citizens and civil society.
- **EISMEA Interregional Innovation Investments Instrument**: This instrument of the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA) focuses on scaling collaborative innovation. CE could contribute to advocate for and ensure innovations are inclusive and socially responsive.

The ongoing communities of practice, policy dialogue and scholarly discourse surrounding these initiatives constitutes an effort to effect radical societal transformation, driven by the universal need for change and adaptation in light of societal challenges, increasing polycrises, and the contemporary reality of change as the new norm in a twin transition. This is particularly reflected in the European Research Area and Horizon Europe programme that explicitly promote systems approaches, including through:

- **Mission-oriented research and innovation:** Addressing grand challenges through coordinated action which mirrors CE's orientation to societal needs.
- **Living Labs infrastructures and methodologies:** Creating real-world testing environments for all forms of innovation including social, public sector and policy innovation by engaging citizens and civil society in innovation processes mirroring CE participatory principles and practices.
- **Engaged Research / Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI):** Embedding societal considerations throughout research processes. This embeds ethics, inclusion, and societal relevance in ways that align with core CE principles.
- **Citizen science:** Engaging communities as research partners / Actively involves communities in research processes, blurring the line between academic and public knowledge.
- **Co-Creation**: Positioning the role of universities in supporting engagement with communities and other actors for shared agendas and strategies for socio-economic development. This is central to both R&I policy and CE practice, reinforcing their mutual relevance.

Of these, we call out missions-oriented research and innovation and living labs as particularly important policy spaces for CE, as they reflect European scale efforts to support systems boundary spanning activity and emergence through collaboration between actors operating at diverse levels.

Horizon Europe's mission-oriented approach provides substantial opportunities for community-engaged research addressing societal challenges. The five missions — cancer, climate adaptation, ocean health, smart cities, and soil health — explicitly require stakeholder engagement and citizen involvement, creating policy imperatives and funding incentives for participatory approaches. The mission framework shifts research funding from discipline-

based programmes toward challenge-oriented initiatives requiring transdisciplinary collaboration. This creates opportunities for community-engaged scholars previously marginalised within traditional funding structures. However, accessing mission funding requires navigating complex consortium requirements, demonstrating impact pathways, and managing multi-stakeholder partnerships. This requires institutional support which is often lacking for engaged research.

Not limited to Horizon's five identified missions, the core concept of missions (Mazzucato 2021) aims to deliver impact by putting research and innovation potential into a new Quintuple Helix model, combining with new forms of governance and collaboration, as well as by engaging citizens.

The UNIC European University Declaration on Engaged Research, one of the first such declarations in Europe, advocates "engaged research" as an approach that involves local people and communities, NGOs and municipalities working together with universities to collectively decide what to research and to involve societal partners at all stages of the research process. The subsequent institutional strategy places missions working at its heart. Missions connect all relevant actors through new forms of partnerships for co-design and co-creation by focusing on problems or challenges, not disciplines, and targets that require multiple sectors and actors to solve. Thus, mission-oriented research and innovation has the possibility of leading to system wide transformation. Only at the level of the European Union, with its long experience of operating within a multilevel governance system, can we achieve the scale and diversity of talent and ideas to make real progress (Mazzucato 2018).

This is just one example of innovation within higher education that is emerging from the new landscape of European Universities. The European Universities Initiative represents an unprecedented opportunity for embedding community engagement within new transnational higher education networks. With currently over 73 alliances involving almost 650 institutions from 39 countries, these networks demonstrate varying approaches to civic engagement integration ranging from peripheral inclusion to central strategic positioning.

Many of these European Universities employ living lab structures and practices to frame their engagement activities. Member universities of the European university alliances were encouraged by the EC to cooperate with each other to further the co-implementation of relevant innovation actions of the European Strategy for Universities and the New European Innovation Agenda. This bottom-up teaming-up resulted in the creation of a new European Living Lab Hub (ELLH). The ELLH brings together representatives of the Alliances involved in these new engagement infrastructures to progress jointly agreed objectives, which includes promoting the third mission and value to society.

Additionally, FOREU4ALL the platform for all alliances to come together to share best practices, exchange experiences, and strengthen cooperation has established 20 topical groups, including one on Regional Innovation Systems. Knowledge sharing in this community of practice explicitly references engagement and societal challenges. It invites members to 'reflect on engagement models aimed at strengthening regional innovation capacities across diverse socio-political and academic contexts'. It also aims to have policy impact by

'showcasing how alliances can address societal challenges through research aligned with regional strategies and needs.'

This regional innovation context aligns with the new European Innovation Strategy and JRC Regional Innovation Playbook (Pontikakis et al., 2022), which emphasises an 'upgraded role for innovation' to foster socio-economic transformation in light of green and digital transitions. Recognising that we are living in a period of historic change they unequivocally call out that:

> 'the necessary transformations do not seem likely with innovation policy as usual. To stand a fair chance of having the required impact, new innovation policies must address two important prerequisites: First, the local and regional stakeholders including citizens, enterprises, knowledge institutions, local authorities must be meaningfully involved. Second, policy must strive for transformative, system-level, innovation in enabling and accelerating the necessary transformation.'
> (Pontikakis et al., 2022; p.3)

Their framework considers societal wellbeing and environmental gains as essential purposes for innovation. The accompanying Concepts and Rationale document outlines this new scientific paradigm of innovation governance and the concept of system-level innovation. Across all of these we can see systems views informing policy and strategies rooted in multi-level and boundary spanning governance and practice, the inclusion of citizen and civil society as partners in knowledge-production and innovation to respond to societal needs and new and strengthened networks and communities of practices emerging as part of new infrastructures being developed in the European higher education landscape bridging EEA and ERA.

The field of community engagement, its theory, methods and community-engaged practitioners, can not only help realise the aligned policy ambitions for societal value - but critically, can play a leading role in informing their practical application bringing its ethic and expertise of authenticity and integrity for truly just, reciprocal working. This is relevant to academic roles working across learning and research contexts as well as leadership and professional staff aiming to support integrated institutional thinking, relational governance and positional leadership.

4.4 Practical implications: operationalising systems approaches

If systems theory and transdisciplinary innovation frameworks align so closely with CE, how could universities operationalise these insights? Here we summarise practical strategies that operationalise systems thinking under six headings: (i) structures and governance, (ii) missions-oriented research and innovation, (iii) competences for transdisciplinarity, (iv) decolonising knowledge systems, (v) participatory evaluation and assessment, and (vi) communities of practice.

Structures and governance
Organisational structures commonly applied in innovation projects could find equally valuable applications in the contexts of CE. Whilst institutional frameworks recognise internal and

external conditions for the organisation, systems approaches require new organisational configurations which can include:

- **Living Labs as institutional infrastructure:** Creating permanent spaces for experimentation, co-creation, relational governance and feedback loops. For CE, they offer boundary spanning infrastructures where universities and communities co-create solutions to societal challenges.
- **Innovation hubs and intermediary units:** Facilitating brokering connections across systems (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000) as well as spaces and support services for innovation between academic and community partners. For CE, they facilitate trust-building and sustained partnerships.
- **Matrix structures:** Enabling cross-functional collaboration while maintaining disciplinary excellence. For CE, they help bridge academic disciplinary silos and align teaching, research, and other institutional efforts with community needs.
- **Boundary-spanning roles:** Dedicated positions for facilitating university-community collaboration and explicitly created to connect organisational sub-systems. In CE, such roles are indispensable for sustaining community partnerships.

These structures serve as boundary-spanning infrastructure that enables systems approaches whilst maintaining connection to academic programmes and research activities (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

Given the prevalence of living labs in European Universities, it is worth referring to the existing community of practice that coheres through the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL). ENoLL provides research, tools, training and guidance for living labs, and its recent account of the origins, evolution and future outlook of the Living Lab movement (ENoLL, 2025) makes explicit the involvement of citizens and civil society and the relational governance that is central to these boundary-spanning infrastructures.

Missions-oriented research and innovation

Systems approaches can be applied in organisational strategies for supporting missions-oriented research and innovation, and such approaches can be replicated in supporting community engagement in higher education. According to the Missions Oriented Innovation Handbook from Sweden's Innovation Agency Vinnova (Hill, 2022), the following three elements are key:

- **Institutional positioning:** Universities could develop strategic approaches to mission participation identifying institutional strengths, regional priorities, and community partnerships enabling distinctive contributions to mission objectives. This aligns with CE emphasis and orientation to community identified needs.
- **Capacity development:** Supporting researchers in developing competencies for mission-oriented research including co-design methodologies, stakeholder engagement, and impact planning beyond traditional academic outputs. CE has an existing community of practice, theories and methods which could contribute to this space.

- **Partnership Infrastructure:** Establishing institutional mechanisms supporting long-term partnerships required for mission implementation rather than project-specific collaborations. CE has a track record for building trusted partnerships for reciprocal value.

Competences for transdisciplinarity

In addition to recognising how systems thinking and transdisciplinarity are transforming our understanding of organisational structures for engagement, connections between systems thinking and CE can also be made by considering the complementarity of competences that are essential for systems-oriented thinking, and how these competences overlap with those needed for CE (Wiek et al., 2011). Here it is worth highlighting the prevalence of engagement competencies embedded in European Competencies Frameworks including GreenComp and ResearchComp. Essential competencies for systems-oriented engagement include:

- **Systems literacies:** Understanding complexity, feedback, and emergence. In CE, this enables academics and students to grasp the non-linear dynamics of community challenges.
- **Facilitation skills:** Managing diverse multi-stakeholder processes and conflicting interests. In CE, facilitation builds trust and ensures equitable dialogue.
- **Adaptive leadership:** Guiding institutions through uncertainty and ambiguity. In CE, adaptive leadership helps universities remain relevant in changing contexts.
- **Cultural competence:** Working across diverse community contexts. In CE, this ensures respect for local knowledge and inclusion of marginalised voices.
- **Evaluation capabilities:** Assessing outcomes that are complex, multidimensional and emergent. In CE, evaluation highlights both academic and societal impact.

Universities can operationalise capacity building for transdisciplinary or systems competences, through staff development, student learning and community partnerships, and can explicitly connect them to the wider policy and funding frameworks and position themselves as adaptive, responsive, and socially embedded institutions.

Decolonising knowledge systems

A systems approach can guide a shift towards greater inclusion of diverse forms of knowledge, which intersects with broader debates on the democratisation of knowledge and the decolonisation of higher education. Rather than privileging predominantly Western or WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) epistemic traditions, universities are increasingly challenged to recognise and engage with a plurality of knowledge systems, practices, and forms of expertise. This entails critically examining whose knowledge is recognised as legitimate, how knowledge is produced and validated, and how institutional structures, research methodologies, and partnership models may reproduce historical and contemporary power asymmetries (see e.g. Moreno-Cely et al., 2021; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). This requires universities to become more reflexive about their own epistemic assumptions while creating meaningful opportunities for dialogue across different knowledge traditions.

Critical areas for institutional reflection and community engagement include:

- Documenting inclusive and context-sensitive engagement methodologies and their application in university-community partnerships.
- Examining how institutional commitments to equity, inclusion, and decolonisation translate into sustained and reciprocal partnership practices.
- Exploring reparative approaches to engagement that acknowledge and address histories of exclusion, extraction, and unequal knowledge production.
- Developing evaluation frameworks that recognise multiple ways of knowing and value diverse forms of evidence, expertise, and impact.

Participatory evaluation and assessment

Similarly, complex community–university partnerships operating in dynamic environments require evaluation approaches that support participation and adaptation rather than accountability. Developmental evaluation, pioneered by Patton (1994), provides frameworks for real-time learning, strategic adjustment, and innovation support particularly relevant for transformational engagement initiatives.

We highlight Community-Based Participatory Evaluation and Impact by Design as examples of approaches to operationalise evaluation strategies that place participatory community engagement at the heart of assessment and evaluation processes and work within systems complexity.

Community-Based Participatory Evaluation (CBPE) supports community participation in the activity of assessing, designing, taking action and evaluating. Moving beyond institution-centric assessment, CBPE positions community members as evaluators determining partnership effectiveness according to community-defined criteria. This approach, developed through synthesis of participatory evaluation traditions and indigenous research methodologies, fundamentally reconceptualises assessment power dynamics. CBPE implementation involves extensive capacity building ensuring community partners possess evaluation competencies while maintaining cultural responsiveness to diverse assessment traditions. This requires reimagining evaluation timelines, resource allocation, and dissemination strategies prioritising community learning over institutional reporting requirements.

Impact by Design is the OECD Toolkit on Effective Results Frameworks for Sustainable Development (OECD, 2024), grounded in over four years of discussions at the OECD/DAC Results Community and based on comparative analysis in 10 countries and 58 development co-operation agencies and ministries. This step-by-step guidance on creating, monitoring and using results frameworks emphasises result frameworks that offer increased flexibility owing to the use of theories of change to formulate them. That is, comprehensive descriptions of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context and encouraging responses that seek relevance, acknowledgement of complexity and uncertainties, adaptation to context and change, and the ability to test and review the ‘hypothetical’ causal linkages and underlying assumptions during implementation. The fundamental focus of results frameworks as a management tool is to drive positive development impact.

Communities of practice

Communities of practice (CoPs) and systems thinking are interconnected concepts and CoPs are a key operational strategy for systems working facilitating learning, knowledge sharing, and systemic change in complex environments.

CoPs represent powerful mechanisms for supporting engagement institutionalisation through peer learning, collective problem-solving, and distributed leadership development. Drawing from Wenger's (1998) social learning theory, engagement-focused CoPs create spaces where practitioners develop shared repertoires, negotiate meaning, and build collective identity as engaged scholars. Successful engagement CoPs demonstrate several critical characteristics distinguishing them from traditional academic committees or working groups:

- **Voluntary participation and intrinsic motivation:** Members join CoPs through genuine interest rather than institutional mandate, creating energy and commitment sustaining long-term participation despite competing demands. This requires careful cultivation ensuring CoPs provide sufficient value justifying time investment while avoiding bureaucratic burden.
- **Boundary spanning membership:** Effective CoPs include diverse participants (faculty, professional staff, students, community partners), creating rich learning environments where different perspectives challenge assumptions and generate innovation. This diversity requires skilled facilitation ensuring inclusive participation while managing power dynamics potentially marginalising certain voices.
- **Practice-focused learning:** CoPs centre on solving practical challenges rather than theoretical discussion, creating immediate value for participants while building collective knowledge. This involves sharing failures honestly, celebrating successes collectively, and developing resources supporting broader community engagement.

4.5 The future of community engagement in the digital age

Digital infrastructure, virtual environments and artificial intelligence now reach every part of a university's operations, from administration to teaching, research and the culture of engagement itself, and a systems approach lets actors engage critically with these shifts. The pandemic showed both faces of digital engagement. Wider reach, asynchronous collaboration and access for partners with limited mobility sit on one side; digital poverty, screen fatigue and the difficulty of building trust at a distance sit on the other. Post-pandemic engagement therefore calls for hybrid designs that choose the modality on purpose, with relationship building and conflict resolution in person and routine coordination online, and for digital equity as an institutional commitment: infrastructure, affordability, digital literacy, relevant content and privacy, developed with communities. Artificial intelligence, blockchain and immersive technologies open further possibilities and raise questions of digital sovereignty, data ownership and algorithmic bias; universities should adopt them where they serve community-defined needs and keep non-digital routes open for those who need them.

4.6 Synthesis: toward transformative engagement

Working with systems frameworks and strategies can support embedding and mainstreaming community engagement in higher education. The systems lens reveals that institutionalising community engagement requires a fundamental reconceptualisation, beyond incremental adjustment. Universities must evolve from:

- Service provision → Collaborative partnership
- Linear planning → Adaptive management
- Disciplinary silos → Transdisciplinary integration
- External engagement → Embedded collaboration
- Individual initiatives → Systemic transformation

This transformation aligns with broader movements toward open science, responsible innovation, and addressing societal grand challenges, positioning community engagement as central to university futures.

Operationalising systems approaches demonstrates that while structural conditions set important starting points, effective and deliberate strategies, leadership choices, and capacity-building efforts can support actors to navigate and systemically strengthen community engagement processes in the context of each university's local and regional ecosystem.

The development of leadership supports, communities of practice as well as guidance and tools to strengthen transnational learning around policies and practices for systems thinking, transdisciplinarity and institutional transformation processes that have community engagement at their core, can complement top-down and bottom-up institutional efforts for CE, and potentially accelerate systematic change towards embedding community engagement within university structures and academic cultures.

Taken together, systems thinking and transdisciplinary innovation approaches reveal that institutionalising community engagement cannot just be about embedding activities within existing structures. It requires a fundamental reconceptualisation of the university's role. Universities must move away from seeing themselves primarily as service providers and instead embrace collaborative partnership as their central mode of operation.

In such a context, linear, top-down planning gives way to adaptive management, where feedback from communities informs ongoing adjustment. Similarly, disciplinary silos are replaced by transdisciplinary integration, drawing on multiple knowledge systems to address shared challenges. The result of such an approach is that community engagement is no longer external and peripheral, but embedded within the institution's identity and practices. And rather than relying on isolated individual initiatives, community engagement becomes part of a systemic transformation that aligns with broader policy movements toward open science, responsible innovation, and societal transformation. This reframing positions community engagement not as an add-on but as a central mechanism for managing complexity, sustaining legitimacy, and contributing to the public good.

CONCLUSIONS

Community engagement (CE) is still an emerging priority in European higher education. Only in recent years has it gained visibility in policy debates, institutional strategies, and international networks. The SPACE project builds on more than a decade of work in this area, and the tools already developed through the previous TEFCE and SHEFCE projects – particularly the TEFCE Toolbox and the SHEFCE Action Planning Methodology – have proven their value to stakeholders across Europe. Universities, policymakers, and community partners have recognised them as practical frameworks for assessing, reflecting on, and strengthening CE.

The challenge now is how to ensure **scaling** of the established learning, expertise, community of practice and tools, to make a genuine step forward for CE in Europe. The question is not only how to sustain individual initiatives, but how to embed CE as a recognised and resourced part of universities' missions and of higher education systems more broadly. This report has therefore engaged with the institutionalisation literature, which will remain an essential reference point for understanding the conditions, structures, and resources evidenced as being essential to support CE. These insights highlight the importance of mission alignment, leadership commitment, organisational resources, recognition policies, and monitoring frameworks.

However, what this report argues – and where it differs from the dominant view in the literature – is that framing the challenge as one of 'institutionalisation' alone is not enough. The complexity of today's societal challenges requires frameworks that go beyond embedding CE in existing structures. By introducing concepts from systems thinking and transdisciplinary research, this report has shown that CE should be seen not only as an institutional agenda but as a transformative practice that enables universities to adapt to and shape complex social ecosystems.

In policy and practice, CE can be framed as an essential part of managing complexity and driving institutional transformation in light of global change. CE should therefore become part of the **core business** of how universities operate and deliver societal value and impact. Institutional self-reflection and action planning are critical to orient universities toward authentic CE, ensuring participatory practice and knowledge co-production.

Theoretical foundations from the systems thinking and innovation literature such as emergence, feedback loops, boundary spanning, and adaptive capacity provide new language to explain how CE operates and why it matters. Practical implications, ranging from organisational structures such as living labs and innovation hubs to competences such as facilitation, cultural literacy, and evaluation, demonstrate that CE can be operationalised as a driver of institutional resilience. Moreover, the policy context – particularly European research and innovation frameworks – shows that the broader policy discourse is already shifting toward systemic and co-creative approaches that CE can both contribute to and benefit from.

The SPACE resource kit carries these concepts into five working principles for the SPACE Acceleration Programme: interdependence, boundary spanning, co-creation, adaptive change, and an ecosystem around the institution.

Taken together, these insights suggest that universities must reconceptualise their role. CE is not simply about offering services to society, but about forming collaborative partnerships that generate shared knowledge and solutions. It is not a linear process of planning and delivery, but an adaptive practice of learning, reflexivity, and adjustment. It does not occur at the margins, but at the heart of teaching, research, and innovation. In short, CE can and should be understood as a transformative practice that positions universities as embedded actors in knowledge ecosystems, capable of responding to and shaping societal change.

Embracing systems thinking is essential to accelerate institutional transformation and to make CE a core part of higher education. A key task is to bridge different knowledge systems and languages, so that universities, communities, and policymakers can work together more effectively. This kind of bridging strengthens the capacity, leadership, and skills needed for authentic engagement across the ecosystem and achieving meaningful societal impact.

The SPACE project will now take these arguments a step further. In the next phase of our work, we will develop a methodology for applying innovative approaches to community engagement by drawing on the tools and insights of systems thinking. This methodology will be piloted at four partner universities – University College Cork, Universitat de Girona, University of Rijeka, and Vrije Universiteit Brussel – providing a unique opportunity to test, refine, and demonstrate how systems-informed CE can strengthen universities' societal role. Through this process, SPACE will contribute not only to conceptual debates but also to practical pathways for mainstreaming CE in higher education across Europe and beyond.

AFTERWORD: CONSTRUCTIVE TENSIONS AND FURTHER REFLECTIONS

The process of drafting this research report opened significant discussion among consortium members of the SPACE project. There was broad agreement among consortium members that the analysis brought forward original and valuable contributions to thinking about community engagement in higher education. At the same time, certain team members felt the discussion could benefit from additional reflections that explore certain tensions, alternative emphases and open questions arising from the report's main arguments. The reflections below are therefore not intended as critiques or rebuttals of the case developed in the publication, but as an invitation to further dialogue in the field.

Reflection 1: Could innovation eclipse community engagement?

Thomas Farnell, Institute for the Development of Education

The argument put forward in chapter four of this report (written by the team of Martin Galvin, Maroun Tabbal, and Ciara O'Halloran) is both compelling and convincing. It has certainly made me think hard about how we frame community engagement in higher education. What I particularly appreciate about the analysis is the following:

- It has a strong and ambitious **visionary** component, arguing that community engagement is not an 'activity' but a core mission of higher education; an 'essential part of managing complexity and driving institutional transformation in light of global change'.
- It offers a convincing argument on how to rethink **how institutional change works** in practice. Instead of change being under the primary and exclusive influence of university leadership, change can happen both due to the larger forces (wider ecosystems of actors and policies that influence their priorities) and due to bottom-up pressures (living labs and communities of practices that influence culture change).
- In addition to framing community engagement in a systems thinking approach, the chapter also makes a strong case for **connecting community engagement to the field of innovation**. It does this at a strategic level, by considering the objectives of universities to identify innovative solutions to societal challenges, in collaboration with societal stakeholders; and at a practical, implementation level, with innovation methods such as living labs, citizen science, mission-oriented research creating meeting points of innovation and community engagement.

The vision of the university responding in a holistic and innovative way to address the challenges in its surrounding communities (including local, national and global) echoes the idea of civic university as conceptualised by Goddard, Hazelkorn and Vallance (2016) and reflected recently in initiatives supporting a network of civic universities in the UK. [5]

But there are tensions that remain in this framing that brings community engagement and innovation together. Innovation is, of course, a contested concept, with many possible

[5] https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Universities-Civic-Role-Explainer.pdf

interpretations. However, in many European policy contexts, innovation is often operationalised through goals and indicators linked to **economic development**, regional competitiveness, technology transfer, patents, start-ups and employment. Social and civic goals are not absent from these framings, but they are not always equally central in the way priorities, funding instruments and evaluation frameworks are structured.

The concern, then, is not with innovation as such, nor with connecting community engagement to innovation agendas. Rather, the concern is that **dominant policy framings** of innovation may privilege certain goals, actors and indicators over others. In such a context, community engagement could become instrumentalised and "eclipsed" if it is absorbed into innovation frameworks without sufficient safeguards: its distinctive values and agency could be diluted, community-based stakeholders could be included in tokenistic ways, and activities and resources could still be funnelled primarily towards dominant (economic) goals.

There are, of course, other understandings of innovation, including social innovation, the quadruple and quintuple helix (which encompass civil society and the environment), open innovation, Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), or "third-generation innovation". These may provide new narratives that challenge the economically centred logic of dominant approaches to innovation.

In any case, if connecting community engagement to innovation is seen as a precondition for mainstreaming it more widely in higher education, then several **safeguards** would need to be put in place:

1. Explicitly include the term "community engagement" in discussions of innovation in higher education and research, defining it as the way universities address societal challenges in partnership with external communities.
2. Specify equity, reciprocity and co-creation as core principles of community engagement, not as peripheral aspirations.
3. Openly acknowledge and address asymmetries in priorities, values and power, including by:
    - involving communities in reshaping policy agendas, not only in implementing predefined priorities;
    - applying frameworks such as living labs in ways that empower less dominant voices, rather than simply consulting them;
    - developing evaluation criteria that include non-economic outcomes such as social trust, democratic participation and community relevance, rather than focusing primarily on economic outputs.

Reflection 2: Institutionalisation and the need for reflexivity

Linde Moriau, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

The presented report is both timely and persuasive. At the same time, it raises an important question: **how can community engagement be institutionalised without institutionalising the very injustices it seeks to address?** Institutional capacity is essential for sustaining engagement, yet institutionalisation is never neutral. It shapes priorities, allocates resources, establishes routines, and influences whose knowledge, interests and forms of participation are recognised and valued. Institutionalising community engagement therefore raises questions that are not only organisational but also fundamentally ethical and political.

Research suggests that, while engagement initiatives are intended to address societal challenges, they may nevertheless reproduce longstanding inequalities regarding whose knowledge is recognised, whose expertise is regarded as authoritative, and who ultimately benefits from processes of change. Universities may collaborate with societal partners while continuing, often unintentionally, to position themselves as the principal producers and validators of legitimate knowledge. Community partners contribute experience, local knowledge, legitimacy and opportunities for societal impact without necessarily exercising equivalent influence over how research questions are framed, partnership success is defined, knowledge is interpreted, or priorities are established. Participation alone, therefore, does not necessarily redistribute epistemic authority or transform the structures through which knowledge is produced.

These issues become particularly relevant as universities increasingly embrace partnership-based education and co-creative research. While these approaches represent an important departure from linear models of knowledge transfer, the language of partnership does not, in itself, resolve underlying asymmetries. Institutional influence may continue through decisions about partnership priorities, resource allocation, evaluation criteria and definitions of successful engagement. The critical question is therefore not simply whether collaboration occurs, but whether it redistributes authority over knowledge production and creates more equitable relationships between universities and the communities with which they work.

These observations should not be read as arguments against institutionalisation. Rather, they suggest that institutionalisation itself requires ongoing reflexivity about the assumptions, relationships and power dynamics through which engagement is organised. Systems thinking reminds us that transformation emerges through relationships and continuous adaptation, but also that systems reflect particular histories and distributions of power. Building institutional capacity for community engagement may therefore also require building institutional capacity for critical self-reflection. From this perspective, three institutional dispositions may help sustain the transformative ambitions of community engagement as it becomes more firmly embedded within higher education.

The first is **humility**. This does not diminish the distinctive contributions universities make through research, education and innovation. Rather, it recognises that universities are one knowledge institution among many. Civil society organisations, public institutions,

professional practitioners, grassroots movements and citizens all contribute forms of knowledge grounded in different experiences and traditions. Humility therefore encourages universities to engage societal partners not simply as stakeholders but as knowledge partners whose perspectives can reshape institutional assumptions as well as collaborative agendas.

The second is **care**. The report rightly emphasises the importance of long-term partnerships. Care extends this insight by drawing attention to the relationships that make engagement possible. Trust, reciprocity and mutual accountability develop over time and cannot be reduced to project cycles or performance indicators. They also depend on emotional, organisational and relational labour that often remains less visible than conventional academic outputs. Recognising these dimensions is an important part of creating institutional environments in which collaboration can flourish.

The third is **courage**. Genuine engagement inevitably involves disagreement, friction and discomfort. Societal partners may challenge institutional priorities, question established research agendas or introduce alternative understandings of societal problems. Courage, in this context, means remaining open to institutional learning rather than simply pursuing engagement more assertively. Universities committed to community engagement must be willing not only to influence society but also to allow engagement to reshape their own priorities, assumptions and practices.

This reflection is offered in the spirit of extending, rather than challenging, the report's central argument. Institutionalising community engagement requires not only appropriate strategies, governance arrangements and ecosystem perspectives, but also sustained attention to the normative assumptions, power relations and forms of labour that underpin collaborative practice. Too often, universities celebrate successful engagement while overlooking the unequal burdens that collaboration can place on civil society organisations, practitioners and community partners. Equally, the relational work undertaken by academics and professional staff—building trust, navigating conflict and sustaining partnerships—rarely receives the institutional recognition afforded to more conventional academic outputs. The transformative potential of community engagement ultimately depends on universities' willingness to remain open to challenge, learning and adaptation. Institutionalising community engagement is therefore not simply about embedding engagement within the university; it is equally about creating the conditions for engagement to reshape the university itself.

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