ENHANCE-GSL

Community Engagement in Higher Education Manual

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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION MANUAL

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

This publication is created as part of the project Enhancing Capacities for Sustainable Community Engagement: Cases of Georgia and Sierra Leone (Project # 101179287 — ENHANCE-GSL) financed by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Programme and managed by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) within the framework of the Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education (CBHE), Strand 1.

The general objective of the project ENHANCE-GSL is to help incite the bond between higher education institutions and societies in Georgia and Sierra Leone by equipping the universities with the necessary skills and knowledge to engage with their respective non-academic communities timely and successfully.

The specific objectives are:

1. Foster community engagement capacity among Georgian and Sierra Leonean universities.
2. Raise awareness on community engagement.

The consortium includes six beneficiaries from 4 countries as well as four associated partners. There are 2 types of higher education institutions: European HEIs with solid experience in community engagement and partner country universities from Georgia and Sierra Leone, representing central and other cities that are both in need of and eager to receive training on this matter.

In line with the project objectives, the manual aims to provide practical guidance, examples, and tools to support the development of community-engaged teaching, research, outreach, and partnership-building across diverse university contexts.

As societal challenges grow increasingly complex, the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) is evolving beyond the traditional boundaries of teaching and research. Today, universities are called to engage more deeply and responsibly with the communities they serve, both locally and globally. Community engagement in higher education is not a peripheral activity; it is a core strategy for fostering social justice, promoting democratic participation, and co-creating sustainable solutions with communities.

This manual responds to that call. It offers a comprehensive yet practical guide for integrating community engagement into the institutional, curricular, and research fabric of universities. Structured around key pillars - definitions and principles, strategic planning, integration in teaching and research, partnership development, and impact assessment - it reflects both global best practices and locally grounded insights. Whether working through participatory research, service-learning, community-based teaching, or multi-stakeholder partnerships, the manual promotes an approach that is reciprocal, ethical, and transformative.

What distinguishes university–community engagement from other outreach or third-mission activities is its commitment to mutual benefit, shared knowledge production, and long-term social impact. It acknowledges power asymmetries, embraces diverse epistemologies, and insists on cultural humility and critical reflection. Rather than framing universities as providers and communities as recipients, this manual encourages practitioners to view engagement as a space for co-learning, co-design, and co-action.

Drawing on European policy frameworks, international scholarship, global assessment models, and grounded institutional experiences, the manual is intended for educators, researchers, university leaders, university professionals, and community partners alike. It invites all stakeholders to see engagement not as an add-on, but as a pathway to institutional transformation and societal relevance. Let

this manual serve as a map, a mirror, and a catalyst – as we work together to strengthen the civic mission of higher education through meaningful, sustained, and just partnerships with our non-academic communities.

In line with the project's tasks and activities, the manual development process intentionally integrated insights from exploratory visit, cross-institutional reflections, and structured partner collaboration.

PHASE 1: CONTEXTUAL ANALYSES BEFORE THE EXPLORATORY VISIT IN RIJEKA

Before the visit, universities in Georgia and Sierra Leone prepared contextual analyses using templates provided by the University of Rijeka and Matej Bel University. These analyses responded to a structured homework assignment based on seven dimensions of university-community engagement. Partners were asked to reflect on selected dimensions - particularly those working well or those needing improvement - guided by questions such as:

- How would you describe and rate academics' experience with community-engaged teaching and learning?
- How would you describe and rate engagement in community-engaged research and innovation?
- How would you describe and rate involvement in outreach, service activities, or knowledge exchange?

As part of the assignment, partners conducted a short survey among academics and administrative staff to identify topics they considered relevant for learning and capacity-building. The questionnaire served as a valuable resource for framing these themes. The results of these reflections provided key inputs for the visit, creation of the manual and later training.

PHASE 2: JOINT TOPIC IDENTIFICATION AND PRIORITISATION

During the exploratory visit in Rijeka, partners reviewed the contextual analyses and, through a shortened deliberative process, identified themes of common importance. A prioritisation exercise ranked each proposed topic on a scale from 1 (least relevant) to 5 (extremely important). This ensured that the final manual reflected real institutional needs across diverse contexts and was tailored to Georgian and Sierra Leonean HEIs, while remaining adaptable to other contexts.

PHASE 3: DRAFTING AND REFINEMENT

Based on the prioritised themes, a detailed structure for the manual was drafted, enriched with concrete examples from across the world to demonstrate the diversity of community engagement practices. Partners reviewed the structure, commented on the first draft, and contributed to refining the final version.

INTEGRATION OF INSIGHTS FROM EXPLORATORY VISIT

The exploratory visit foreseen during the meeting in Rijeka played a central role throughout the process. The visit enabled partners to observe university–community engagement initiatives firsthand, exchange experiences, and identify practices adaptable to their own institutions.

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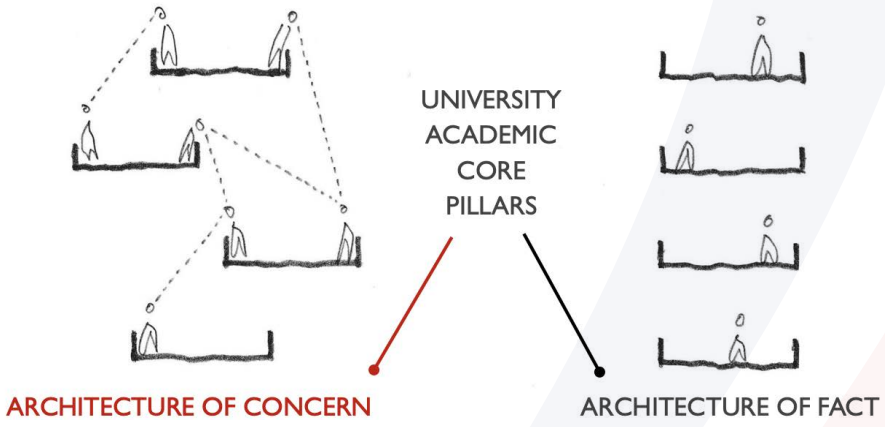
1. DEFINING UNIVERSITY–COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, ITS IMPORTANCE AND PRINCIPLES

University–community engagement (UCE) is increasingly recognised as a transformative dimension of higher education, anchoring universities more firmly in their civic and societal missions. However, despite its global promotion, engagement often remains marginalised within institutional structures, seen by many as tertiary to research and teaching.

In a contemporary age defined by interconnected crises – climate change, rising inequality, social polarisation, conflicts, and democratic fragility – universities are called upon not only to produce knowledge but to act as place-based **anchor institutions**: embedded, responsible, and committed to the long-term well-being of their communities. As such, universities should not exist as isolated ivory towers but transform into civic actors with the responsibility to help shape sustainable and just societies.

The graphic below illustrates the deeper philosophical tension within universities today: are universities institutions focused solely on the production (or co-production) of knowledge, "constructing" academic pillars as architecture of facts, or do universities embrace a broader mission that includes the ethical application of knowledge in service of society, thus "constructing" academic pillars as architecture of concern? This aligns with Lasker et al. (2001), who argue that university-community partnerships are not just collaborative mechanisms, but moral and strategic necessities in addressing complex social problems, where both academic and non-academic perspectives and expertise are necessary. It challenges us to reflect on the values underpinning our institutional choices. Today, we must ask: what kind of university do our societies need? A place where knowledge is merely produced and ranked, or a socially responsible institution that leverages its expertise for the common good?

Visual 1-1 Architecture of Facts vs. Architecture of Concern



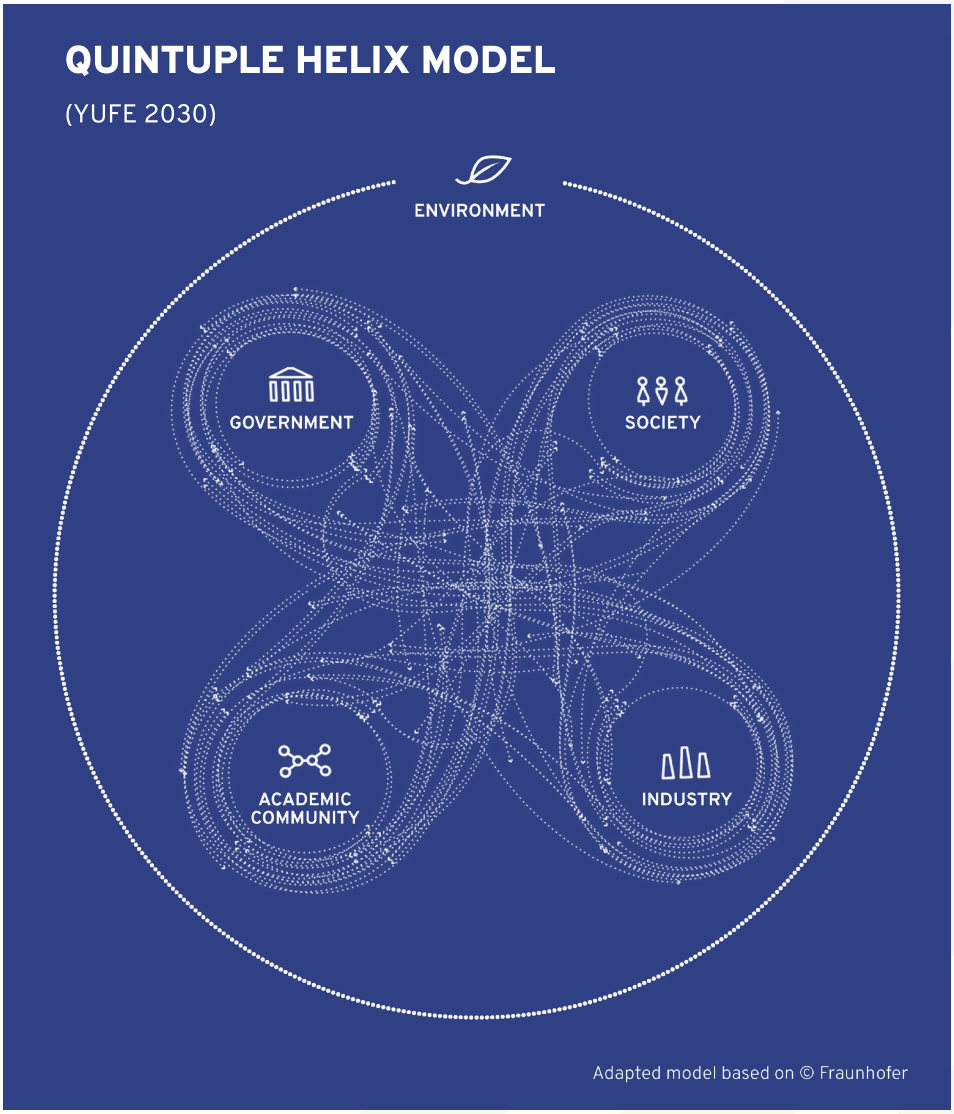
Source: authors (adopted, based on Jesper Magnusson, 2013)

University social responsibility is central to this transformative vision. As defined by Simon Fraser University's Community Engagement Initiative, it refers to the "ethical obligation of universities to contribute positively to their communities through knowledge sharing, partnerships, inclusive practices, and leadership in addressing societal challenges" (SFU, n.d.). This responsibility extends beyond mere outreach to reimagine the university's social contract as a reciprocal, long-term commitment to the public good. The move toward community engagement is in part driven by the recognition that inclusion of diverse and both academic and non-academic perspectives in multidisciplinary teams is es-

sential to addressing complex societal problems (Lasker, Weiss & Miller, 2001). As many declarations and policy papers affirm, universities of today must establish civic-minded learning communities and develop transnational, inclusive partnerships that nurture social cohesion, critical thinking, and local/regional innovation.

The UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century (1998) underscored this imperative, urging higher education institutions to renew their societal contract and act in close partnership with communities, promoting, among others, peace, access, equity, and development. This call has been reinforced by frameworks like the Talloires Declaration, TEFCE Framework, Sustainable Development Goals, and the Quintuple Helix model of innovation, all of which demand a redefinition of the university's role in society. The Quintuple Helix Model, as highlighted in the YUFE Community Engagement Declaration 2025-2030, positions universities within a broader ecosystem of collaboration with government, industry, civil society, and the environment. It provides a robust conceptual framework for understanding UCE as a dynamic contributor to regional innovation and sustainability. As universities seek to embed engagement across missions, their role in shaping and co-creating resilient regional eco-systems becomes both strategic and ethical.

Visual 1-2 Quintuple Helix Model - YUFE Community Engagement Declaration 2025-2030



Source: YUFE Community Engagement Declaration 2025-2030

1.1. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Community engagement has the potential to be controversial precisely because it appears to be at once more specific, prescriptive, and immediate than traditional calls for universities to practice a generic 'civic responsibility' (Sunderland et.al, 2003). Community engagement is a term that is currently both in flux and in fashion. Our initial literature and policy review has revealed numerous claims about what community engagement entails – some outdated and some new.

UCE encompasses a broad range of activities through which universities collaborate with societal partners to co-produce knowledge, foster social innovation, and respond to public needs. The concept itself is fluid and context-specific, yet several widely cited definitions help frame its essential dimensions.

The **Carnegie Foundation** defines community engagement as "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities [...] for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity."

According to **Simon Fraser University** (SFU, n.d.), community engagement involves building respectful, reciprocal relationships between universities and communities that lead to collective action for social change.

The Australian Consortium on Higher Education (2004) views community engagement as a dynamic social practice embedded in a shared moral medium of responsibility and shaped by the give-and-take of human relationships. This view recognises that engagement is not merely transactional but constitutive of identity, belonging, and shared ethical frameworks.

Boyer (1996) famously argued for the scholarship of engagement, urging universities to move beyond the ivory tower and re-integrate civic purpose into teaching, research, and service.

Hall and Tandon (2017) further describe engagement as the democratisation of knowledge, rooted in epistemic justice and co-creation, while **Watson** (2007) emphasises institutional transformation toward civic-mindedness and global responsibility.

From the **TEFCE** perspective[1], engagement is not a static achievement but an ongoing institutional commitment that resists metrics and performance-based models. Instead, it privileges trust, co-creation, and social responsiveness over quantifiable outputs. Community engagement is defined as a process whereby universities engage with community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial, even if the benefits are not equally shared.

These conceptualisations converge around key themes: **mutuality, reciprocity, co-creation, social relevance, and public accountability**. Together, they affirm that UCE is not an optional supplement to the academic mission, but an essential foundation of universities as democratic institutions.

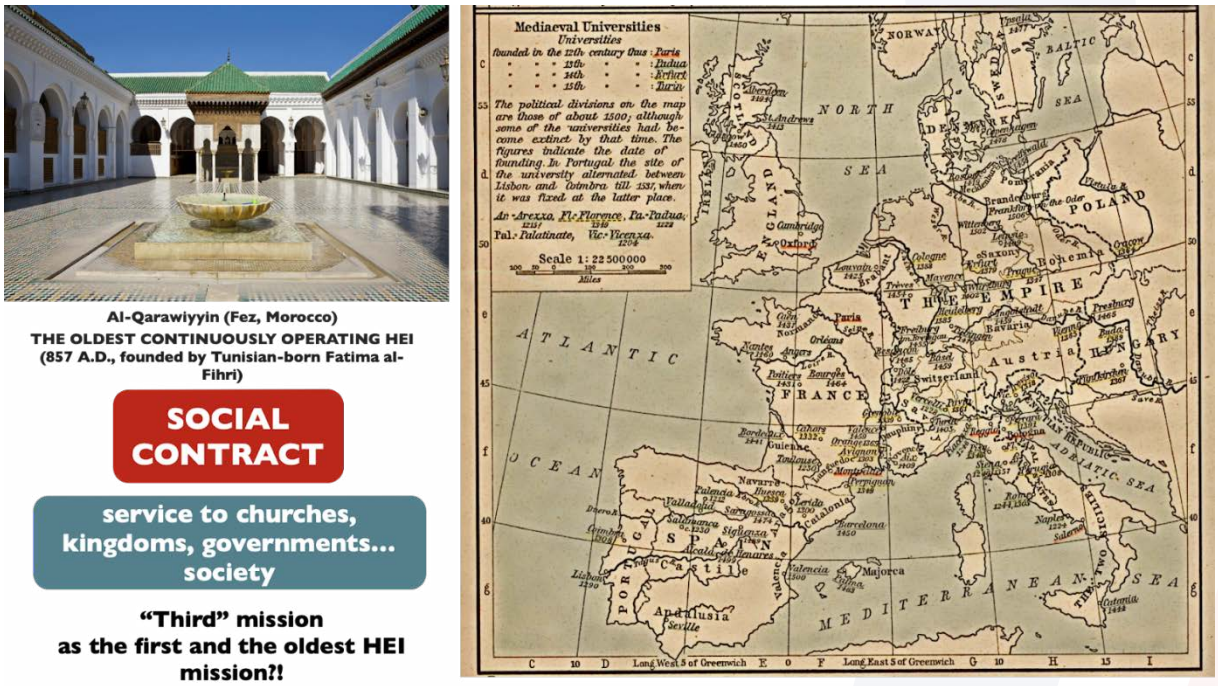
[1] TEFCE Toolbox is a comprehensive institutional self-reflection framework to help universities map and improve their community engagement. The full TEFCE Toolbox package can be freely downloaded as it is an open access resource under Creative Commons license CC BY 4.0. For more information visit https://community-engagement.eu/toolbox/

1.2. KEY ARGUMENTS FOR UNIVERSITY–COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

To shift engagement from the margins to the core of academic life, four key arguments are essential:

Historicity Argument: UCE is not an innovation but a return to foundational university ideals. Historically, universities have played a civic role in shaping (democratic) societies. Engagement restores this broader public mission.

Visual 1-3 Reflection on the UCE historicity argument



Societal Argument: UCE enables universities to address pressing societal issues, such as inequality, climate change, and digital divides, through collaboration with local and global communities. It transforms the university into a platform for social responsiveness.

Policy Argument: From the UNESCO World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century: Vision and Action to the EU's Renewed Agenda for Higher Education and Horizon Europe, policy frameworks increasingly demand engagement. Funding, assessment, and legitimacy are now closely tied to a university's social responsibility and broader social impact.

Visual 1-4 Reflection on the UCE policy argument - Excerpts from various EU policy papers affirming the importance of UCE

Future-Oriented Argument (Students as Leaders): Engagement-rich educational environments prepare students to become socially responsible leaders of tomorrow. Universities have to cultivate the values, knowledge, and resilience necessary for their graduates to contribute meaningfully to a rapidly changing and uncertain world. Community-engaged teaching and learning, as well as community-engaged research, not only develop students' academic capacities but also foster empathy, solidarity, and civic agency.

1.3. PRINCIPLES OF MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Effective UCE is grounded in a set of interrelated principles:

Mutual Benefit: All parties must gain from the partnership, whether through knowledge, capacity-building, or innovation.

Reciprocity: Engagement must be dialogical, not extractive. Communities are co-educators and co-creators.

Cultural Humility and Inclusion: Recognising power asymmetries, engagement must be ethically attuned, inclusive, and respectful of diverse knowledge.

Long-Term Commitment: Relationships should be sustained and enduring, rather than project-based or transactional.

Reflexivity: Engagement requires continuous critical reflection by academics and institutions.

These principles have been affirmed across various frameworks (e.g. TEFCE, Campus Compact, Carnegie) and in empirical studies (e.g., Weerts & Sandmann, 2010; Hoy & Johnson, 2013, Seal, Maguire & Gormally, 2025).

1.4. RELEVANCE ACROSS CONTEXTS

The conceptualisation of UCE must be sensitive to diverse national, regional, local and institutional contexts. For example, African perspectives often ground engagement in the ethos of Ubuntu and community solidarity, while EU frameworks emphasise responsible research and innovation (RRI) and the SDGs.

The TEFCE project highlights the importance of place-based, context-sensitive, and non-metric approaches to engagement assessment, cautioning against purely performance-driven models. Instead, it proposes trust-based and narrative-rich peer learning.

As for acknowledging diverse (higher education) institutional context, the Table 1-1 below provides examples of engagement activities over seven key dimensions: (I) Institutional engagement, (II) Public access to university facilities, (III) Public access to knowledge, (IV) Engaged teaching and learning, (V) Engaged research, (VI) Student engagement, and (VII) Academic staff engagement.

Table 1-1 Classification of UCE and related engagement practices

Dimension	Examples of engagement practices
1. Institutional engagement – policy & practice for partnership building	▪ Policies on equality, recruitment, procurement of goods and services, and environmental responsibility ▪ Improving recruitment and success rate of students from non-traditional backgrounds (e.g. peer-mentoring, financial assistance, access courses) ▪ Strategy for encouraging access by students with disabilities ▪ Promotion policies that reward social/community engagement ▪ Policies for recognition of prior learning and work-based learning ▪ University division or office for community engagement

Dimension	Examples of engagement practices
	▪ University division or office for innovation and technology transfer ▪ University-community networks for learning, dissemination and knowledge exchange ▪ Community members on the board of governance ▪ Website with community organisations'/institutions' web pages/links ▪ Helpdesk facility ▪ Public ceremonies, awards, competitions and events ▪ Organising and hosting events and festivals for the community ▪ Corporate social responsibility ▪ (Joint) start-ups and spin-offs ▪ Meeting regional skills needs and supporting SMEs ▪ Funds and prizes for entrepreneurial projects ▪ Business advisory services offering support for university-community collaborations ▪ Commercialisation of intellectual property ▪ Stakeholder dialogues, public consultations, meetings ▪ Joint venture activities between universities and community partners
2. Public access to university facilities	▪ Use of equipment, premises, and laboratories ▪ Access to university buildings and facilities (e.g. for conferences, ▪ meetings, events, accommodation, etc.) ▪ Public access to university libraries ▪ Cultural and athletic offerings ▪ Public access to sports facilities ▪ Shared facilities (e.g. museums, art galleries)
3. Public access to knowledge / dissemination of academic findings	▪ Providing information (news bulletins, press releases, ▪ commentaries, media announcements) ▪ Conferences, roundtables, congresses, symposia, seminars, ▪ exhibitions open/free for the public ▪ Science fairs, festivals, and cafes are open/free for the public ▪ Conferences with public concerns and public access ▪ Publicly funded knowledge exchange projects ▪ Science and technology parks ▪ Science shops ▪ Publicly-engaged commercialised activities ▪ Publicly accessible database of university expertise ▪ Public involvement in research

Dimension	Examples of engagement practices
4. Engaged teaching & learning	▪ Offering training as continuing and occupational education ▪ Professional development centres ▪ Learning centres ▪ Pre-professional programs ▪ Capacity-building courses ▪ Work-integrated learning ▪ Internships ▪ International experiences ▪ Inviting practitioners as teachers/lecturers ▪ Co-creation of a new curriculum with community representatives ▪ Extra or co-curricular community-based activities to enrich ▪ personal and professional development of students ▪ Teaching courses/seminars for/with hard-to-reach groups and ▪ those at risk/marginalised groups ▪ Teaching appropriate engagement practices ▪ Curricular and co-curricular practical education for citizenship ▪ Public lectures and seminars ▪ Non-credit courses ▪ Tutoring, training programmes
5. Engaged research	▪ Collaborative research projects ▪ Research & innovation collaboration ▪ Collaborative community-based research programmes ▪ responsive to community-identified need ▪ Public involvement in research ▪ Research projects involving co-creation ▪ Co-production of community-relevant research with ▪ community partners ▪ Research for/with hard-to-reach groups and those at risk/ ▪ marginalised groups ▪ Contracted research ▪ Participatory action research ▪ Research collaboration and technology transfer
6. Student engagement	▪ Student volunteering initiatives ▪ Student-led projects/initiatives (e.g. arts, environment) ▪ Social innovations by students ▪ Contributing to the civic life of the community ▪ Practice placements ▪ Student-community actions

Dimension	Examples of engagement practices
7. Academic staff engagement	▪ Developing community-engaged courses (e.g. service learning) ▪ Research helpdesk - investigation and advice ▪ Consultancies ▪ Consultancy for hard-to-reach groups and those at risk/ ▪ marginalised groups ▪ Pro bono services and volunteering outside working hours ▪ Free chairing in boards ▪ Sitting on community organisations'/institutions' boards ▪ Promoting public dialogue ▪ Media engagement - media interviews and articles ▪ Contributing to the civic life of the community ▪ Making an intellectual contribution as an expert ▪ Public lectures and seminars ▪ Technical assistance, expert testimony and legal advice ▪ Research reports, policy reports, technical reports ▪ Staff with social/community engagement as a specific ▪ part of their job ▪ Alumni services

Source: Ćulum, B. (2018).

UCE is essential to the future of higher education as a democratic, inclusive, and transformative force in society. When guided by core principles and legitimised by strong arguments, engagement becomes not an ancillary task, but a defining feature of the contemporary university.

The following section will explore how institutions can strategically and structurally support this integration through policies and planning frameworks.

2. INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES & STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR UNIVERSITY–COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

For university-community engagement (UCE) to move from the periphery to the core of academic life, institutions must strategically embed it across their governance, planning, and policy frameworks. Institutional transformation requires more than individual initiatives - it calls for a systemic commitment grounded in vision, leadership, and organisational culture. This section explores how universities can develop enabling environments that normalise and support UCE across all dimensions of their missions.

As Hall and Tandon (2017) argue, institutionalisation is essential for sustaining the impact of engagement beyond short-term projects. Without structural support, UCE risks remaining fragmented or tokenistic. Weerts and Sandmann (2010) similarly emphasise the importance of alignment between boundary-spanning roles and institutional policies to foster a culture of collaboration and responsiveness. Anchoring engagement in policy ensures that it is not dependent on individual champions alone but becomes embedded in the institution's ethos and everyday practices.

Goddard et al. (2016) advocate for the civic university as a model that embodies this integrated approach, where engagement is not a third mission but a "whole-university" orientation.

Strategic planning is also necessary to link engagement with broader university goals, including widening participation, responsible research and innovation (RRI), and regional development. As the YUFE Declaration (2025–2030) states, engagement must be a transversal principle embedded in governance, teaching, and research.

In short, institutional policies are not mere administrative instruments - they shape what is valued, who is rewarded, and how knowledge flows between the university and society, leaning on the reciprocity principle. Embedding UCE into these frameworks is both a strategic necessity and an ethical imperative for contemporary universities.

2.1. EMBEDDING UCE IN INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY

Embedding engagement into institutional strategy begins with aligning high-level vision and policy. Universities that excel in UCE frequently:

- Recognise engagement in their **mission statements and strategic plans**;
- Allocate **dedicated resources and staffing** (e.g. engagement offices, community liaison roles);
- Integrate engagement into **performance metrics, promotion, and reward systems**;
- Foster an **inclusive culture** that values reciprocal partnerships and mutual respect.

A strategic approach must also include clear definitions of community, engagement, and impact, tailored to institutional and regional contexts. As the Australian "Engaged University" guidebook suggests, institutions benefit from conducting internal audits of engagement activity and co-developing priorities with community stakeholders. (Beyond the Academy, 2022).

2.2. MODELS AND FRAMEWORKS FOR STRUCTURING ENGAGEMENT

Several models help institutions design coherent engagement policies:

- **The Civic University Model** (Goddard et al., 2016): prioritises place-based responsibility, integrated missions, and civic leadership.
- **The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification** offers a structured framework for institutional self-assessment and external recognition. (American Council on Education, n.d.)
- **The Anchoring Engagement Framework** (Pasque et al., 2005): emphasises collaborative governance, transparency, and shared ownership of engagement processes.
- **YUFE's Strategic Pillars and Declaration (2025–2030)** institutionalise co-creation, inclusivity, and regional innovation.
- **TEFCE framework**. (Farnell et al., 2020)

Each model highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder co-design and internal alignment among central leadership, academic departments, and professional services.

2.3. UCE POLICY ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

Key enablers of effective UCE policy include:

- **Leadership commitment** at the rectoral and senior management levels;
- **Integrated funding models** that incentivise engagement as core academic work;
- **Institution-wide communication** strategies that highlight the value of engagement.

Barriers often include:

- **Fragmentation** between central administration and academic units;
- Lack of **institutional clarity** on what constitutes engagement;
- Misalignment between engagement goals and **promotion/tenure criteria**.

TEFCE's mapping work revealed that sustainable engagement thrives when it is embedded in quality assurance mechanisms, rather than being treated as discretionary or extracurricular.

2.4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION

3. **Develop a shared institutional vision** of UCE in consultation with internal and external stakeholders.
4. **Integrate UCE into institutional planning** cycles, quality frameworks, and annual reporting.
5. **Create leadership roles** (e.g. Vice-Rector for Engagement) and cross-functional teams to oversee UCE policy.
6. **Invest in professional development** for staff and faculty to build engagement capacities.
7. **Reward and recognise engaged scholarship** through revised academic workload models and promotion policies.
8. **Ensure ongoing monitoring and evaluation** through participatory and reflective mechanisms.

2.5. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UNITS

The institutionalisation of community engagement within higher education necessitates a multifaceted approach, demanding the integration of engagement principles into the university's core functions (Bhagwan, 2020). Community engagement units have emerged as pivotal organisational structures within universities, tasked with fostering mutually beneficial partnerships between academic institutions and the communities they serve (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

These units play a crucial role in aligning university resources with community needs, enhancing the institution's social responsiveness and contributing to the community's well-being (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010). The units serve to amplify, implement, or legitimise community engagement work across the university, and they can function as a "front door" for community partners to make initial contact with the university (Beyond the Academy, 2022). They can be a bridge, connecting the university's academic expertise with the community's practical needs and aspirations (Gruber, 2017). These units facilitate collaborative projects, where faculty, students, and community members work together to address local challenges (Bhagwan, 2020). Community engagement units that promote the work of students, faculty, and staff simultaneously encourage community connection. For example, they may offer an annual award recognising outstanding scholarly engagement, rewarding individual efforts while also demonstrating the institution's commitment to such engagement. They can also employ skilled conveners who can identify opportunities for faculty engagement, navigate opportunities for research without pushing a single department or disciplinary agenda, and build trust with potential external partners (Beyond the Academy (2022).

The most effective community engagement units guide institutional outreach by addressing societal issues, strengthening civic responsibility and democratic values, and enhancing scholarship, research, creative activity, curriculum, and teaching and learning (Beyond the Academy, 2022).

Community engagement units can have different scopes and functions, depending on the higher education institution's goals and priorities. Various names, such as *community engagement centre, service-learning unit, office for community and outreach engagement*, and others, may refer to community engagement units. They are structured differently but often share similar functions.

2.5.1. MAIN FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UNITS AND EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT CURRICULAR INTEGRATION

Goal: Embed community engagement into academic teaching and learning.

Key activities:

- Support higher education teachers in developing community-engaged learning courses through individual consultations
- Offer pedagogical workshops on engaged teaching and learning.
- Facilitate reflection practices and tools for connecting community work to academic goals.
- Provide mini-grants or seed funding for curriculum innovation.

- Help align community engagement with accreditation standards and learning outcomes to ensure effective integration.
- Raise awareness about community-engaged learning among teachers, students, and administrative staff.

Example:

The University of Minnesota's Centre for Community-Engaged Learning offers training and consultations to help faculty co-design courses with community components. For community-engaged learning courses coordinated through the Centre for Community-Engaged Learning, they provide the following services and support:

- *Integrating community-engaged components to existing or new syllabi*
- *Assistance in identifying organisations and projects that connect to the course objectives*
- *Faculty development workshops and individual consultations*
- *In-depth knowledge of community-engaged learning pedagogy*
- *Student support throughout their community work. Designated community-engaged learning coordinators assist students in navigating the process and help them maintain their commitments.*
- *Organised community panels for community-engaged learning classes. This means we arrange for community organisations to visit every community-engaged learning class, where they can share their mission and opportunities with students.*
- *An online system for community-engaged learning students to manage position referrals, track hours, and communicate with community partners.*
- *Training to help students prepare for their community work and get as much out of it as possible.*
- *Conflict resolution, mediation when there are issues of concern, and liability forms*
- *Manage students' post-class evaluations and share them with the faculty and community partners involved.*

https://ccel.umn.edu/faculty/teaching-community-engaged-learning/faculty-development-comuntiy-engaged-learning

COMMUNITY ENGAGED RESEARCH & SCHOLARSHIP SUPPORT

Goal: Promote and support research that is co-produced with communities and addresses real-world issues.

Key Activities:

- Support community-based participatory research and action research.
- Provide training and workshops for scholars, community partners, and administrative staff in community-engaged research.
- Connect researchers with community partners.
- Offer grants, mentoring, or publishing support for engaged scholarship.
- Organise research showcases, conferences, or seminars in community-engaged research.

Example:

The Community-Engaged Research Fellows Program at Michigan State University offers a year-long,

cohort-based faculty and academic staff development opportunity for up to four early- and mid-career faculty members and four academic staff to strengthen their community-engaged research (CER) skills, develop CER projects in partnership with communities, and produce scholarly products. Fellows participate in monthly workshops with researchers and community partners who have deep experience in collaborative, community-engaged research. Workshops cover such topics as building and sustaining partnerships, practising CER in an inclusive and culturally responsive manner, collaborating with community partners throughout the research process, publishing CER, and achieving career success in CER. Fellows co-design a Community Engagement and Research (CER) project in partnership with community members or produce scholarly products related to CER, such as grant proposals, community-based participatory research pilot studies, or peer-reviewed research articles.

SUPPORT STUDENTS´ COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES AND DEVELOPMENT

Goal: Develop students' civic identities, leadership skills, and professional competencies.

Key Activities:

- Coordinate volunteer and internship programs with community organisations.
- Run civic engagement programs (e.g., voter education, social innovation labs).
- Offer student fellowships, leadership academies, or ambassador programs.
- Provide pre-departure and re-entry preparation for students in off-campus or international engagement.
- Support student-led community projects and grant competitions.
- Support students' initiatives, clubs and organisations.
- Recognition of student community engagement.

Example:

DukeEngage is a program of the Kenan Institute for Ethics. DukeEngage is an eight-week immersive summer program that places Duke students in global communities addressing critical social issues. Through DukeEngage, students work with communities to develop solutions and create positive change, guided by Duke faculty and local partnering organisations. Additionally, students participate in critical reflection throughout the summer — unpacking their experiences, learning about the context of their work, and considering why this work matters and what it means for them moving forward.

https://dukeengage.duke.edu/learn-more/

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT & MANAGEMENT

Goal: Build and maintain mutually beneficial partnerships with community stakeholders.

Key Activities:

- Identify and map potential community partners.
- Facilitate partnership agreements and memoranda of understanding (MOUs).
- Maintain a partnership database with contacts, projects, and evaluations.
- Ensure ethical, inclusive, and reciprocal collaboration.
- Organise networking events or community partners.

Example:

The Centre for Community Engagement and Impact at Virginia Commonwealth University runs the Community-Engaged Partnership database. The partnership database is an online resource that places university-community relationship data in the hands of faculty, staff and students. The purpose of the partnership database is to connect, coordinate, and collaborate more effectively with our community partners and to celebrate and promote community engagement. Faculty and staff can identify and connect with colleagues who have similar community-based interests and find potential community partners for their research, teaching and service. Students can discover community-based projects or experiential learning opportunities. Community Partners can collaborate with university experts. Administration, government relations and advancement staff can learn about various community engagement projects and stories that connect with the university's mission and positively impact community-identified needs.

https://communitypartnerships.vcu.edu/

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

Goal: Measure the impact of community engagement on all stakeholders.

Key Activities:

- Develop tools for tracking student learning, faculty participation, and community outcomes.
- Conduct qualitative and quantitative evaluations of programs to assess their effectiveness.
- Produce annual reports and impact dashboards.
- Support engaged research and dissemination.
- Facilitate participatory evaluation with community input.

Example:

University College Dublin publishes the UCD Community Engagement Report. This report highlights and showcases the wide variety of community engagement activities happening across UCD, ranging from community-engaged research and innovation to community-engaged teaching and learning, as well as volunteering.

https://www.ucd.ie/ucdinthecommunity/impactstories/ucdcommunityengagementreport/

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH

Goal: Facilitate dialogue and shared learning between the university and society.

Key Activities:

- Host public forums, dialogues, town halls, and exhibitions.
- Organise community-university weeks or service days.
- Publish newsletters, podcasts, or community stories.
- Maintain visibility of community engagement activities through media and digital platforms.
- Act as a liaison between the university and community media, local government, and other relevant entities.

Example:

Every year, Rhodes University Community Engagement hosts an awards evening to celebrate the accomplishments, dedication and love shown by everyone in the sector. The Annual Community Engagement Awards recognise a year of excellence in Makhanda. It provides an opportunity for us all to acknowledge and share, and reaffirm the pride we take in brightening the corners where we are. The Awards are an essential part of reaffirming the student leaders and volunteer managers of programmes, all of whom go above and beyond their call of duty throughout the year to ensure the best possible experience for everyone involved in the project. The Finalists for Awards in five categories, as well as University management, are invited to a small ceremony held towards the end of each year. The event brings together volunteers and student leaders from across our citizenship programmes, as well as early engaged researchers and the community partners who make it all possible.

https://www.ru.ac.za/communityengagement/about/communityengagementawards/#d.en.157990

CAPACITY BUILDING IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Goal: Equip various stakeholders with the knowledge and tools necessary for meaningful engagement.

Key Activities:

- Offer professional development workshops on topics like equity, ethical engagement, and power dynamics.
- Develop guides, toolkits, and templates to support effective project management.
- Provide onboarding on the topic for new faculty/staff.
- Support community partners and administrative staff with resources (e.g., project planning, funding literacy).
- Facilitate peer learning spaces (e.g., communities of practice).

Example:

In reimagining community engagement, the University of Pretoria has developed the Curricular Community Engagement Framework and Toolkit. This framework and toolkit guide staff, students, and community partners in advancing strategic objectives that align with the university's vision and mission.

https://www.up.ac.za/community-engagement

STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Goal: To ensure that community engagement is embedded in the strategy, policies, and culture of the university.

Key Activities:

- Participate in the development of the university's strategic plan or mission statement to ensure community engagement is represented as a core priority.
- Advocate for including community engagement benchmarks and KPIs in university-wide planning documents.
- Support the integration of community engagement into faculty development, student learning goals, and research strategy.

- Conduct a university-wide engagement audit or mapping to identify all engagement-related activities across faculties, departments, and research centres.
- Develop a Community Engagement Policy Framework
- Create an Advisory Committee or Working Group
- Embed Engagement in Faculty Promotion and Tenure
- Review current policies for recognition of service, teaching, and research to identify gaps in valuing community-engaged work.
- Align with National and International Recognition Frameworks

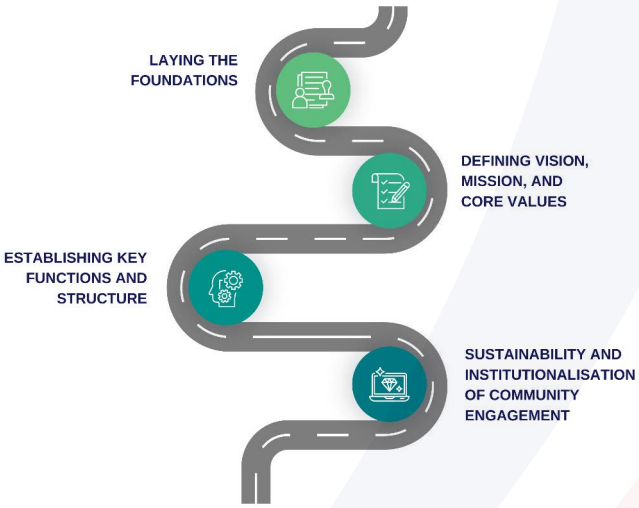
Example:

One of the primary areas of activity for the University Centre for Community Partnerships at Matej Bel University is to develop strategies that promote community engagement at the university and integrate it into strategic documents at both the university and unit levels.

https://servicelearningumb.sk/o-umb-engage/poslanie-a-ciele-centra

2.5.2. HOW TO ESTABLISH A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT UNIT - MAIN STEPS

The process of establishing a Community Engagement Unit (CEU) at a university can be broken down into several distinct steps. These provide a guide on how to proceed. Establishing a unit should be a participatory process; ideally, it is the result of participatory planning involving a diverse range of actors, including management representatives, teachers, students, and community partners. Only if the unit is the result of a participatory process will its strategy and specific activities be set to meet the needs of the particular university, community, and its stakeholders. At the same time, changing needs may necessitate adjustments to the direction of the community engagement unit's activities.



FIRST STEP: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

The first step is to lay the groundwork. In this step, you should map the activities taking place at the university, involve a diverse set of stakeholders in the mapping process, and secure institutional alignment of the unit.

For mapping and needs assessment, you can use various tools that will guide you through the process. For example:

- TEFCE TOOLBOX provides innovative and open-access tools to support universities in institutional self-reflection and action planning for community engagement. https://community-engagement.eu/toolbox/ (Farnell et al., 2020)
- Guidelines for the Institutionalisation of service-learning in European higher education (Ribeiro et al., 2021) https://www.eoslhe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Guidelines-for-SL-Institutionalization-Validated.pdf
- Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalisation of Service-Learning in Higher Education (Furco, 2002) https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1105&context=slcesl-gen

Institutional Alignment consists of aligning the CEU's mission with the university's strategic plan, securing endorsement from top leadership (rector/president, deans) and determining where the CEU will be housed (central office, provost, community affairs, etc.).

Example:

The University of South Africa (Unisa) Community Engagement and Outreach Policy is centred on the philosophy and vision of Unisa becoming the African university that shapes futures in the service of humanity. To that end, Unisa has operationalised Community Engagement as referring to initiatives and processes through which the expertise of the institution in the areas of teaching and research is applied to address issues relevant to its community, to the mutual benefit of the community and the institution.

https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Colleges/Human-Sciences/Community-engagement

Tips for advocating the CE unit with the decision-makers:

1. **Align the CE and CE unit with the university's mission and strategy.** Read the documents of your university and determine how community engagement contributes to institutional goals. You can connect community engagement with the goals associated with social responsibility, innovation, employability, visibility, the third mission, knowledge transfer, and many other topics.
2. **Highlight external recognition, accreditation, and contributions to quality.** Emphasise how engagement supports frameworks that are relevant in your national context (e.g., Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, UN Sustainable Development Goals, European university rankings, etc.).
3. **Show benefits and impact with evidence.** Present data or case studies on how community engagement enhances student learning outcomes, faculty research opportunities, and community partnerships. You can find out some of them in this manual.
4. **Show different opportunities for funding, international cooperation and partnerships.** Point out that structured engagement can attract grants, philanthropic support, global partners, and long-term partnerships with local/regional stakeholders.

SECOND STEP: DEFINING VISION, MISSION, AND CORE VALUES

Defining why the community engagement unit exists, what you want to achieve with this unit, and

what core values will guide your efforts are the next steps. It is essential to take your time with this because these are the answers to the hard questions that will arise in the future. The mission, vision, and values of the community engagement unit must align with those of the university within which it will operate.

Example:

Matej Bel University, in Slovakia, established the UMB Engage - University Centre for Community Partnerships with the mission of promoting mutually beneficial and sustainable partnerships between the university and communities to address social challenges and improve the quality of life in society.

The core values of UMB Engage are:

- *Reciprocity – the centre supports the building of relationships within its internal environment and with external partners based on mutually beneficial cooperation.*
- *Solidarity – the centre focuses on mutual support and cooperation among different individuals and groups in society to promote trust, cohesion, and social justice.*
- *Equality – the centre promotes equal rights, opportunities, and access to resources for all people.*
- *Respect and trust – the centre emphasises constructive dialogue and openness, respect for diverse opinions and experiences, mutual recognition of the contributions and values that partners bring to the collaboration, and recognition of the diversity of individuals, their views, and perspectives. It promotes understanding between different groups and individuals.*
- *Inclusion – the centre contributes to creating an environment where everyone feels accepted, valued, and has equal access to opportunities and resources, enabling them to participate fully in the life of their community and society.*
- *Flexibility and adaptability – the centre emphasises adaptable and flexible cooperation that reflects changing circumstances and societal needs. Both parties should be open to new ideas, willing to adjust joint strategies, and actively work with feedback.*

THIRD STEP: ESTABLISHING KEY FUNCTIONS AND STRUCTURE

Depending on the mission and values, the next step is to define the functions that the centre will perform and the organisational structure of the centre, i.e., the persons who will be assigned to perform the functions. The unit doesn't need to perform all the tasks listed in the previous section. Still, it is essential to identify those that are key to achieving the objectives and should be prioritised based on a mapping of the current situation and objectives. Over time, these functions may change or their prioritisation may change. Initially, it may be necessary to build awareness and capacity among academic staff regarding community engagement in teaching or research. Later, when there is sufficient awareness and capacity on the subject, attention can be shifted to monitoring and measuring the impact of activities and other functions. In some cases, the focus of the community engagement unit may be narrowed down to supporting a specific strategy or initiative.

The organisational structure of a community engagement unit may include various individuals with different job descriptions who are responsible for performing the given functions. In reality, at universities in Europe, separate positions are not often allocated for these roles, but various academic staff members may be assigned these tasks. A very effective model is to have specific individuals responsible for these activities within faculties or departments, and to establish a network of collaborators across the university who are in closer contact with students and staff at the faculties. Structure can be scaled according to size and available resources.

Example:

The University of Limerick's UL Engage office has a team of four people. The head of the UL Engage team, a community-engaged officer and two community-engaged facilitators. They also cooperate with community-engaged mentors at eight different faculties.

https://www.ul.ie/engage/meet-the-team

There is also a need to have representatives from students, academics, and the external community within the community engagement unit. They can, for example, serve on the advisory board of the unit. Their participation can offer valuable input and feedback on plans or recent actions. Establishing advisory boards with community representation is a key mechanism, providing a structured forum for ongoing dialogue, feedback, and co-creation. This ensures that the work of the engagement unit remains relevant and mutually beneficial.

FOURTH STEP: SUSTAINABILITY AND INSTITUTIONALISATION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

To build a lasting community engagement unit, securing long-term sustainability through targeted institutional mechanisms is critical. One foundational strategy is to **embed community engagement into faculty promotion and tenure criteria**, ensuring that engaged teaching, research, and service are recognised and rewarded as integral to academic excellence. This formal acknowledgement helps align institutional values with engagement practices, encouraging broader academic participation. Despite various methodologies for fostering community engagement in higher education institutions, many faculty members are hesitant to participate because it often does not align with institutional standards for promotion and tenure, and there is a lack of recognition or rewards for such involvement (Nuuyoma & Makhene, 2020). To encourage faculty participation, institutions need to provide incentives and support, such as incorporating community engagement into faculty evaluation criteria and recognising it as scholarly academic work (Bringle et al., 2007).

In addition, the university can offer **internal grants and fellowships** to support the development of community-engaged projects, capacity building, and the establishment of long-term partnerships. By providing these resources, the university signals a serious commitment and helps drive innovation in engagement practices.

To **monitor progress and guide strategic decision-making**, the university should also develop engagement metrics and dashboards. These tools enhance the visibility of engagement efforts across the university, promote accountability, and support continuous improvement.

Finally, to **reinforce engagement as a core dimension of academic quality**, it is essential to integrate engagement into quality assurance and accreditation processes. This legitimises engagement work and embeds it into the institution's long-term development plans. Engaging with national and international networks further strengthens the unit by fostering peer learning, collaboration, and alignment with global standards and innovations in community engagement. Several networks are supporting the idea of community engagement in higher education, for example:

- Talloires Network of Engaged Universities: https://talloiresnetwork.tufts.edu/
- European Association on Service-learning in Higher Education: https://www.easlhe.eu/about-us/
- South African Higher Education Community Engagement Forum (SAHECEF)
- Universitate program: https://www.uniservitate.org/

Securing funding for the community engagement unit is also a crucial issue; it can only function effectively if the financing is secure. This investment demonstrates a university's long-term commitment to community engagement, which is vital for building and maintaining trust with community partners. In summary, community engagement units are more than just administrative entities; they are the linchpin for advancing meaningful, equitable, and sustainable partnerships between universities and their communities.

By implementing these mechanisms, universities can create the structural support needed for the community engagement unit to thrive over time and remain responsive to both academic and societal needs. It is essential to consider these factors when establishing a community engagement unit (Bhagwan, 2020).

Strategic planning and institutional policies are essential levers for embedding university–community engagement as a central pillar of academic life. By adopting inclusive, reflective, and context-sensitive frameworks, universities can move beyond rhetorical support and realise UCE as a structural and cultural norm.

The following section will examine how community engagement can be meaningfully integrated into core academic pillars—teaching and learning, institutional research agendas, and research practices — and how to develop meaningful and sustainable partnerships with community partners.

3. UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION & MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS DEVELOPMENT

If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.
— African Proverb

In an era marked by complex societal challenges and shifting public expectations, universities are increasingly called upon to play a more direct and engaged role in their communities. University–community partnerships have emerged as a key strategy in this transformation, serving not only to bridge theory and practice but also to democratise knowledge production, foster mutual learning, and support sustainable social change (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Hillier, 2013).

As these collaborations emerge across global health, urban planning, education, and innovation ecosystems (Larkan et al., 2016; Davey, 2011), their diversity highlights a unifying call: that partnerships must be intentionally designed, ethically grounded, and structurally supported (Curwood et al., 2011; Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Importantly, when guided by principles of social justice, these relationships move beyond knowledge transfer to become vehicles for equity, empowerment, and shared societal impact (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005).

Community partnerships also provide a space for universities to reflect critically on their own institutional cultures, power structures, and responsibilities. They invite scholars and students to learn from lived experience, to engage with uncertainty and complexity, and to foster civic agency. These partnerships can support community capacity-building, enhance the relevance of research, strengthen public trust in academia, and contribute to policy development and innovation (Curwood et al., 2011; Drahota et al., 2016).

So, why do university–community partnerships matter? Because they are not only mechanisms for engagement, they are transformative practices that reimagine the purpose, relevance, and impact of higher education in the 21st century. Moreover, with shifting public expectations, universities are increasingly called upon to play a more direct and engaged role in their communities. No longer isolated ivory towers, higher education institutions are evolving into civic actors, capable of co-producing knowledge and co-creating solutions alongside communities. University–community partnerships represent one of the most visible and impactful expressions of this shift. These partnerships aim not only to bridge theory and practice but also to democratize knowledge production, foster mutual learning, and generate sustainable social change (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Hillier, 2013). As demands for social relevance, accountability, and public value grow, meaningful partnerships between universities and communities have become both a strategic imperative and a moral responsibility.

This chapter explores the critical success factors that underpin these collaborations. It deliberately does not focus on the specificities of various stakeholder types and their profiles. Instead, it emphasises the shared principles, frameworks, and processes that support the development of equitable, sustainable, and impactful partnerships.

3.1. DEFINING UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

University–community partnerships (UCPs) have been conceptualised in diverse ways by scholars across disciplines, reflecting a wide range of motivations, structures, and goals. At their core, UCPs

refer to intentional, collaborative relationships between higher education institutions and community stakeholders that aim to address shared concerns and foster mutual benefit. However, the language, emphasis, and depth of these definitions vary.

Curwood et al. (2011) define UCPs as collaborations between community organisations and institutions of higher education aimed at achieving a specific social change goal through community-engaged scholarship, ensuring mutual benefit for both the community organisation and the university. This definition underscores both purpose (social change) and the importance of reciprocity.

Jassawalla and Sashittal (1998) offer a more process-oriented lens, viewing partnerships as the coming together of diverse interests and people to achieve a common purpose via interactions, information sharing, and coordination activities. Their definition stresses coordination and shared intention.

In the field of health equity research, Drahota et al. (2016) define community–academic partnerships as those characterised by equitable control, a cause primarily relevant to the community, and specific aims to achieve shared goals involving both community representatives and academic researchers. This framing centres community relevance and power-sharing.

Similarly, Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2005) emphasise principles such as co-learning, shared power, and the production of actionable knowledge rooted in social justice and the promotion of community development.

Buys and Bursnall (2007) argue that partnerships should not be viewed as peripheral or project-based, but as central mechanisms of institutional engagement. They contend that UCPs must be embedded in academic cultures and supported through explicit policy, funding, and recognition.

Finally, Strier (2013) introduces a critical perspective by describing partnerships as "fields of paradox," shaped by ongoing tensions between academic norms and community priorities. He emphasises that partnerships are relational spaces that require the constant negotiation of values, knowledge systems, and power dynamics.

These varied definitions reveal the multidimensional nature of university–community partnerships. Whether framed as instruments of social change, spaces of co-production, or platforms for institutional transformation, they share a commitment to collaboration, mutual learning, and contextual responsiveness. Understanding this definitional diversity helps set realistic expectations and encourages a flexible, inclusive approach to partnership development.

University-community partnerships can take many forms, ranging from *short-term* service projects to *long-term* research collaborations and institutionalised networks (Hart & Wolff, 2006; Medved & Ursec, 2021). It is essential to revisit Strier's critical perspectives (2013) and not overlook the fact that university–community partnerships are often situated in "fields of paradox," where differing values, institutional cultures, and power dynamics shape collaboration. These partnerships can therefore range from *transactional*, characterised by limited and goal-specific interactions, to *transformational*, where both partners experience fundamental shifts in knowledge, identity, and capacity. What distinguishes meaningful partnerships is not their duration or format, but their commitment to shared purpose, mutual benefit, and co-creation.

3.2. FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES FOR MEANINGFUL COLLABORATION

Successful university–community collaborations are grounded in a set of core principles that transcend disciplinary and institutional boundaries. These principles are not prescriptive formulas, but rather relational and ethical orientations that guide partners in how they work together, learn from one

another, and commit to shared transformation. Drawing from a growing body of scholarly literature and practice-based insights, the following principles represent the backbone of meaningful university–community partnerships.

Mutual Respect and Knowledge Pluralism: Recognising that both academic and community partners bring valuable knowledge, lived experience, and expertise to the table is fundamental. Medved and Urșec (2021) highlight the importance of validating non-academic forms of knowledge as legitimate contributions to research and problem-solving. Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2005) emphasise that valuing local expertise helps dismantle hierarchies and promotes equitable co-production of knowledge.

Trust and Relational Accountability: Trust is not a given but must be continuously nurtured through transparency, consistency, and responsiveness (Hart & Wolff, 2006). Long-term engagement, reliability, and openness to feedback are crucial for building enduring relationships. Curwood et al. (2011) note that trust also involves showing up consistently and following through on commitments - even when challenges arise.

Equity and Shared Power: Recognising and addressing power imbalances is crucial to preventing the perpetuation of existing inequities. The University of Toronto (2014) emphasises that shared governance and decision-making are hallmarks of equitable collaboration. This includes equitable access to funding, authorship, and leadership opportunities, as well as creating spaces where marginalised voices are prioritised and respected.

Commitment to Co-Creation: Partnerships flourish when both sides are involved from the beginning - defining the problem, co-designing activities, interpreting findings, and disseminating outcomes (Vieira et al., 2021). Buys and Bursnall (2007) suggest that co-creation not only yields stronger outcomes but also fosters a sense of shared ownership and a long-term commitment to impact.

Sustainability and Long-Term Engagement: Meaningful partnerships are not one-off engagements but long-term relationships built on continuity and collective growth. Pasque et al. (2005) and Larkan et al. (2016) argue that sustainability should be considered from the outset, including discussions around exit strategies, succession planning, and shared capacity-building over time.

Cultural Humility and Reflexivity: Effective partnerships require an openness to cultural difference, as well as a willingness to reflect critically on one's own assumptions and institutional privileges. Suarez-Balcazar et al. (2005) and Strier (2013) both emphasise the importance of cultural humility as a pathway to equitable engagement, particularly in cross-sectoral and cross-cultural contexts.

Transparency and Open Communication: Open, regular communication fosters mutual understanding and reduces the potential for conflict or misalignment. This includes co-developing communication protocols, feedback loops, and clear expectations around decision-making and conflict resolution (Drahota et al., 2016).

Together, these principles provide a moral and strategic compass for developing partnerships that are not only effective but also just and transformative. They invite practitioners to build relationships based not on efficiency or convenience, but on trust, care, and collective responsibility for equitable change.

3.3. CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS IN UNIVERSITY–COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

While foundational principles offer the moral compass for partnership development, translating them into effective collaboration requires attention to a set of interrelated success factors. These factors,

drawn from empirical research and practice-based frameworks, highlight the operational, relational, and institutional elements that underpin sustainable and transformative university-community partnerships.

Shared Vision and Values: One of the clearest predictors of partnership success is the presence of a shared vision. Partnerships grounded in co-defined goals and mutual values are more likely to endure and adapt (Hart & Wolff, 2006; Drahota et al., 2016). This alignment ensures that both academic and community partners understand the rationale behind their collaboration and the specific outcomes they aim to achieve.

Inclusive Leadership and Governance: Effective leadership in university-community partnerships is collective, inclusive, and often distributed across multiple stakeholders. It requires leaders who can navigate institutional complexity while centring the voices of (historically) marginalised communities. Shared governance structures, such as joint steering committees or advisory boards, create mechanisms for inclusive decision-making and accountability.

Clear Communication and Transparency: Sustained communication, grounded in openness and consistency, fosters trust and shared understanding (Vieira et al., 2021). Establishing clear expectations, timelines, and feedback loops early in the collaboration can help prevent misunderstandings and reduce the risk of disengagement.

Flexibility and Responsiveness: Partnerships must be adaptive to the evolving needs, constraints, and capacities of both university and community actors. Narifarijo et al. (2023) stress that rigidity in roles or timelines can inhibit responsiveness and alienate partners. Flexibility allows for iteration, realignment, and renegotiation—especially when external conditions change.

Capacity Building and Reciprocity: Successful collaborations are not extractive but generative. They enhance the capacities of all participants, whether through skill-building, shared resources, or professional development (Hillier, 2013; Drahota et al., 2016). Reciprocity also entails recognising and addressing asymmetries in access to funding, infrastructure, or decision-making power.

Evaluation and Reflective Practice: Meaningful partnerships incorporate mechanisms for ongoing evaluation - not just of outcomes, but also of relationships, processes, and shared learning. Reflective practice enables continuous improvement and reinforces a culture of mutual accountability (Risien et al., 2023).

Together, these factors provide a practical foundation for building, maintaining, and evolving university-community partnerships. They emphasise that successful collaboration is neither accidental nor automatic - it is cultivated through intentional practices, transparent systems, and a shared commitment to equity and (societal) impact.

3.4. NAVIGATING DIFFERENCES AND POWER DYNAMICS

While university-community partnerships are often built on ideals of equity, mutuality and co-creation, the reality of collaboration frequently involves negotiating deep-seated differences in institutional cultures, timelines, values, and resource availability. Acknowledging and actively navigating these differences is not a sign of weakness but a hallmark of strong, ethical partnerships.

Understanding Asymmetries: Universities and communities operate within distinct systems that influence how they define success, use language, allocate resources, and approach time. For example, academic incentives prioritise publication and grant acquisition, while community actors may prioritise practical, immediate outcomes and relationship continuity (Strier, 2013; Risien et al., 2023). These divergent logics can create friction unless surfaced and addressed early in the partnership.

Power and Privilege: Power asymmetries - rooted in access to knowledge, funding, credentials, and institutional authority - can shape who sets the agenda, whose knowledge is validated, and who benefits from the collaboration. Meaningful partnerships require a conscious effort to flatten hierarchies, redistribute authority, and amplify the voices of marginalised individuals (Vieira et al., 2021). Transparency in roles, compensation, authorship, and decision-making helps mitigate extractive dynamics.

Cultural Sensitivity, Social and Emotional Intelligence: Beyond structural factors, interpersonal and cultural dynamics also shape partnerships. Trust may be influenced by historical relationships with academic institutions, and emotions such as fear, frustration, or hope may emerge throughout the collaboration (Strier, 2013). Practising cultural humility, active listening, and emotional attunement helps maintain relational integrity and build resilience.

Constructive Tensions and Reflexivity: Differences are not inherently barriers - they can be sources of creativity, innovation, and growth if approached constructively. Tensions should not be ignored or suppressed but explored through reflective dialogue and co-learning (Drahota et al., 2016). Partners who can hold space for disagreement while maintaining shared purpose are more likely to weather challenges and deepen their collaboration.

Navigating differences requires not only individual commitment but institutional flexibility and cultural transformation. Universities that embed equity-oriented engagement values into their structures are better equipped to support long-term, trust-based relationships with diverse communities.

3.5. FRAMEWORKS AND MODELS TO SUPPORT PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

To design, implement, and sustain effective university - community partnerships, it is essential to draw on structured models and conceptual frameworks that provide practical guidance and foster critical reflection. These models help translate principles into action, support shared understanding among partners, and provide roadmaps for navigating complex relational and institutional dynamics.

THE COLLABORATION FRAMEWORK - MATTESSICH ET AL. (1992, 2001, 2016)

This widely cited and used framework identifies twenty (20) success factors for interorganizational collaboration, grouped into six thematic domains:

1. *Environment* - history of collaboration, legitimacy in community, favourable political and social climate
2. *Membership characteristics* - mutual respect, cross-section of members, interest alignment, compromise, shared stake
3. *Process and structure* - multiple layers of participation, flexibility, clear roles and guidelines, adaptability, open communication
4. *Communication* - frequent, open communication; established informal relationships
5. *Purpose* - concrete goals, shared vision, unique purpose
6. *Resources* - Sufficient funding, staffing, and leadership

This model remains foundational across sectors for both partnership design and evaluation.

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH (CBPR) PARTNERSHIP – BRUSH ET AL. (2020)

Brush and colleagues build on the framework developed by Mattessich and collaborators, integrating elements specifically tailored to the dynamics of community–academic partnerships. Their additions include:

1. explicit recognition and navigation of power imbalances
2. honouring cultural and epistemological differences
3. understanding the structural and institutional constraints facing partners, and
4. recognising outcomes generated by the partnership itself as meaningful success indicators

These enhancements reinforce the relational and justice-based ethos of engaged scholarship.

COLLABORATION SUCCESS MEASUREMENT MODEL – CZAJKOWSKI (2006)

Czajkowski offers a three-stage model that examines collaboration through the lenses of Precondition, Process, and Outcomes. Each stage is accompanied by core success themes, such as trust-building, stakeholder alignment, adaptive learning, and tangible results, that can be used both for designing and evaluating cross-sectoral partnerships. This model offers a practical roadmap for assessing the health of collaborative efforts, with relevance for both new and established university–community partnerships.

THE DYNAMIC FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING PARTNERSHIPS - RISIEN ET AL. (2023)

This framework presents partnerships as dynamic, non-linear, and evolving processes. It introduces the idea of "partnership ecologies," where context, relational history, institutional culture, and external forces all interact to shape outcomes. The framework supports adaptive management, reflection, and iterative design as central to sustaining collaboration over time.

TRANSFORMATIONAL RELATIONSHIP EVALUATION SCALE (TRES) – CLAYTON ET AL. (2010); KNIFFIN ET AL. (2020)

Developed for assessing service-learning partnerships, the TRES framework expands upon the transactional–transformational partnership typology (Enos & Morton, 2003) and civic engagement scholarship (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). It contributes two unique dimensions to partnership evaluation:

1. how the partnership affects each participant's sense of self, and
2. the satisfaction of all partners with the relationship

These elements capture the reflective, emotional, and developmental aspects of collaboration, especially in pedagogical contexts.

THE EMERGING MODEL FOR MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY–UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS – UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO (2014)

This model outlines five key domains for developing meaningful partnerships: (I) governance, (II) communication, (III) shared priorities, (IV) resource alignment, and (V) knowledge co-creation. It encourages institutions to move beyond transactional engagements and toward deeply embedded,

reciprocal, and equity-focused collaborations. It also calls for institutional policies and structures that support long-term relationship-building.

THE GLOBAL HEALTH PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK – LARKAN ET AL. (2016)

Developed from an extensive review of international health research collaborations, this framework identifies seven core pillars that underpin effective global partnerships: (I) Focus, (II) Values, (III) Equity, (IV) Benefit, (V) Communication, (VI) Leadership, and (VII) Resolution. Each of these pillars is linked to both relational and operational factors that determine the overall health and success of the collaboration. Larkan and associates emphasise that sustained partnerships require attention to underlying attributes—such as shared language, respect for roles, and clarity of expectations—across the full partnership lifecycle.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION - NARIFARIJO ET AL. (2023)

Used particularly in multi-national and intercultural contexts, Appreciative Inquiry reframes partnership development around identifying strengths, shared values, and aspirations, rather than focusing on deficits. This approach promotes a positive orientation toward co-creation and shared leadership, particularly in contexts characterised by asymmetry or cultural differences.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE - HART & WOLFF (2006)

Hart and Wolff frame partnerships as ongoing communities of practice where learning is mutual, distributed, and grounded in shared inquiry. This model positions engagement as a space for collaborative knowledge-making, rather than unidirectional service provision, and values relationships as sites of learning and transformation in themselves.

THE COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP MODEL - CHRISLIP & LARSON (1994)

This model emphasises the importance of inclusive, facilitative leadership that brings together stakeholders across sectors to solve shared problems. It highlights the need for trust-building, shared purpose, and participatory decision-making as foundations of collective action. Collaborative leaders are not defined by their authority, but by their ability to convene, listen, and mobilise diverse voices.

Each of these frameworks offers different entry points and strategies for understanding and enhancing university–community partnerships. While no single model can fully capture the richness and variability of these collaborations, they do provide a robust foundation for designing intentional, equity-oriented, and context-sensitive engagement practices, while offering practical guidance and critical reflection. These models help translate principles into action, support shared understanding among partners, and provide roadmaps for navigating complex relational and institutional dynamics.

3.6. SUSTAINABILITY, INSTITUTIONALISATION AND LONG-TERM IMPACT

The long-term success of university - community partnerships depends not only on initial enthusiasm or project-level effectiveness, but on their capacity to become sustainable, institutionalised, and embedded within both university systems and community ecosystems. As Buys and Bursnall (2007) argue, partnerships must move beyond *ad hoc* arrangements and become fully recognised compo-

nents of the academic mission. Sustainability is thus both a relational and structural challenge - requiring strategic planning, resourcing, and cultural change within institutions.

Recent research (Larkan et al., 2016; Brush et al., 2020) also emphasises that sustainable partnerships must be designed with mutual benefit and long-term capacity-building in mind. This includes building community leadership pipelines, supporting shared infrastructure, and embedding feedback mechanisms that allow the collaboration to evolve. It also means fostering institutional flexibility and responsiveness to the shifting priorities and constraints experienced by community partners.

To support this vision, several key components have been identified as essential to the long-term viability of university–community collaborations:

Institutional Commitment and Policy Integration: For partnerships to thrive, they must be supported by robust institutional frameworks, effective policies, and adequate resources. This includes formal structures such as community engagement offices, staff dedicated to partnership coordination, and internal funding mechanisms. Embedding engagement into strategic plans, tenure and promotion criteria, and governance bodies reinforces its legitimacy and longevity (Hillier, 2013; Medved & Urșec, 2021).

Memoranda of Understanding and Shared Agreements: Clearly defined roles, expectations, and resource commitments contribute to the transparency and accountability needed for long-term collaboration. Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) or partnership charters provide a formal foundation for relationship-building and ensure alignment even amid institutional or personnel changes (Drahota et al., 2016).

Continuity Through Relational Infrastructure: Beyond formal agreements, the relational infrastructure - trust, networks, and shared histories - must be continually nurtured. Sustained communication, regular reflection, and opportunities for shared celebration help keep partnerships alive and responsive over time (Risien et al., 2023).

Shared Ownership of Impact and Outcomes: The long-term impact depends on shared responsibility for outcomes and the ongoing use of research or engagement findings. This means jointly developing follow-up strategies, involving community actors in dissemination, and pursuing joint funding or advocacy initiatives where relevant.

Scaling and Replication with Integrity: While successful partnerships can inspire replication, scaling efforts must be context-sensitive and tailored to the specific needs of each organisation. What works in one setting may not directly translate to another. Institutions must resist the urge to standardise and instead support adaptable models that respect local cultures, histories, and capacities (Strier, 2013).

In summary, sustainability is not just about duration - it is about depth, ownership, and the ability of partnerships to adapt, grow, and remain relevant over time and in the face of change. It reflects an ongoing commitment to shared responsibility, learning, and equity. By institutionalising engagement and fostering cultures of collaboration, universities and communities can co-create enduring pathways to social transformation - and ensure that these pathways remain vibrant, responsive, and rooted in the needs and strengths of all partners.

3.7. TOWARDS PARTNERSHIP AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

University - community partnerships are not merely mechanisms for outreach or public relations; they represent a profound reimagining of the university's role in society. When grounded in equity, mutuality, and shared purpose, these partnerships become engines of social innovation, civic renewal,

and collective problem-solving. They challenge the traditional hierarchies of knowledge production, disrupt siloed thinking, and foster a new ethos of co-creation in both research and teaching.

The success of such partnerships is not a product of perfect alignment or seamless collaboration. Instead, it arises from an intentional and ongoing commitment to navigating difference, building trust, and engaging in reflective practice. It requires institutional courage to embed engagement in core missions and governance structures, and it demands personal humility and openness from all participants.

As higher education institutions face growing pressure to demonstrate their social relevance and public value, community-engaged partnerships offer a compelling and actionable path forward. They are not quick fixes or standardised models, but dynamic, context-responsive relationships that must be cultivated with care, transparency, and ethical integrity.

Ultimately, the development of meaningful university - community partnerships is not just a strategy - it is a stance. It is a way of working, learning, and being in relationship with the world. It is a practice of shared responsibility for shaping more inclusive, resilient, and just societies.

4. INTEGRATING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INTO CURRICULA & RESEARCH

This chapter provides a framework for academics and practitioners seeking to embed community-engaged scholarship within their pedagogical and research endeavours. It delineates the symbiotic relationship between academic rigour and community needs, emphasising how collaborative partnerships can enrich learning outcomes and foster impactful research (Goggins & Hajdukiewicz, 2022).

4.1. INTEGRATING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN CURRICULA

Community engagement, the collaborative process of working with community groups, organisations, and individuals to address issues impacting their well-being, represents a potent pedagogical approach that can enrich educational curricula across diverse disciplines. Integrating community engagement into curricula necessitates a paradigm shift, requiring educators to move beyond traditional didactic methods and embrace experiential learning opportunities that foster reciprocal relationships between students and the communities they serve (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010). This integration provides a practical platform for students to apply theoretical knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, and cultivate a sense of civic responsibility (Prakash et al., 2020). Furthermore, the intentional integration of community engagement initiatives into educational frameworks necessitates a meticulous understanding of the cultural and communal contexts that significantly shape students' experiences, aiming to foster a more inclusive and actively involved learning environment (Faulkner, 2020). Incorporating community engagement necessitates re-evaluating conventional pedagogical approaches, underlining the importance of experiential learning as a means of fostering mutual partnerships between students and the communities they engage with (Long, 2013).

4.1.1. MODELS AND LEVELS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INTEGRATION INTO EDUCATION

Several terms describe the incorporation of community engagement into curricula, and they are sometimes used interchangeably; however, they differ in **scope, intentionality, and depth of community partnership**.

As a framework for incorporating community engagement into curriculum, the terms "community-based learning" and "community-engaged learning" are often used interchangeably in practice. In many contexts (especially in Europe), the terms overlap in practice, and institutions may choose one over the other based on tradition, policy, or strategic focus. Still, there are subtle distinctions in emphasis and theoretical orientation, especially in academic and civic engagement literature.

Community-based learning refers to various instructional methods and programs that educators use to connect what is being taught in schools to their surrounding communities, including local institutions, history, literature, cultural heritage, and natural environments. It is also motivated by the belief that all communities have intrinsic educational assets and resources that educators can use to enhance students' learning experiences. It emphasises the application of academic concepts in real-world settings, often using the community as a site for experiential learning. The primary goal is to enhance students' understanding of course content by exposing them to practical situations out-

side the classroom. Synonyms include *community-based education, place-based learning,* and *place-based education*. (https://www.edglossary.org/community-based-learning/). However, service, experiential, and work-based learning are similar yet slightly different concepts. Community-based learning is an educational strategy in which students **learn in the community**.

Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) goes further by emphasising **reciprocal partnerships** between universities and communities. It can be defined as a framework in which students and teachers **learn with the community** through collaboration and shared outcomes. It involves students, teachers, and community partners collaborating to address public issues in a way that benefits all stakeholders. CEL is guided by principles of civic responsibility, co-creation of knowledge, social change and critical reflection.

Table 4-1 Differences between community-based learning and community-engaged learning

Aspect	Community-Based Learning (CBL)	Community-Engaged Learning (CEL)
Emphasis	Learning *in* a community context—the community serves as the setting for applied learning.	Learning *with* the community—focus on mutual benefit, co-creation, and civic outcomes.
Main Driver	Experiential, contextual, or place-based learning connected to academic content.	Collaborative, civic-oriented pedagogy centred on reciprocity and social change.
Relationship with Community	Community is often a **learning context** or site for field experience.	Community is a **co-educator** or equal partner in the learning process.
Power Dynamics	Can be more unidirectional (e.g., university → community), though not necessarily so.	Aims for more **equitable partnerships** and shared power in defining goals and outcomes.
Language of Purpose	"Apply course concepts in real-world contexts."	"Advance public good and develop civic responsibility."

There are several approaches to incorporating **community engagement into curricula**, ranging from co-curricular activities to deeply embedded academic experiences. Co-curricular activities, such as volunteer projects, offer students opportunities to engage with communities beyond the classroom, fostering a sense of social responsibility and broadening their perspectives. However, the most transformative approach involves integrating community engagement directly into the curriculum, where students work collaboratively with community partners to address real-world problems (Rajandram & Tharumaraj, 2024). This approach requires careful planning and coordination, ensuring that the learning objectives align with the community's needs and priorities (Cherrington et al., 2018).

Examples of community-engaged approaches are presented in Table 2. At higher levels of curriculum integration, reflection and reciprocity increase. Power sharing with community partners becomes more significant, and institutional support and faculty development are crucial for sustained integration.

Table 4-2: Community-engaged initiatives based on the curricular integration

Level	Integration in Curriculum	Type of Community Engagement	Description	Level of reciprocity, reflection and institutional support needed
1. Informal / Co-Curricular	Outside the formal curriculum, no academic credits.	Volunteering, community service.	Student-initiated or supported by student units or by community-engagement units.	
2. Add-on / Extra Credit	Peripheral to the course	Optional community activities as part of the course or later awarded with credits.	Students can choose to participate in community work to earn extra points or for enrichment as part of the course.	
3. Partial Integration	Linked to course content but not core	Community-engaged assignments	Involves addressing community issues and collaborating with the community on assignments.	
4. Full Integration (academic service-learning and civic or community-based internships)	Core to course design and outcomes	Collaborative projects with community partners	Students engage in structured, reciprocal partnerships, learning and service are connected, and reflection is an integral part.	
5. Capstone / Community-Based Research	Advanced-level courses, research focus	Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), Capstone projects	Students and community partners co-create research or projects, which often culminate in public outputs.	
6. Curriculum-Wide Integration	Embedded across a program	Civic Curriculum, Strategic Partnership Models	Long-term integration into degree programs involves cross-disciplinary collaboration and sustained partnerships.	

The following section provides information about specific approaches presented in the continuum, including volunteering, service-learning, civic or community-engaged internships, and global, international, or cross-cultural community-engaged learning projects.

VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering can be defined as an individual or group activity "undertaken freely and by choice, for no financial gain, to benefit another person, group, or cause." It is typically carried out through organisations or informally within communities and plays a crucial role in civic life and social solidarity." (UNV, 2011). Volunteer activities are not directly linked to the university curriculum and are not intentionally designed to have specific learning outcomes. Usually, they do not have predefined learning goals, but that does not mean students are not learning while volunteering. Volunteering is a type of non-formal and informal learning. Based on the recommendations for the recognition of non-formal and informal education on the global (UNESCO, 2012) and European levels (Council of the European Union, 2012), different stakeholders should recognise learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning, particularly when relevant to higher education access, progression, or credit recognition.

Volunteering can be a significant form of experiential learning that contributes to students' personal, civic, and professional development. In line with the **Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012/C 398/01)**, higher education institutions are encouraged to recognise learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal activities — including volunteering — as part of the formal learning process. This recognition may take the form of **awarding ECTS credits**, provided that the learning outcomes achieved through volunteering are clearly documented, assessed, and aligned with the expected outcomes of the relevant study programme or course. Implementing such recognition practices enhances flexibility, supports lifelong learning, and strengthens the link between academic education and civic engagement.

Volunteering opportunities can be designed in university environments by university students or their representative bodies, like student units. They can also be coordinated by teachers or other university staff, specific community-engaged units, or volunteer centres at universities. Community-engagement units often offer students possibilities to volunteer in the community on particular projects. This distinguishes it from formal academic requirements, emphasising altruism and community benefit over explicit curricular integration.

Example:

Directive No. 11/2021 on the awarding of ECTS credits for extracurricular activities at Matej Bel University, Slovakia, can be considered an example of support for volunteer activities or recognition of the results of non-formal education through volunteer work. According to it, ECTS credits can be awarded to MBU students for extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities of UMB students can be carried out as part of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. These activities develop students' professional competences and transferable skills, but are not part of accredited study programmes; i.e., they are not regulated within the curricula of courses. These may include student internships, volunteer activities, artistic activities, active participation in scientific, professional, or artistic conferences, workshops, seminars, non-formal education programs, or other activities that have not yet been awarded ECTS credits within the study programmes of UMB or other domestic or international institutions.

SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning (SL) is a teaching and learning approach that combines planned learning and community service. It focuses on both an activity that benefits the community and the educational benefits it provides for the student. Service-learning enables students to earn credits for learning outcomes

through active community engagement and real-world solutions in practice. The process of learning is supported by reflection as a necessary part of experiential learning. Students participating in SL work to meet community needs by applying the knowledge and skills they have learned in the classroom (Álvarez et al., 2024; Meyers, 1999). Through guided reflection on academic readings and service, students link their service experience to broader systems-level thinking (Sabo et al., 2015). Integrating service-learning into curricula offers a powerful means of cultivating global citizenship and leadership in students, often incorporating cross-cultural engagement that enhances its impact (Santulli, 2018). SL is not about adding engagement to learning, but rather integrating engagement within the learning process itself.

Regardless of how many definitions of service learning exist in professional literature, we identify several key elements:

1. Service-learning is a planned and organised experience for students gained through service that responds to authentic community needs. Service-learning promotes a shift from the traditional assistance model (service to the community) to a horizontal model of solidarity (service with the community).
2. Service-learning is based on the active involvement of students in all phases of implementation, from planning to evaluation. Students should feel responsible for the project they are implementing and act as leaders, not just implementers or executors of service learning projects.
3. Service learning is intentionally integrated into the academic curriculum or research context. There is a clear connection between the services and the goals and content of the education.
4. Service learning provides a space that allows students to reflect on their experiences on an ongoing basis. Reflection in service learning is viewed as a process of learning from one's own experiences — building an understanding that fosters a thorough comprehension of the relationships and connections between experiences and service learning concepts.
5. Service learning focuses on developing students' civic responsibility. By applying this strategy in the educational process, we expect not only the development of professional competencies but also changes in the "civic characteristics" of students, which determine their involvement not only during but also after the implementation of service learning projects focused on education in service. (Albanesi, Culcasi, Zunszain, 2020).

As Furco and Norvell (2019) point out, service learning often needs to be clarified concerning other experiential learning strategies, such as internships or volunteer activities, and several authors offer different approaches to explaining these differences (see, for example, Brozmanová Gregorová et.al, 2014; Furco and Norvell, 2019; Tapia, 2007). What distinguishes service learning from other forms of service-based experiential learning activities is primarily its focus (service/learning), the primary target recipient (recipient/provider), the type of learning (disjointed/integrated), and the level of integration of service (high/low). Professional practice focuses on educating and developing the specific competencies necessary to perform a profession. Service learning combines service and education. The difference between service learning and professional practice lies mainly in reciprocity and a focus on developing civic engagement. Another factor that distinguishes service-learning from other forms of experiential learning is the emphasis on critical reflection. Service-learning differs from different types of community-oriented activities in its connection to the curriculum, its focus on enriching the learning process with a better understanding of the course content and a broader perception of the discipline, its promotion of civic responsibility, and its strengthening of communities (Fiske, 2001; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Rusu, Bencic, Hodor, 2014).

Several service-learning models are currently in practice. Service-learning can be incorporated into the curriculum of various academic subjects and study programs. It can be implemented within a uni-

versity course or combined with several classes to solve interdisciplinary projects. Moreover, it can be part of the compulsory or elective subjects and organised as a group or individual activity.

Service-learning students have the opportunity to engage with a diverse array of community organisations, offering a broad spectrum of services encompassing social services, sports and recreation, arts and culture, education and research, and environmental causes. The specific activities students undertake as part of their service component are determined by the course outcomes, the SL model employed, and the identified needs of the community partner or beneficiaries.

There are four types of services in service learning:

1. **Direct service** connects students and the community in field activities with direct interaction with recipients.

Example:

In a course such as Community-Based Social Pedagogy, students engage directly with children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds at a local low-threshold youth centre. As part of their weekly fieldwork, they design and facilitate interactive support activities focused on social skills development, educational support, and creative expression, such as community theatre. Through this direct interaction, students develop empathy, communication skills, and practical experience in inclusive education. Expected outputs include a reflective journal, a documented plan of activities with evaluation, and a final presentation analysing their learning process and the impact of their service.

2. **Indirect service** involves students in service without direct interaction with beneficiaries.

Example:

In the course Graphic Design for Social Impact, students collaborate with a local non-profit organisation focused on youth mental health. Without direct interaction with beneficiaries, they create a series of visual materials, including posters, infographics, and educational brochures, for an awareness campaign. The collaboration involves consultations with NGO staff to understand the target audience and message. Final outputs include a portfolio of design materials, process documentation, and client feedback, as well as a written reflection on how design can serve community goals.

3. **Advocacy activities** or advocacy services involve students in activities aimed at raising awareness, promoting action, and increasing knowledge on issues of public concern, etc.

Example:

The course Media and Civic Engagement invites students to develop advocacy campaigns that address pressing social or environmental issues. One project example involves creating a podcast series on climate justice and ecological migration, designed to raise awareness among university students and young adults. Students conduct research, interview experts and community members, and disseminate their work through university media channels and social networks. The project outputs include the recorded podcast episodes, a campaign dissemination plan, and an individual reflection on the effectiveness and ethical dimensions of advocacy communication.

4. **Research service** involves students in various research activities based on defined community needs.

Example:

In a course like Qualitative Research Methods in Communities, students partner with a municipal office to conduct action research focused on youth participation in local decision-making. Working in teams,

they conduct focus groups and interviews with young residents, analyse barriers to civic engagement, and formulate practical recommendations for the city council. The project culminates in a research report, a public presentation to stakeholders involving young people, and an academic reflection on the process, including ethical considerations and the role of participatory research in social change.

COMMUNITY-ENGAGED OR CIVIC INTERNSHIPS

Civic internships, also referred to as community-engaged internships/professional practice, represent another way in which community engagement can be integrated into the curriculum and how universities can prepare students for both professional and civic life. These models integrate career development with community engagement, creating experiences that benefit both student learning and the broader community. They provide students with opportunities to apply their knowledge to real-world problems, develop a sense of civic responsibility, and gain valuable experience in community settings. Civic internships address real community challenges through student contributions, deepen students' understanding of structural inequalities, encourage active citizenship and public problem-solving, and broaden students' perspectives beyond profit-driven professional goals. They respond to critiques of traditional internships as instrumental, hierarchical, or depoliticised, and align with the broader mission of universities to prepare students not just for jobs, but for life in democratic societies. (Brozmanová Gregorová, Heinzová, Uhláriková, 2024)

Civic internships, also referred to as community-engaged professional practice, are structured experiences in which students:

- Collaborate with communities or community-based organisations.
- Utilise their disciplinary and professional expertise.
- Address societal problems, civic duties, or social justice concerns.
- Adhere to the principles of reciprocity, reflection, and partnership.
- Receive academic credit and intentional supervision from faculty and/or the community.

Table 4-3 Classic Internships vs. Civic / Community-Engaged Internships

Dimension	Classic Internships	Civic / Community-Engaged Internships
Main Purpose	Career preparation, professional skill-building	Career preparation *plus* civic learning and community contribution
Host Organization	Typically, the private sector or large institutions	Often NGOs, the public sector, grassroots or community-based organisations
Student Role	Learner and contributor in an organisational role	Learner, contributor, and **partner** engaging with community needs
Academic Connection	May or may not be linked to coursework or academic learning	Explicitly connected to the course objectives and the civic mission of the university

Dimension	Classic Internships	Civic / Community-Engaged Internships
Civic Dimension	Rarely emphasized	Central to design: includes reflection on social issues, ethics, justice
Reflection	Minimal or focused on career skills	Structured critical reflection on societal impact, self, power, and learning
Assessment	Based on workplace performance, task completion	Includes community feedback, civic learning, and academic integration
Power Relations	Intern learns from/works for the organisation	Intern and community co-create solutions; **emphasis on reciprocity**

Civic internships share the same key elements as other high-quality internships, including:

1. Defined Learning Objectives: Focusing on specific skill development and broader civic learning.
2. Clear Roles and Responsibilities: Defined for the student, the university, and the community partner.
3. Supervision and Mentoring: Provided from both the workplace and the university.
4. Reciprocity: Establishing mutually beneficial partnerships with community organisations.
5. Structured Reflection: Encouraging learning and addressing civic issues, power dynamics, ethics, and community impact.
6. Critical Analysis: Promoting the analysis of social problems and structural inequalities.

This intentional organisation of internships ensures that they are high-impact activities, leading to specific learning outcomes, fostering mentoring relationships, and exposing students to diverse perspectives (Kopp, 2019).

Example:

In the Bachelor's degree program in Social Work at the Faculty of Education of the University of Matej Bel, community-engaged internships are integrated into three courses in the third year. During the winter semester, these courses include Participatory Approaches and Community Work and Social Prevention. In the summer semester, Supervised Professional Practice incorporates 120 hours of direct professional practice. As part of the Participatory Approaches and Community Work course, students map the needs of a specific organisation, establishing contact through the semester, following lectures and seminars focused on understanding empowerment, participation, and planning in community work. The outcome of this course, a report on the needs mapping conducted in cooperation with a community partner, is then evaluated. In parallel with the Participatory Approaches and Community Work course, students take Social Prevention, where they develop a preventive project based on the needs assessment conducted in the course. The project is prepared as a grant application, potentially receiving €200 for implementation. The project implementation plan is presented at a joint meeting. Subsequently, the project is implemented during their professional practice in the summer semester, which includes regular ongoing reflection and mandatory supervision. At the end of the semester, an evaluation is conducted, and students submit a report on their practical experience, along with a structured reflection and report on the implementation of the prevention project. The project results are then presented at a public presentation, inviting community partners, other students, and teachers.

Example of the project: ***Light to Family***

Four social work students participated in the Light to Family project. The project was implemented in cooperation with a community centre that works with an excluded Roma community. As part of their mapping, the students identified several needs. One of them was the lack of lighting in the common areas of apartment buildings. The second group of needs identified concerned children living in the community who lacked basic hygiene habits and the necessary skills for starting school. The students organised a fundraising campaign, which they used to purchase supplies needed to paint the common areas of the apartment buildings and to buy lighting. They collaborated with the community to enhance the premises. At the same time, they regularly organised low-threshold activities with children from the Roma community at the community centre. The activities were prepared in a playful yet educational format, tailored to the children's age. They worked with the children to develop their fine motor skills, such as tying shoelaces and practising proper hygiene. On various holidays, they created themed pictures and colouring pages with the children. They also organised a clothing drive for visitors to the community centre. Thanks to the project, the students and the community created a safer environment for residents by installing lights in all common areas of each apartment building. The students gave positive feedback, particularly on the knowledge and skills they gained while working with the Roma community and at the community centre, as well as their teamwork skills.

GLOBAL, INTERNATIONAL OR CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING PROJECTS

There is a wide range of structures and types of **international community-engaged learning projects and programs**, sometimes developed in connection with study abroad programs or independently, including credit-based and non-credit-based experiences. As stated by van Ooijen, Schöpfer, and Pellis (2025), international community-engaged learning (ICEL) encompasses a continuum of various shapes and forms. Projects can range from a one-time 10-week tutorial involving collaborative learning and a field trip to a course-based ICEL, a collaborative process between academia and communities that has evolved over more than 12 years. Furthermore, the size of an ICEL project can vary immensely. For instance, the number of students can vary from a small group of six to a cohort of more than one hundred students. Finally, the interdisciplinarity of ICEL is equally diverse, with projects spanning fields as varied as artificial intelligence and planetary health education. The various projects highlighted in the special issue of the Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement dedicated to ICEL demonstrate remarkable diversity. Yet, they also share standard components of ICEL: **a form of experiential education that encompasses collaborative efforts among students, educators, and community partners, addressing global challenges.**

International collaborations in community-engaged learning offer numerous benefits, including enhanced intercultural development through the cultivation of a profound respect for cultural diversity. These collaborations enable diverse stakeholders to participate in varied settings, providing a "glocal" perspective that facilitates an understanding of local and global dynamics within multilingual contexts. Furthermore, they encourage the exchange of knowledge and best practices, thereby promoting the collaborative design of innovative community-engaged learning pathways (Andrian, 2024). Daly et al. (2014) stated that study abroad components of educational programs are especially likely to benefit from the effect of community-engaged learning in further integrating the impact of local experiences on student impressions and cultural exposures. Moving from visiting and observation to direct involvement raises the bar on learning opportunities.

Example:

FLY is an international, interuniversity, and interdisciplinary summer service-learning and volunteering program. This program offers approximately 150 posts annually to students enrolled in one of the European partner universities involved. The FLY program provides a diverse range of service-learning

and volunteer projects annually, which vary in duration from one week to two months (depending on the host organisation) and take place during the summer period between June and August. The FLY program is not limited to providing specific opportunities for student involvement in various areas of social need. Still, it aims to integrate this participation consciously into the comprehensive training of participants, generating sensitivity, capacity for analysis, and future commitment, even explicitly linked to professional performance. It does this by emphasising three elements:

1. *Training and reflection: review of motivations and expectations, development of skills necessary for community-engaged learning and volunteering and reflection on the internal impact of the experience, on the causes of inequality and on the personal and social responsibility in it and in fighting against it.*
2. *Mentoring: This is for logistical purposes, but, above all, to encourage the reflective element described above in the field. Each project has a mentor who often travels to the field with the participants. Mentors undergo their own training process and are staff members of the partner universities.*
3. *Evaluation: Universities, volunteers, and community partners participate in the evaluation process. Evaluation aims to assess the effectiveness of collaboration with social organisations, fine-tune future collaborations, and measure the impact of the experience on participating volunteers.*

More information about the FLY program and evaluation from the first three years of implementation can be found in the paper: Brozmanová Gregorová, A., Culcasi, I., Ávila Olías, M., & Arbaiza Valero, A. (2025). International service-learning, volunteering networks, and social justice through the European Interuniversity FLY Program. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29(2)*, 127-146. https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/4020/3552

4.1.2. HOW TO INCORPORATE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Different sources recognise different stages in the implementation of community engagement in education. The recognised steps are mostly preparation, planning, needs assessment, action, evaluation, and celebration. Reflection is sometimes recognised as a separate step. However, because it should be viewed more as a continuous process, we recommend considering reflection as a constant, ongoing process with regular promotion and documentation.

The next part summarises each step based on the different sources, mostly from service-learning literature. It does not matter if you decide to focus more on co-curricular activities; you can start with them and later explore possibilities for deeper curricular integration and a higher level of integration, as expressed in Table 4-2.

PREPARATION FOR COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING

This stage focuses on preparing and designing the community-engaged learning experience. It helps you determine if you and your university are ready to implement community-engaged learning, and if not, what steps you need to take to be prepared. In some manuals, this step is also referred to as the motivation step.

Before implementing community-engaged learning in any form, it is essential to be aware of several key factors that may influence your intentions and what you should consider. If you are new to community-engaged learning, preparing yourself, your colleagues, university/faculty department leaders, and students is essential for implementing this approach. All of these groups can positively or nega-

tively influence the implementation of your intentions. Therefore, if you want to achieve and accept change, it is ideal to prepare people for it and involve them in the process, so they are part of it.

At the same time, you must consider your plan for implementing community-engaged learning in this step. What form of community-engaged learning will you choose? Plan your learning objectives and think through your timeline.

REFLECT ON YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES AND MOTIVATIONS

Suppose you want to engage in the development of community-engaged learning. In that case, you should honestly answer the question of what your attitude is towards community activities and why you have decided to pursue this topic. Although there is no definitive list of "correct" motivations, the more accurately a teacher can answer this question, the more transparent and motivating their actions will be. In community-engaged learning, you interact with various stakeholders; it is not just an exercise, but rather a process of building meaningful and sustainable relationships.

SECURE SUPPORT FROM MANAGEMENT AND OTHER COLLEAGUES

A fundamental prerequisite for the successful implementation of any community-engaged learning activity is an atmosphere that encourages student participation in community activities. We understand this as creating an environment that stimulates interest in what is happening in the community and in helping others, and in which student activities in the community are supported and valued. This atmosphere is present "automatically" in some universities/faculties/departments. In contrast, in others, it needs to be worked on and can be one of the goals of introducing community engagement in that environment. Such an atmosphere is shaped mainly by the attitude of university/faculty/department management towards community activities, as well as the attitudes of other teachers and staff. When presenting the idea of introducing community-engaged learning to university/faculty/department management, it is essential to focus on explaining the benefits to the school.

Here are some examples of benefits that you can use:

- **Strengthening Community Engagement and Building Partnerships.** Community-engaged learning fosters sustainable and reciprocal partnerships among universities, community organisations, local governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders. These partnerships create spaces for collaborative problem-solving and mutual learning, grounded in real-world chal-

lenges (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Through such cooperation, the university becomes an active agent of social change and local development.

- **Increasing Institutional Visibility and Reputation.** Universities that actively contribute to the public good through student-community collaboration are more visible and valued in their regions. A university that is recognised as a hub for civic engagement, innovation, and social responsibility gains legitimacy and strengthens trust among citizens, local institutions, and potential partners (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). This enhanced reputation can also support recruitment efforts and public funding opportunities.
- **Developing Student Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies.** Community-engaged learning contributes meaningfully to student development in multiple dimensions that universities already prioritise:
    - **Civic competencies and social responsibility:** When students participate in environmental clean-up initiatives or co-create programs with marginalised communities, they develop a deeper understanding of democratic participation, equity, and the value of contributing to the common good (Jacoby, 2014).
    - **Soft skills development:** These projects often require students to collaborate across disciplines and sectors, enhancing their communication, teamwork, leadership, and conflict resolution skills, which are increasingly valued in the labour market.
    - **Enhanced academic performance and critical thinking:** Research shows that connecting theory to practice through community-engaged learning can increase content retention and deepen understanding, particularly in disciplines such as environmental science, public health, social work, and political science (Eyler & Giles, 1999).
    - **Increasing Student Motivation and Engagement.** Students often report higher motivation and engagement when they can see the real-world relevance of their studies. For instance, co-developing a neighbourhood improvement project or designing an inclusive public space with local stakeholders can generate a sense of purpose and pride, reinforcing students' connection to their academic experience (Yorio & Ye, 2012)
    - **Improving Campus Climate and Learning Culture.** Projects that involve students in shaping the university's physical or social environment—such as inclusive campus audits, accessibility initiatives, or sustainability actions—can foster a more inclusive and participatory campus culture. These initiatives enhance relationships among students, faculty, and administrators, fostering a sense of shared ownership.
    - **Preventing Negative Behaviours and Building Empathy.** Active engagement with diverse communities and real-life social challenges cultivates empathy, ethical reasoning, and self-awareness. Evidence suggests that students involved in community-based learning are less likely to engage in harmful behaviours and more likely to challenge stereotypes, becoming more inclusive and socially responsible (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011).
    - **Enhancing Institutional Attractiveness.** Universities that integrate innovative and socially relevant teaching strategies, such as community-engaged learning, position themselves as forward-thinking institutions. This can attract motivated students seeking hands-on, purpose-driven education, as well as faculty interested in engaged scholarship and teaching innovation.

SET THE GENERAL GOALS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING

Before planning community-engaged learning projects, it is essential to establish the general goals of community-engaged learning within your university/faculty/department (Roehlkepartain, Gryphon-Wiesner, Byers, & Nelson, 1999). Consider the following questions:

- What should the implementation of community-engaged learning bring to your university/faculty/department?
- What are the goals of implementing community-engaged learning in relation to your university/faculty/department?

IDENTIFY SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Before you begin, identify the resources available to you at your institution for developing a community-engaged learning practice. These may include your colleagues, as well as faculty or university leadership or a specific unit. Ideally, consult with people who have already implemented community-engaged projects and discuss your ideas, concerns, and experiences with them.

PREPARE THE PLAN FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS

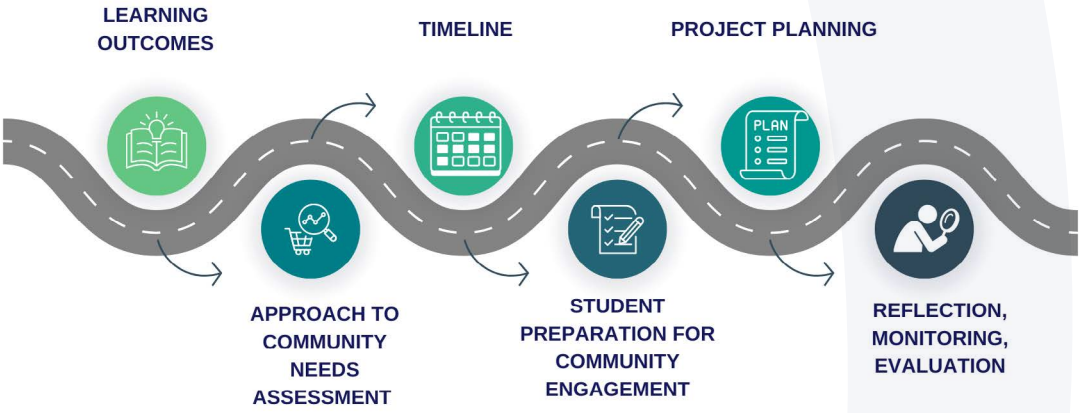
To effectively communicate with university leadership, colleagues, community partners, and students themselves, it is essential to develop a preliminary plan for incorporating community-engaged learning into your course or project. While some elements can be carefully designed in advance, it is necessary to acknowledge that plans may evolve based on students' interests, the needs they identify in the community, or the dynamic nature of implementation.

In community-engaged learning, flexibility is key. However, we strongly recommend following the "rule of improvisation": only those who have a plan can improvise. Thoughtful preparation allows for meaningful adaptation.

When planning to integrate community-engaged learning into your course or academic program, consider the following questions:

1. **What learning outcomes**—disciplinary, civic, personal, or professional—**do you want students to achieve through community-engaged learning?**
2. **How will you approach community needs assessment or asset mapping?** Will students conduct interviews, focus groups, observations, or partner with organisations to identify relevant issues?
3. **How much time and space within the course structure or semester will you allocate to community-engaged learning activities?** Will it be a semester-long project, a shorter module, or a recurring component?
4. **How will students be prepared to engage with communities respectfully and effectively?** What orientation, readings, or training will they need on topics like ethical engagement, cultural sensitivity, or project management?
5. **What will the planning process look like?** Will students collaborate with community partners to co-design the project? Will the planning be instructor-led, student-led, or a combination of both?
6. **How will reflection be facilitated throughout the experience?** Will students write reflective journals, participate in class discussions, or use creative formats (e.g., visual, digital) to process their learning?
7. **What methods will you use to monitor the process?** Will you use check-ins, progress reports, peer feedback, or community partner input to ensure ongoing alignment with learning and community goals?
8. **How will you evaluate the outcomes of the community-engaged learning project**—for students, for community partners, and for yourself as an educator?

PREPARING THE PLAN FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING



Carefully considering these elements helps ensure that community-engaged learning is not only impactful for students and communities but also academically rigorous, ethically grounded, and aligned with your institution's mission.

SET LEARNING OBJECTIVES IN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING

In **community-engaged learning**, the **learning and service objectives must be meaningfully integrated**. As a university educator, your success depends on being transparent about the **academic learning outcomes** you want students to achieve. Begin by identifying what knowledge, skills, or competencies students should develop through their engagement in real-world projects.

Once students, in collaboration with community partners, identify a specific need or challenge to address, they can jointly define the **service goals**. Because community-engaged learning typically involves addressing complex, real-life issues, the learning goals often span multiple areas and types of skills and competencies.

Significantly, not all learning can be predicted in advance. Students may gain unexpected insights or develop competencies that exceed the teacher's initial intentions. Community-engaged learning is dynamic, so it's essential to view your learning objectives as **living elements**—you can **revisit, revise, or expand them** throughout the project based on what emerges during the process.

Nevertheless, as with any course or academic program, it is essential to begin with **clearly articulated learning objectives** that are aligned with your institutional curriculum or accreditation standards. These should reflect what students are expected to achieve at their level of study—whether undergraduate or graduate—and in their field of specialisation. There is no need to "invent" new objectives from scratch; instead, identify those already embedded in your course syllabus, degree outcomes, or national qualification frameworks.

You won't be able to address all course outcomes through community-engaged learning, and not every subject or topic will lend itself equally well to this method. We recommend choosing at least one **primary area** as a focal point for the project. For example, in a public health course, the project might be linked to health promotion; in an environmental science course, to sustainability; or in teacher education, to inclusive pedagogies.

It is also highly beneficial to **involve students in the co-creation of learning goals**. Invite them to reflect, in the later stages, on what they want to learn through the project—individually and as a group—and consider incorporating their input into your overall learning objectives. This approach increases student ownership and enhances intrinsic motivation, especially when their goals are recognised and aligned with the academic framework.

In sum, linking service and learning intentionally strengthens both the **academic rigour** and **civic relevance** of your course. It helps students apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts and prepares them to engage meaningfully with the challenges of their disciplines and communities. Depending on the project design, you can connect learning objectives to areas of **personal, academic and civic learning outcomes.**

PERSONAL LEARNING GOALS are focused on students' self-awareness, identity development, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills, for example:

- Develop greater empathy and active listening skills when working with diverse individuals.
- Increase self-confidence in managing group dynamics and facilitating learning.
- Recognise and reflect on personal strengths and limitations when solving real-world problems in team settings.
- Enhance emotional resilience and adaptability in unpredictable field situations.
- Improve self-regulation and stress management in high-pressure collaboration scenarios.

ACADEMIC / DISCIPLINARY LEARNING GOALS are focused on mastering subject-specific knowledge and applying theoretical concepts in real-world contexts, for example:

- Apply ecological and sustainability principles to analyse and address a local environmental issue. (Environmental Science)
- Demonstrate culturally sensitive communication and apply health education methods with community groups. (Nursing / Health Sciences)
- Analyse how policy decisions affect marginalised populations using real-life case studies. (Political Science)
- Design a user-friendly digital tool that addresses a specific need in a nonprofit or community setting. (Computer Science)
- Develop a site plan proposal that incorporates community feedback and sustainable design principles. (Architecture / Urban Planning)

CIVIC LEARNING GOALS are focused on understanding community issues, democratic engagement, social justice, and ethical responsibility, for example:

- Critically assess structural inequalities affecting the community and propose possible interventions.
- Understand the legal barriers faced by underserved populations and advocate for more equitable policies.
- Create advocacy content (e.g., campaign, podcast, documentary) to raise awareness about a local issue.
- Collaborate with local schools to support inclusive learning and community engagement practices.
- Evaluate the social impact of corporate practices and propose socially responsible business models.

Examples of learning objectives in several community-engaged learning projects:

Creating a Financial Literacy Toolkit for Youth Leaving Foster Care

Business, psychology, and social work students collaborate with an NGO to support young adults ageing out of care systems in developing accessible financial literacy resources.

Personal Goal: Strengthen empathy and reduce bias when working with individuals from vulnerable backgrounds.

Academic Goal: Integrate financial planning, behavioural psychology, and communication strategies into educational materials.

Civic Goal: Critically assess systemic barriers that impact economic mobility and advocate for more equitable support systems.

Oral History Project with Marginalised Community Members

Students from history, anthropology, and media studies collect and publish oral histories from members of a marginalised group (e.g., Roma communities, war refugees, elderly LGBTQ+ individuals).

Personal Goal: Enhance active listening skills and reflect on personal assumptions or stereotypes.

Academic Goal: Analyse and interpret qualitative data using ethnographic and historical methods.

Civic Goal: Contribute to cultural preservation and public awareness through ethical storytelling and representation.

Environmental Education Workshops in Local Schools

Environmental science and education students design and deliver interactive workshops about climate change and sustainability in primary schools.

Personal Goal: Increase self-efficacy and adaptability in facilitating group learning activities.

Academic Goal: Translate complex scientific concepts into age-appropriate educational formats.

Civic Goal: Promote environmental awareness and stewardship among young citizens and schools, utilising them as community hubs.

Co-developing a Health Promotion Campaign with Migrant Communities

Public health, nursing, and communication students co-create a culturally sensitive campaign addressing vaccine hesitancy among migrant populations.

Personal Goal: Deepen intercultural competence and humility when working across language and cultural differences.

Academic Goal: Apply epidemiological data and public health communication principles to real-world health challenges.

Civic Goal: Empower marginalised communities to access health information and services through participatory practices.

CHOOSE AN APPROACH TO MAP COMMUNITY NEEDS

Mapping community needs is a foundational step in community-engaged learning. It helps ensure that the project addresses real and relevant issues, fosters authentic partnerships, and supports student learning and development. There are several approaches that university teachers and students can take when identifying community needs:

1. Mapping Within the University

Community-engaged learning projects can be implemented within the university itself, particularly when teachers and students are new to this method. These projects may focus on enhancing various aspects of university life, including accessibility, sustainability, student well-being, and diversity and inclusion. While this "internal" approach may offer a more familiar and logistically manageable environment, its scope is limited in terms of fostering connections beyond the campus and developing students' understanding of broader societal contexts. Nevertheless, it can be a valuable starting point, especially in the early stages of community-engaged learning or institutional support.

Example:

Students audit campus spaces for accessibility and propose improvements to enhance the experience for students with disabilities.

2. Partnering with a Specific Community Organisation

This approach involves collaboration with a selected community partner—often an NGO, public institution, or social enterprise—based on existing relationships or a long-term partnership between the university and the organisation. In some cases, the initiative comes from the community partner, who reaches out to the university with a specific need or proposal. While this model offers stability, coordination, and mutual trust, it is essential to ensure that students are meaningfully engaged in the process and that their interests align with the project's goals. There is a potential challenge if students feel disconnected from the partner's mission or context. However, when well-facilitated, these collaborations provide a strong foundation for reciprocal, sustainable partnerships that can extend beyond the duration of a single course or semester.

Example:

Students in a social work program work with a long-term partner organisation supporting elderly clients, co-developing intergenerational workshops.

3. Mapping Needs in the Broader Community

This approach allows students to explore and identify needs directly in the broader community—local neighbourhoods, municipalities, or specific populations. It encourages greater student autonomy and exposes them to the complexity and diversity of community issues. This form of open mapping can involve field visits, interviews, focus groups, desk research, or the use of digital mapping tools. While more time-consuming and complex, it can lead to significant projects and deeper learning. To maintain academic focus, a university teacher may choose to guide students by defining a thematic area (e.g., health equity, environmental sustainability, youth empowerment) or geographic boundary for exploration. This helps align student-identified needs with learning outcomes.

Example:

Students in an environmental studies program conduct a community needs assessment in a local neighbourhood affected by pollution, leading to a student-led awareness campaign and green infrastructure proposal.

Each of these approaches has its advantages and trade-offs. You can select or combine them based on learning objectives, student readiness, logistical constraints, and the nature of existing university–community relationships. Regardless of the method, needs mapping should be guided by principles of reciprocity, respect, and collaboration, ensuring that both student learning and community benefit are central to the process.

ESTABLISH THE TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING.

The duration of community-engaged learning projects can vary significantly depending on the learning objectives, the complexity of the identified community need or challenge, the structure of the academic course or program and your possibilities. However, it is essential to allocate sufficient time for each key phase of the community-engaged learning cycle: preparation, community needs assessment, planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation.

While short-term projects can be meaningful, longer-term engagement is ideal, especially when the goal is to foster deeper student learning and contribute to sustainable community impact. Ideally, projects are integrated across an entire semester or even a full academic year, allowing time for relationship-building, meaningful collaboration, and the iterative nature of real-world problem-solving.

Here are several standard models for project timing in the university context:

Short-term (4–6 weeks)

Best suited for exploratory or introductory community engagement initiatives (e.g., needs assessments, awareness campaigns, one-time interventions), this approach aligns nicely with a lower level of community engagement integration in education. The emphasis is often on civic learning or personal development rather than long-term community change.

Semester-long (10–14 weeks)

A typical format for a course-based community-engaged learning project allows for deeper academic integration and engagement with community partners. Students can go through the whole cycle, mapping needs, co-creating the project, implementing it, and reflecting on the outcomes. This requires careful coordination to align with course objectives and academic calendar constraints.

Year-long or multi-semester projects

Ideal for advanced-level courses, thesis projects, interdisciplinary studios, or capstone experiences, this approach fosters more sustained partnerships and meaningful community impact. It encourages co-creation with community partners and allows for iteration and revision. These projects may involve hand-off models, where one student cohort begins the project and another continues it in the following semester or year. Such long-term engagement not only deepens students' understanding of complex societal issues but also cultivates a sense of individual responsibility and active citizenship, preparing them to address the public good with a change in perspective (Geier & Hasager, 2020).

The academic calendar, of course, will influence project timing. You can start community-engaged learning at the beginning of the semester or integrate it mid-way through the course, depending on course design and partner readiness. Be aware that you need to reserve time for preparing the students and planning the activities.

Table 4-4 Examples of the timelines for community-engaged learning projects

Short Project 2–6 weeks	Semester Project 10–14 weeks	Year-long Project 10 months	Phase	Outcomes / Student Outputs
Week 1	Weeks 1–2	Month 1	**Inspiration & Orientation**	Students are introduced to community-engaged learning, motivated to create positive change, and to explore societal challenges. They co-define initial learning goals.
Week 1–2	Weeks 2–4	Months 1–3	**Community Needs Analysis**	Students assess community context and stakeholder needs through interviews, field visits, research, or consultations with partners.
Weeks 2–3	Weeks 4–6	Months 2–4	**Goal Setting**	Students set service objectives aligned with community needs and course learning outcomes. They develop shared values and group norms.
Weeks 3–4	Weeks 5–8	Months 3–8	**Project Planning**	Students co-create project plans, timelines, and task divisions with community partners.
Weeks 4–5	Weeks 6–12	Months 4–9	**Action Phase**	Students implement project activities, provide services, conduct workshops, build tools, or deliver outcomes in collaboration with community members/partners.
Week 6	Weeks 10–14	Month 9	**Evaluation**	Students assess the outcomes of their projects and reflect on their personal, academic, and civic growth. They gather feedback from community partners and peers. Students and partners celebrate accomplishments. They prepare final reports and presentations that showcase the results.
Through-out Weeks 1–6	Throughout Semester	Throughout Project	**Reflection (Ongoing)**	Students regularly reflect on their experiences through journals, discussions, or structured assignments to connect theory and practice.

Short Project 2–6 weeks	Semester Project 10–14 weeks	Year-long Project 10 months	Phase	Outcomes / Student Outputs
Optional: Week 5–6	Weeks 12–14	Months 8–10	**Promotion & Dissemination**	Students share project stories through media, conferences, publications, or university showcases.
Optional	Throughout	Throughout	**Monitoring & Documentation**	Students document project progress using reports, visuals, research logs, or multimedia. Partners may co-contribute to documentation.

DESIGN THE PROCESS FOR STUDENT PREPARATION TO ENGAGE WITH THE COMMUNITY

At this stage, teachers should identify and provide students with appropriate orientation sessions, readings, or training on key topics such as ethical engagement, cultural sensitivity, teamwork, and project management to prepare them for responsible and effective community engagement.

Introductory activities in community-engaged learning aim to help students grasp the core idea of learning through meaningful collaboration with communities and to inspire their motivation to participate. Emphasising the purpose of community-engaged learning from the outset helps students stay focused on both their academic goals and their civic responsibility. The intention is not for students to immediately master all theoretical frameworks or logistical steps involved in community-engaged learning—that is the role of the teacher or course facilitator. Instead, the priority is for students to develop a clear sense of the journey ahead and to feel enthusiastic and open to the experience.

Introductory activities should be interactive, reflective, and appropriate to the students' academic level and disciplinary background. They should foster curiosity, build trust within the group, and establish a respectful and reciprocal mindset toward working with community partners and in the team.

As part of the introductory activities in community-engaged learning, the teacher defines the core academic learning objectives aligned with the course. However, it is valuable to invite students to identify a **personal goal**—something specific they wish to develop or learn through their community engagement experience. This does not need to be an exhaustive list; one clearly articulated intention is enough. Encouraging students to name a personal learning focus fosters ownership of the experience and supports deeper reflection throughout the course.

Teamwork is a crucial component of any community-engaged learning project. While university students may already have experience working in groups, it is still vital to include structured activities that reinforce the value of collaboration and prepare them for working effectively as a team in a real-world context. These introductory activities should not only strengthen group cohesion but also open a discussion on the need for clear ground rules, shared expectations, and role distribution within the project.

Teachers should plan how to guide students in establishing team norms, defining responsibilities, and understanding that some roles will be student-led. In contrast, others—such as coordination with community partners or assessment—may remain under the guidance of the teachers. This helps establish a foundation for a respectful, organised, and productive team dynamic throughout the project.

PREPARE THE REFLECTION ACTIVITIES

How will reflection be facilitated throughout the experience? Will students write reflective journals, participate in class discussions, or use creative formats (e.g., visual, digital) to process their learning?

Reflection is considered a key "ingredient" that transforms experience from service activity into learning; it has a vital role in awareness-building and transforms service-learning into critical pedagogy, potentially inspiring personal transformation and driving social change (Jacoby, 2015).

For planning your reflection, please refer to the specific chapter.

PREPARE THE MONITORING, ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

Monitoring and recording activities and outcomes throughout the implementation of a community-engaged learning project is essential—not only for thorough evaluation, but also to support the project's sustainability and potential continuation. Given that projects rarely unfold precisely as planned, documenting the process allows students and instructors to reflect on challenges, adaptations, and successes for future learning.

Encourage students to actively participate in **documenting the project journey** using a variety of methods such as photos, videos, reflective journals, blogs, or project diaries. This documentation can be assigned as a specific role within the student team, helping to distribute responsibilities and engage students in critical observation and reflection. There are many digital and analogue tools available for capturing these records, ranging from simple smartphone cameras and online platforms to more structured reflective portfolios.

Community-engaged learning integrates academic learning with meaningful service in the community. As such, evaluation must address **both the academic learning outcomes** and **the effectiveness and impact of the service activities**. Additionally, it is crucial to evaluate the **overall implementation and quality** of the community-engaged learning project, including the collaborative process between the university and community partners.

Because the foundation for both types of evaluation is laid during the project itself, **evaluation should be planned during the initial design phase**. This includes defining clear academic learning objectives, service goals, and implementation milestones, along with indicators for their assessment.

EVALUATING LEARNING IN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED COURSES

As with other pedagogical strategies, it is essential to assess what students have learned through their participation in community-engaged learning. However, the nature of experiential and community-based learning calls for **adapted, often more reflective and integrative assessment approaches**.

Learning objectives should guide the design of both in-class and community-based activities, and the **assessment methods** should align with these objectives. Assessment strategies may include:

- **Reflective assignments** (e.g. journals, essays, portfolios) that link theory to practice,
- **Presentations or reports** that demonstrate the integration of academic content with real-world service,
- **Peer and self-assessment**, to foster critical self-awareness and collaborative learning, and
- **Feedback from community partners** is primarily obtained when students work closely with them over an extended period.

Involving community partners in assessing aspects of students' professional behaviour, communication, or contribution to project goals can provide valuable external perspectives and reinforce reciprocity in the partnership.

To support this process, it is helpful to develop an **Assessment Plan for the Achievement of Learning Outcomes**, identifying:

- Learning objectives,
- Intended outcomes,
- Assessment methods,
- Criteria for success, and
- Roles of academic staff, students, and community partners in the assessment process.

A structured plan ensures that **evaluation is transparent, consistent, and aligned** with both the academic and civic goals of community-engaged learning. For assessment of the impact of community-engaged learning, please see also the last chapter: **REFLECTION, EVALUATION AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**.

PLANNING A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED PROJECT WITH STUDENTS

The planning process should encompass all stages of project planning, including:

a) identifying community needs, a problem analysis,

b) setting service objectives and indicators,

c) planning specific activities, tasks, roles and budget,

d) planning the promotion.

Teachers should also clarify whether students will collaborate with community partners to co-design the project and determine the extent to which the planning will be instructor-led, student-led, or a combination of both.

IDENTIFYING THE COMMUNITY NEEDS AND PROBLEM ANALYSIS

In community-engaged learning, mapping community needs is a critical first step in the project planning process. It is essential to guide students in understanding that meaningful engagement is not driven by their assumptions or ideas about what the issues are, but by the lived experiences and voices of those directly affected. Real change begins with listening. The goal is to identify genuine needs as defined by the community itself, rather than imposing solutions from the outside.

Needs assessment is also a foundation for ensuring that students work *with* the community from the outset, rather than simply *for* it. This reinforces the principles of reciprocity, mutual respect, and co-creation that are central to CEL.

The approach to needs mapping will vary depending on the context of the course and the partnership model described in the previous section. For example, students may be working with an established community partner, engaging with a new organisation, or focusing on needs within their own university or local neighbourhood. Teachers should tailor mapping activities to fit the specific setting and level of student experience, while ensuring that ethical practices and community involvement are maintained throughout the process.

SETTING SERVICE OBJECTIVES AND INDICATORS

Service objectives are distinct from academic learning objectives. While learning goals are typically defined during the initial stages of the course or project design, they can be revisited and refined once the specific community issue the students aim to address has been identified.

Service objectives articulate the intended change or improvement within the community—they describe how the project will respond to a defined need or challenge. These goals should emerge directly from the results of a collaborative and well-structured needs assessment conducted with community stakeholders. For this reason, allocating sufficient time and support for the needs assessment is essential to ensure the service goals are grounded in real, community-identified priorities.

These goals can also be referred to as the **objectives of the community-engaged learning project**, as they capture the project's intended contribution to the community. Importantly, these objectives should only be formulated *after* the community's needs have been clearly explored and defined. They should also follow the **SMART** criteria—Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound.

Once the service objectives are in place, students can begin identifying and designing the **activities** that will help achieve those objectives. This stage is often where project planning becomes concrete and collaborative. It is also essential to collaborate with students to identify **specific outcomes or indicators** of success and to develop a plan for **evaluating** these outcomes. This can be integrated directly into the service objectives or addressed through a follow-up planning activity. Either way, goal-setting should be linked to reflection and evaluation from the beginning.

PLANNING SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES, TASKS, ROLES AND BUDGET

To effectively address a community-identified need or problem, students must plan a set of **purposeful and well-structured activities** as part of their community-engaged learning (CEL) project. These activities are not an end in themselves—they are **the means by which the project's service objectives are achieved**.

When selecting and designing project activities, students should consider several key factors:

- The **timeframe** available within the course or project cycle.
- The **size and capacity** of the student team, including relevant skills, experience, and academic background;
- The **resources** required for implementation include materials, facilities, equipment, and partnerships.

Each activity should align with the project's **service objectives**, contributing directly to solving a specific problem or meeting a real community need. Each planned activity will likely include multiple steps or **sub-activities** that need to be logically sequenced. For example, if a team decides to organise a workshop as part of their project, they will need to:

- Design the content and format of the workshop;
- Identify and invite participants;
- Select and secure a venue (physical or virtual);
- Develop an outreach and communication plan;
- Prepare materials and supplies;
- Carry out the workshop.
- Document and communicate the outcomes (e.g., via social media or a report).

The same logic applies to all major project components—consider the **correct order of implementation**, and ensure clarity around roles and responsibilities.

Given the complexity of most CEL projects, **task distribution and timeline planning** are essential. The team should:

- Break down each activity into specific tasks.
- Assign **clear responsibilities** to individual team members;
- Set **realistic deadlines** for completion.

This planning helps ensure a smooth implementation, fosters accountability, and enables the team to respond to unexpected changes or challenges that may arise along the way.

Many CEL projects involve **direct costs**, such as:

- Materials or supplies for events or workshops;
- Travel expenses;
- Honoraria for guest speakers or experts;
- Equipment rental or venue fees.

It is crucial to **anticipate and plan** these expenses early in the process. If funding is limited, teams should explore additional sources of support (e.g., university grants, community sponsorships, or in-kind donations). Most costs can be estimated through basic research or direct outreach to providers. Throughout the project, students should carefully **track their spending**. Maintaining a simple project budget helps the team stay within financial limits, make informed decisions, and provide transparent reporting.

PLANNING THE PROMOTION OF THE PROJECT

The project planning also **includes communication and promotion planning**. By **communication**, we mean maintaining clear and regular information sharing within the student team and with all relevant stakeholders, including community partners, faculty, and other campus or local groups as applicable. Effective communication ensures everyone stays informed about the project's progress, challenges, and milestones.

Promotion refers to sharing the project more broadly to raise awareness, both about the community issues identified and about opportunities for others to engage in addressing them. Promotion can amplify the project's impact by inspiring wider involvement and fostering a culture of civic responsibility.

It is essential to acknowledge that no single project can address the entire community's problem or "save the world." However, by communicating and promoting thoughtfully, students contribute to a larger ongoing dialogue and collective effort toward positive change.

Use this checklist to support the effective design and planning of a CEL project with your students and community partners:

Community and Service Orientation

- Have we accurately identified and understood the community's needs?
- Is the project addressing a need that is truly important to the community
- Have community members or partner organisations been actively involved in the needs assessment?

- Have we co-developed clear and realistic **service objectives** based on the identified needs?
- Are the service objectives meaningfully connected to the needs of the community?

Learning Integration

- Have we defined specific academic learning objectives for the students?
- Are the learning and service objectives intentionally aligned?

Activity and Project Design

- Are the planned project activities linked to the service and learning objectives?
- Have student teams defined roles and responsibilities within the group and concerning the community partner?
- Have we created a detailed and realistic timeline for all project stages?

Resources and Feasibility

- Have we estimated a budget for each activity?
- Are the necessary resources (human, material, financial) available to support implementation?

Evaluation and Communication

- Is there a plan in place to monitor progress and evaluate both learning and community impact?
- Do we have a communication or visibility plan (e.g., sharing outcomes with the community, posting on social media, presenting results)?

4.2. COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

The outcome of good research is not just books and academic papers,
But it is also the creative action of people to address matters that are important to them;
It is also concerned with revising how we understand our world
as well as transforming practices within it.
— Heron and Reason, 2008

4.2.1. DEFINITION, CORE CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

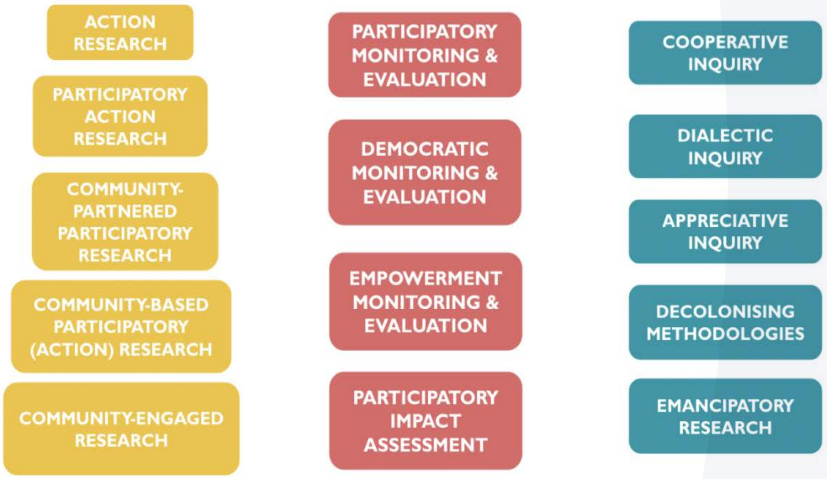
Community-engaged research belongs to the school of (research-analytical) approaches that share a fundamental philosophy of participation, collaboration, inclusivity, power-sharing, and knowledge-sharing. It recognises the value of involving individuals in the research process as research partners rather than merely as subjects of research - those potential beneficiaries, collaborators, and other relevant actors who are (in)directly affected by the issue that becomes the focus of research and analysis. Put most simply, this type of research is conducted WITH people, not ON people.

Community-engaged research, as its name suggests, should follow the needs, challenges, problems, and relevant topics that emerge directly from the community, as identified by its members as necessary, interesting, appropriate, or timely. Therefore, such research should primarily be guided by research questions recognised as relevant by (diverse) community actors, rather than being driven by the (scientific) theory and/or method itself - while still making use of a broad range of rigorous

research approaches and techniques. The often complex and multilayered contexts of such research designs frequently require a vast repertoire of (research) tools and methods, coming from both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms, benefiting significantly from methodological pluralism.

Community-engaged research in higher education is a collaborative approach in which universities partner with diverse community actors to conduct research that addresses community-identified needs and priorities. This approach emphasises reciprocal relationships, mutual benefit, and shared decision-making throughout the research process. It can involve various forms, as well as diverse methodological approaches.

Figure 4-1 Diverse forms and methodological approaches



However, although methods are essential and instrumental in carrying out such research, what truly characterises community-engaged research is the way these (research) methods are implemented - through mutual and mutually beneficial partnerships and shared learning, to take action and contribute to positive social change.

Community-engaged research is defined by a set of values, goals, and practices that emphasise the active participation of various community actors who are (in)directly affected by the chosen research problem. These actors are engaged in the co-construction of knowledge and later interventions aimed at fostering positive change and improving the well-being of community members. Through the process of engaging relevant actors, the research outcomes may become more meaningful to them, and their meaningful involvement in the research process can help increase the likelihood that the research results will later be used as a platform for designing various well-being-focused actions. This is achieved precisely through the development of socially responsive interventions based on the research results - interventions that can manifest through improvements in (public) policies, programmes, practices, and the mobilisation of resources to address a variety of social challenges.

To summarise the key insights, community-engaged research is characterised by the following features:

- **Anchored in community needs/challenges/problems** - it is grounded in the needs, questions, concerns, and strategies of the community and diverse community-based organisations and relevant stakeholders.
- **Community involvement** – it directly involves (research problem-relevant) community actors in the research process and its outcomes, drawing on their experience and knowledge at one or more stages of the research process and the resulting interventions/innovations, in a way that is mutually beneficial. Community members and organisations are active participants in various stages of the research, from identifying research questions to interpreting

findings and disseminating results. In this sense, special emphasis is placed on sharing power, authority, and knowledge.

- **Partnership and Collaboration** - community-engaged research is built on strong partnerships between researchers and community actors, fostering trust and mutual respect.
- **Reciprocity and Mutuality** - the research aims to benefit both the academic institution and the community, with a focus on addressing local needs and priorities.
- **Trust-building** aims to establish trustworthy, two-way relationships between researchers and community partners, taking into account all partner perspectives in defining the research focus, intervention strategies, and measures.
- **Diverse Perspectives** - it values and incorporates diverse knowledge, experiences, and contexts, recognising the unique strengths and assets of each community.
- **Impact and Relevance** - the research is designed to have a tangible impact on the community, addressing real-world issues and contributing to positive social change. It seeks to have a social impact through action by strategically applying research and its innovative outcomes to better understand the complex nature of various community needs/problems and to offer responses and solutions to social challenges.

Community-engaged research is inherently contextual, shaped by the unique histories, needs, assets, and challenges of the communities involved. Rather than applying one-size-fits-all approaches, this form of research recognises that diverse and usually complex social issues are deeply embedded in local realities, cultural norms, power dynamics, and lived experiences. Contextual sensitivity is therefore essential not only for building trust and fostering meaningful partnerships but also for ensuring the relevance, validity, and impact of the research outcomes. By grounding the research process in the specific context of a community, researchers are better positioned to co-create knowledge and interventions that resonate with local stakeholders and respond effectively to their evolving priorities.

Despite its contextual anchoring, community-engaged research has **multiple benefits** for all parties engaged. **For universities**, the benefits focus on the enhanced relevance of research, stronger community relationships, improved visibility, better student learning experiences (if students are engaged in the first place), and enhanced publishing opportunities, among others. By embracing community-engaged research, universities and higher education institutions can fulfil their public mission, improve their relevance, and contribute to positive social change. **For communities**, benefits usually include increased access to resources, enhanced capacity for self-determination, and solutions to local challenges. Participating actors/organisations can, for example, develop and evaluate effective programs for their beneficiaries, demonstrate the effectiveness of their programmes for future funding opportunities, and increase the legitimacy of their work among funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders. **For society** in general, the benefits include more equitable and sustainable solutions to complex social problems, as well as a more engaged citizenry.

Some of the examples might include a university working with a local health clinic to study the prevalence of a specific disease and develop culturally appropriate interventions, or a university partnering with a community organisation to address food insecurity by creating a community garden and educational programme, or a university collaborating with a local school to evaluate the effectiveness of a new teaching method.

Like any form of research, community-engaged research presents its own set of challenges - it brings forth a **distinct set of challenges**, shaped by both the diversity of community partners and the inherent dynamics of collaborative knowledge production. Community-engaged research is deeply embedded in the specific contexts of the communities it seeks to work with, reflecting their unique histories, social, cultural, economic, political and institutional realities. This contextuality is not a limitation, but a defining feature—one that creates a core difference between traditional academic re-

search and these kinds of collaborative and participatory forms of research. While such contextuality enriches the research process, it also introduces a distinct set of challenges that must be navigated thoughtfully and ethically. No two communities are the same; therefore, research approaches must be flexible, adaptive, responsive, and grounded in mutual understanding and respect. At the same time, the co-creation of knowledge within diverse community settings inevitably reveals structural and relational complexities, particularly in terms of roles, responsibilities, and power dynamics.

One of the challenges lies in the **diversity of community actors** themselves. Engaging in research with a well-resourced public health institution is not the same as collaborating with a grassroots youth organisation or a marginalised informal community network. Each partner brings different capacities, expectations, time horizons, and power positions to the table. These differences shape not only the research design and implementation but also the dynamics of **decision-making, ownership, and benefit-sharing**. Therefore, it is of no surprise that one of the foremost challenges of community-engaged research lies in **addressing power imbalances** between academic researchers and community members. Even when participation is emphasised, longstanding hierarchies in knowledge production can lead to situations where community voices are marginalised or instrumentalised rather than genuinely valued. Therefore, building and sustaining **equitable partnerships** requires more than just shared goals - it calls for deliberate attention to **power imbalances**, mutual capacity-building, and mechanisms that support meaningful participation for all actors involved, regardless of their institutional strength. Moreover, building such equitable partnerships is quite complex, as it requires continuous reflection, transparency, and commitment to power-sharing practices throughout the whole research process.

Additionally, **resource constraints**—such as limited time, funding, or institutional support—can hinder the depth and continuity of engagement, often placing disproportionate burdens on community partners who may lack access to stable infrastructure. Ensuring the **sustainability** of such research partnerships and translating findings into concrete, long-term change is another significant challenge, especially when research cycles end but community needs/challenges/problems persist. Finally, due to the participatory and transformative aims of this research approach, **defining success** in community-engaged research is not always straightforward - conventional academic metrics may fall short in capturing the depth of community impact, relational growth, or capacity-building outcomes. Developing meaningful, context-sensitive and pluralistic evaluation criteria is therefore essential to honour both the process and the outcomes of such collaborative research efforts.

Still, despite variations across different contexts, particular **core challenges** remain widely relevant: power dynamics, resource inequities, the sustainability of impact, and the appropriate assessment of outcomes. These require ongoing reflection and negotiation to ensure that community-engaged research lives up to its ethical and transformative potential.

4.2.2. UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT INTENSITIES OF ENGAGEMENT

Community-engaged research always seeks to incorporate community actors throughout the research process, encompassing a continuum of research processes with varying levels of community participation.

Visual 4-2. Participation continuum in community-engaged research

Source of visual: https://www.norc.org/research/library/community-engaged-research-framework.html

Community-engaged research is not a one-size-fits-all approach - it operates along a continuum of engagement, shaped by the depth of community involvement, communication, trust, and ownership. The visual representation above illustrates a progression from minimal to whole community leadership, highlighting a shift in power dynamics, decision-making roles, and responsibilities throughout the research process. Each level offers distinct forms of collaboration and reflects different degrees of participatory ethos. Understanding these levels helps researchers and community partners establish shared expectations and work intentionally toward deeper engagement.

COMMUNITY INFORMED – COMMUNITY AS ADVISOR

At this entry level, the community is kept informed about the research process and may serve in an advisory capacity. While there is some dialogue, decision-making largely remains with the academic institution. For example, a university researcher conducting a study on access to healthcare might invite representatives from a local NGO to review survey questions or provide contextual input. However, the project design and data analysis are handled solely by the university team. This level is valuable for transparency and accountability, but lacks deep co-ownership.

COMMUNITY INVOLVED – COMMUNITY AS COLLABORATOR

Here, community actors play a more active role in shaping the research. They may contribute to designing instruments, recruiting participants, or co-facilitating focus groups, yet decisions about overall strategy and outcomes remain researcher-led. For instance, in a study on youth employment, a grassroots organisation may collaborate by helping identify relevant themes or assist in outreach to participants, contributing to implementation but not necessarily steering the project.

SHARED LEADERSHIP – COMMUNITY AS EQUAL PARTNER

This level represents a true partnership, where researchers and community partners share power, resources, and decision-making equally. Both sides co-develop the research question, select methods, analyse data, and co-author publications or reports. An example might be a research project where a university and a community housing coalition co-design a study on gentrification, and jointly advocate for policy change based on the results. Trust, transparency, and accountability are deeply embedded in the partnership.

COMMUNITY LED – COMMUNITY AS LEADER

At the highest level of engagement, the community not only defines the problem and leads the research, but also determines the outcomes and use of the data. Academic researchers serve as assis-

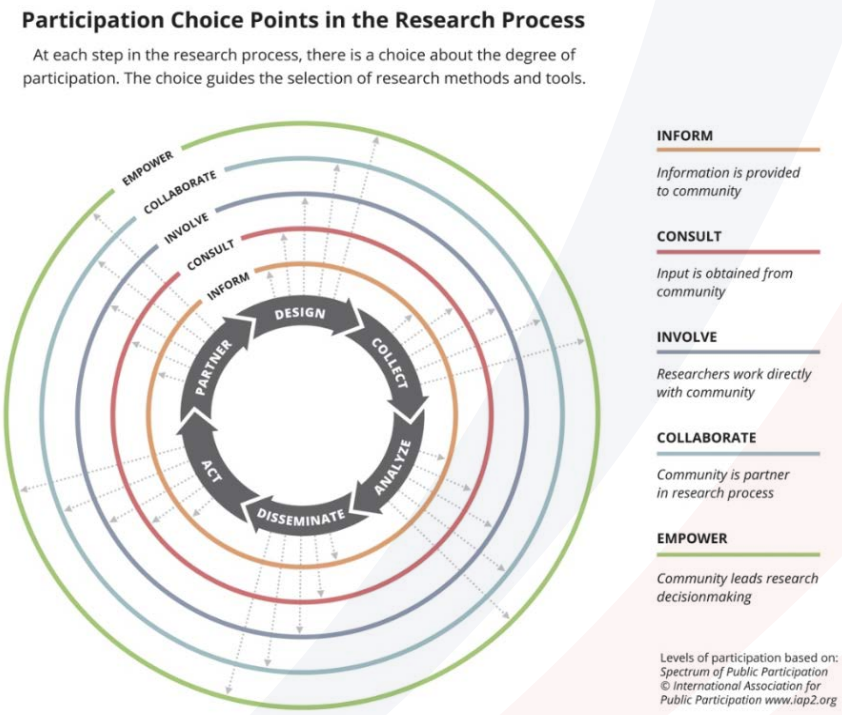
tants, facilitators, or allies. For example, a network of Roma youth organisations may lead a research initiative on barriers to the educational inclusion of Roma children and youth, with university partners offering support in refining the methodology or disseminating the results through academic channels. This level reflects the ultimate form of community self-determination and ownership.

However, it is essential to note that these levels are not fixed or hierarchical checkpoints, nor should they be seen as a linear progression where one level is inherently better or more desirable than another. Instead, they reflect the **diverse realities, capacities, and aspirations of both community and academic partners**. A project may evolve — from informing to collaborating, or from shared leadership to supporting community-led action — but not every project needs or can operate at the highest levels of engagement. What matters most is that the level of community involvement is mutually agreed upon, ethically grounded, and responsive to the context.

For example, a grassroots organisation with limited staff and time may prefer to be consulted as advisors rather than co-lead a whole research process, just as a well-resourced public institution may be better positioned to undertake sustained collaboration. The key is **intentionality**: partners should reflect together on their respective strengths, constraints, and goals, and determine what kind of engagement is realistic, respectful, and impactful for all involved. By embracing this flexibility and humility, researchers and communities can build partnerships that honour the principles of equity, trust, and shared purpose—no matter where they fall on the continuum. What ultimately matters is not how far along the spectrum a project sits, but how authentic, reciprocal, and contextually rooted the collaboration is.

Community engagement in research is not a one-time decision, but a series of intentional choices made across each stage of the research cycle, as highlighted in the visual below. Rather than assuming a fixed level of engagement, the *Participation Choice Points in the Research Process* model encourages us to consider how community participation can vary meaningfully at each stage of the research journey. This visual map illustrates the critical participation points throughout the research process.

Visual 4-3. Participation Choice Points and Degrees of Engagement



This model offers a dynamic and practical lens for understanding how community participation can vary at each phase of the research cycle. Rather than portraying community engagement as a single, fixed status, it emphasises that at every step—partnering, designing, collecting, analysing, disseminating, and acting—researchers make deliberate choices about the level of community involvement.

The visual builds on the well-established IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, categorising engagement into five concentric levels:

1. **Inform** – the community is simply kept up to date; information flows one way
2. **Consult** – community input is sought, but the final decisions remain with researchers
3. **Involve** – community members are more directly engaged in specific activities or decisions
4. **Collaborate** – community is treated as an equal partner in the research process
5. **Empower** – the highest level of engagement, where the community leads in setting priorities, making decisions, and driving action.

What is especially valuable here is how this model intersects these levels of participation with each stage of the research process, making it crystal clear that different levels of engagement can exist within the same project. For example, a study might begin with the community in a consultative role during the design phase but move toward deeper collaboration in data analysis and even empowerment in dissemination or action. It also highlights that meaningful engagement is not all-or-nothing, but situational and phase-specific, and should be approached with intention, reflection, and flexibility.

Moreover, this model encourages researchers to assess their projects not just by the level of participation, but also by where those levels occur, and to consider whether deeper engagement could strengthen ownership, ethics, and impact, especially in later stages that are often neglected, such as dissemination and community action.

While both of these models/visuals presented here are valuable frameworks for understanding community engagement in the community-engaged research setup, they serve slightly different purposes. The first **participation continuum** (Informed → Involved → Shared Leadership → Community-Led) focuses on the overall character and direction of the partnership in community-engaged research. It illustrates a broad, developmental spectrum of trust, ownership, and shared leadership. It is ideal for helping teams define their partnership approach and intentions, particularly at a strategic or research project level. In contrast, the second one - the **Participation Choice Points** model - zooms in on the operational and procedural levels, providing a map of how participatory decisions are made at each research phase. It's constructive for planning, monitoring, and reflecting on how participation is practised in real time, stage by stage.

4.2.3. GETTING STARTED AND GOING FORWARD — A ROADMAP FOR COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

Building strong, trust-based partnerships is a foundational step in community-engaged research. These relationships, when formed with intention, effort, and humility, can generate profound mutual benefits and have a lasting impact, but they require genuine time, presence, and commitment.

There are eight questions to guide the identification of the optimal mix of partners in community-engaged research:

Q1. Who are the end users and beneficiaries of the research products, and what is the added value of their participation in the community-engaged research?

Q2. Which academic disciplines should be represented to address the complexity of the determinants of and solutions to the identified issue(s)?

Q3. Who needs to be involved to ensure that the values driving the research are respected in the planning and implementation of the research?

Q4. Who needs to be involved to ensure that the research results will be translated into practice and action?

Q5. Who needs to be involved to ensure that the research can be implemented with a balance of scientific integrity, social relevance, and cultural relevance?

Q6. Who needs to be involved to ensure that the utilisation of resources and assets from the community of interest is maximised during each phase of the participatory research process?

Q7. Who needs to be involved to facilitate the sustainability of the (a) research products, (b) capacity, (c) relationships, and (d) infrastructure?

Q8. Which other stakeholders could be involved to help the community-engaged research achieve its goals and objectives without compromising its values?

The process begins by **being present in the community**, attending local meetings, events, and informal gatherings, as well as other relevant events/meetings from a community actor's perspective. This approach allows community members to become familiar with you and fosters early trust. From the outset, it is crucial to **prioritise listening over talking**, especially when meeting with institutional/organisational leaders. Taking the time to understand the community partner's mission, structure, beneficiaries/clients, services, challenges, and prior experiences with researchers creates a basis for respectful collaboration. This relationship-building phase should also be supported by **preliminary fact-finding**, where researchers proactively learn about the broader community context and the specific issues their potential partners are addressing. Open and transparent communication—early, frequent, and honest—is essential throughout.

As trust deepens and shared interests emerge, partners can work toward **formalising the collaboration** through a **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)**. An MoU helps clarify expectations by outlining roles and responsibilities, ownership and use of data, plans for sustainability, and how decisions will be made. This formalisation process should include reflection on the history and values of all engaged partners, clarity around the research goals and the level of community involvement, governance structures, methods, and frequency of communication, as well as funding distribution and attribution of work. These discussions are not mere formalities - they are opportunities to co-create an ethical, inclusive, and sustainable foundation for the research journey ahead. In summary, strong partnerships in community-engaged research are not built overnight, but rather through relational care, a shared vision, and a deep respect for each partner's knowledge, context, and contributions.

Once a foundation of trust and mutual respect has been established, attention must turn to the **practical and logistical dimensions** of working together. Meaningful partnerships are not only relational but also operational, and managing the day-to-day realities of collaboration requires thoughtful planning, shared decision-making, and mutual accountability. Several key areas often present **administrative and organisational challenges** that, if addressed early and transparently, can strengthen the partnership and support long-term success.

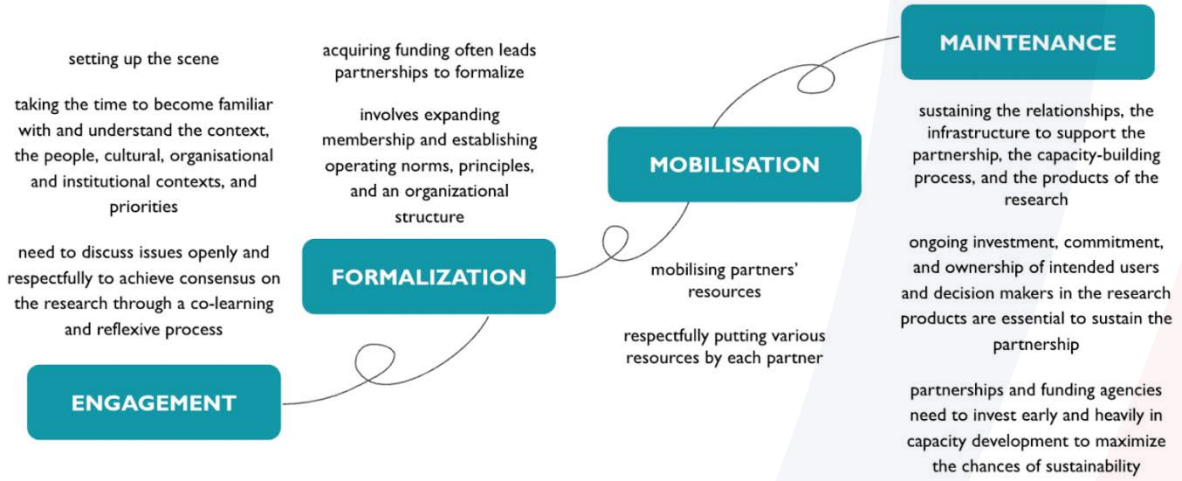
Navigating ethical approval processes, such as securing approval from institutional/university research ethical boards, is one of the first logistical hurdles. Depending on the (diverse) institutional policies, practices around higher education institutions vary as well, of course. In some cases, all partners involved in the research, including staff from the community organisation, might be obligated to complete human subjects protection training. In some cases, internal approval from the community partner's governing board may also be required.

Resources and compensation are another critical area: research draws on time, physical space, and cognitive and emotional labour, especially for community-based staff who often juggle existing responsibilities. It is essential to allocate budget lines for fair compensation and administrative support, ensuring the research does not burden or disrupt the partner's core work.

To support **sustainability**, clear and jointly developed protocols are essential, covering areas such as conflict resolution, data management, role boundaries, and ethical standards. These agreements should not be static, but revisited and adapted as the collaboration evolves.

Administrative clarity is also needed when it comes to **hiring and payment processes**, particularly when community partners or their staff are involved in data collection, facilitation, or other project-related activities. Establishing mechanisms that facilitate smooth transfers of funds and ensure accountability between the academic institution and the community partner is vital. Lastly, **training and capacity-building** should be viewed as a two-way street. A collaborative research culture thrives when academic staff invest in understanding community histories, the present context, and practices, and when community partners are invited into the research process—from design and data collection to the interpretation and dissemination of research results. By fostering a **bidirectional learning environment**, community-engaged research becomes not just a means of generating knowledge but a transformative space for building shared capacity, mutual respect, and collective agency.

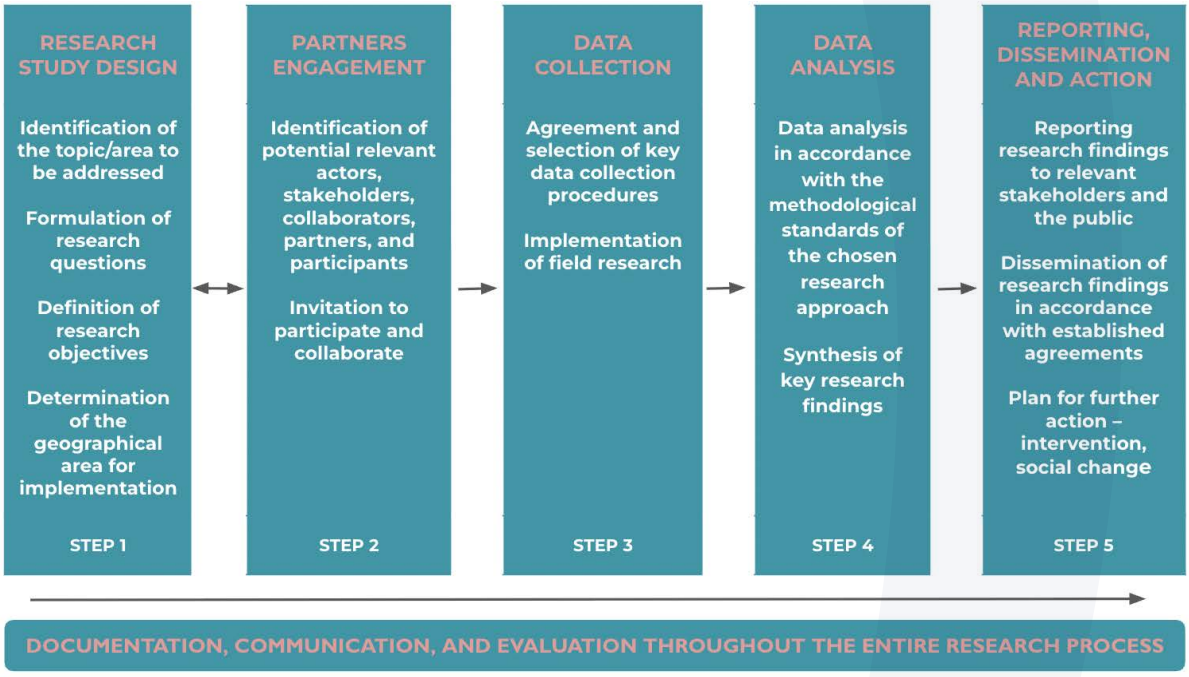
Visual 4-4. Stages of collaboration



Collaboration in community-engaged learning is a dynamic, sustained partnership process that goes beyond occasional teamwork to embrace co-learning, co-leadership, and shared ownership of research activities. It begins with **engagement**, a foundational stage where all parties take time to understand the social, cultural, and institutional contexts of one another. This involves building rapport, cultivating empathy, and ensuring open and respectful dialogue about mutual priorities and expectations. The collaboration process continues through the stages of formalisation, mobilisation, and maintenance. **Formalisation** often coincides with the acquisition of funding, prompting partners to articulate their norms, operating principles, and shared organisational structures. **Mobilisation** involves putting into action the various resources—time, skills, networks, and knowledge— contributed by each partner, ensuring they are respectfully and equitably directed toward the participatory research process. **Maintenance** is perhaps the most challenging yet essential stage, requiring continuous investment in the relationships, infrastructure, and collective capacities that underpin the research. Long-term sustainability is contingent on shared commitment and ownership, especially among intended users and decision-makers. It is therefore critical that universities, funding agencies and other institutional/organisational partners invest early in capacity-building measures that empower all stakeholders and maximise the chances of long-term success.

The following five-step framework, adapted from Burns et al. (2011), outlines the key stages in the design and implementation of community-engaged research. It provides a valuable reference point, particularly for those at the outset of such a research journey, and aligns closely with the core themes and practices discussed throughout this chapter.

Visual 4-5. Five-step framework for community-engaged research



STEP 1: DESIGNING THE RESEARCH STUDY

GOAL: To formulate the research question and determine the area of focus.

QUESTIONS to consider:

- Based on the needs, strengths, interests, mission, and capacities of the community, and the feasibility of taking specific actions or measures, what is the general topic you will focus on?
- What is the specific problem or issue?
- What research questions do you want to answer?
- What exactly do you want to find out?
- Is your research exploratory or explanatory (e.g., are there already existing studies and available results in the field, and is your intention to explore further or clarify specific relevant themes or findings)?
- Is there a hypothesis you consider essential to test?
- What do you want to highlight or draw attention to - something that is not well known or is underrepresented?
- What can you realistically influence?
- What are the approximate geographic boundaries within which you would like to engage participants and take action? Please note that community representatives may disagree with your definition of its boundaries. Consider and discuss these early on to revise them together if necessary.

STEP TWO: ENGAGING PARTNERS

GOAL: To identify partners and invite them to collaborate.

QUESTIONS to consider:

- Based on your general research question and area of focus, who are the key stakeholders?
- Which of them will you collaborate with? If you are already working with some, consider conducting a stakeholder analysis to identify who may still be missing.
- Does this group represent different segments of the community?
- What level of participation will occur in different parts of the process?
- Will you develop the research with some of your participants/service users?
- How involved will project partners be in the research process?

Clarify expectations for each participant and how each person or group wants to contribute, including their interests and the reasons behind them. What resources do they possess and are willing/able to contribute to the research process?

STEP THREE: DATA COLLECTION

GOAL: To refine research questions, select and implement data collection procedures, and identify key participants.

QUESTIONS to consider:

- Depending on the problem and participants, do you need to revise or change specific research questions?
- From whom will you collect data? Who holds specific knowledge about this topic?
- How many participants will you have? What sample size and structure are needed for it to be representative (if necessary) or rich enough in information to provide diverse insights for later analysis?
- What is your capacity to engage participants?
- How do you plan to use the results?
- Who is your target audience for the research results?
- What specific data do you need to answer your research questions? A combination of community actor insights and administrative data would be beneficial. (e.g., perceptions of safety vs. crime statistics)
- What data is already available, and what additional data can you collect?
- Will you collect the data yourself? In what form?
- Do you have additional interests beyond data collection (e.g., education, advocacy, organising events)?
- Prepare and test online tools and other data collection procedures

Check your assumptions! Will the data you collect answer your research questions and allow you to take action based on the research findings?

STEP FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

GOAL: To create and implement an analysis plan.

QUESTIONS to consider:

- What is the optimal participatory format for partner involvement in data processing and analysis?
- Prepare an analysis plan and division of tasks/responsibilities.
- What core information will the data provide?
- In what format will you conduct the analysis?
- Will you use online tools?
- Will you need to create your own templates or forms?
- Is it essential to understand the geographic (or other) dimensions of your data?
- Will you use any software tools for processing/analysing data?
- What do you expect to learn from the analysis of your specific problem?
- How will you look for patterns, spikes, or drops?
- How will the data/analysis answer your research question?
- Which questions are likely to remain unanswered, requiring further investigation?

STEP FIVE: REPORTING

GOAL: Analysis, dissemination, and action, and developing a plan for presenting and sharing the results.

QUESTIONS to consider:

- *What:* What story are you trying to tell? What do you want to show or what question are you trying to answer or address through this research?
- *Who:* Who is your audience? Who will you present these results to?
- *When:* Is this an ongoing issue, or is it time-specific?
- *How:* How will you present the findings and the research? As a report? On your website? In a public forum? At a community stakeholder meeting? At a city council or mayor's office?

What you might consider is to develop an engagement strategy for these follow-up actions - what measures, interventions, or actions do you plan to propose, and how will you ensure their implementation? In addition, it is beneficial to define how you want to involve community members, organisations, institutions, and elected officials, as strategies differ for each group. To enhance the trustworthiness of your research, consider conducting follow-up interviews with diverse communities to validate the data. Additionally, presenting the results to colleagues and community members can help gain support.

It is always good to remember that community-engaged research is not a linear process, but rather a dynamic and evolving journey grounded in relationships, reciprocity, and shared purpose. The five-step framework presented in this section offers not only a practical roadmap but also a values-driven approach to conducting research *with*, not *on*, communities. From co-designing research questions to co-interpreting results and co-creating actions, every phase presents both opportunities and responsibilities for deepening trust, redistributing power, and ensuring relevance. As such, success lies not in reaching a predetermined endpoint, but in how meaningfully we engage with one another, how open-

ly we reflect and adapt, and how intentionally we translate knowledge into action. Whether you are just getting started or continuing on this path, let this framework guide you toward building research partnerships that are ethical, impactful, and rooted in community-defined priorities.

4.2.4. INTEGRATING COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH INTO TEACHING: A STUDENT-CENTRED AND IMPACT-DRIVEN APPROACH

Community-engaged research is not only a methodology for inquiry, but also a powerful pedagogical approach that can be meaningfully embedded into university teaching. It aligns naturally with student-centred and experiential learning paradigms, particularly within the framework of service-learning. Service-learning, as a pedagogical strategy, typically includes four types of student engagement: direct service, indirect service, advocacy, and research. Among these, community-engaged research stands out for its dual emphasis on knowledge generation and civic contribution.

By integrating community-engaged research into teaching, higher education teachers invite students to explore complex societal challenges in collaboration with community partners, shifting their role from passive recipients of knowledge to active co-producers of it. This approach fosters more profound understanding, ethical awareness, and a sense of agency. At the same time, it enriches university teaching by rooting it in real-world relevance and mutual learning between academia and the community.

Community-engaged research in the classroom offers numerous pedagogical and societal benefits. It enhances students' academic learning through real-world application, strengthening their research competencies, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Moreover, it provides opportunities to grapple with ambiguity, negotiate diverse perspectives, and understand the ethical dimensions of inquiry.

Beyond skill-building, community-engaged research nurtures civic identity and responsibility. Students become more aware of social issues and are empowered to contribute to solutions alongside community members. They learn to value different types of knowledge, recognise power dynamics, and appreciate the collaborative nature of change-making. In this way, community-engaged research creates a bridge between the university and the community, preparing students to be both competent professionals and engaged citizens, teaching them that diverse interventions in the community should always be evidence-based.

To sum it up, community-engaged research provides students with the opportunity to learn by doing, while making meaningful contributions to their communities. It transforms classrooms into living laboratories for collaborative inquiry, mutual learning, and civic action.

HOW TO EMBED COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH IN COURSE DESIGN

As emphasised throughout this manual, community-engaged research is inherently contextual, and so is the process of integrating it into diverse academic courses. There is no one-size-fits-all formula, as each discipline, institutional setting, and community partnership brings unique opportunities, challenges and constraints. However, the following steps are intended to support higher education teachers, especially those new to community-engaged research, in thoughtfully embedding research into their teaching in ways that are collaborative, relevant, and responsive.

ALIGN COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES WITH COMMUNITY NEEDS

Effective integration begins by aligning course objectives with community-defined priorities. Research-based assignments should be responsive to authentic challenges or questions articulated by

community partners. Course outcomes may include students' ability to conduct ethical and participatory research, apply theoretical knowledge in context, and reflect critically on their learning journey.

CO-DESIGN PROJECTS WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Co-creation is a cornerstone of community-engaged research. Higher education teachers should work collaboratively with community organisations to identify relevant research topics and design projects that are meaningful for both students and partners. Possible activities include needs assessments, evaluations of diverse community programmes, policy reviews, participatory mapping, or youth-led inquiries. Ensuring mutual benefit is key to fostering trust and sustainability.

SUPPORT STUDENT PREPARATION AND RESEARCH ETHICS

Students must be well-prepared to engage responsibly with communities. This includes training in research methods, ethical guidelines, cultural humility, and power-awareness. Higher education teachers should facilitate discussions on positionality, reciprocity, and shared accountability. Institutional requirements, such as obtaining ethical research board approval (if applicable and relevant to the research as part of the course) and community consent, should be navigated in collaboration with students.

FACILITATE REFLECTION AND MEANING-MAKING

Structured reflection is critical for helping students connect their community research experiences with academic content and personal growth. Reflection prompts explore learning challenges, ethical dilemmas, power dynamics, and the evolution of civic identity. Reflection can be done through journals, group discussions, creative outputs, or public storytelling formats.

SHARE AND CELEBRATE RESULTS

Students should be encouraged to share their findings with both academic and community audiences. This could take the form of presentations, reports, exhibitions, policy briefs, or digital storytelling. Opportunities for co-authorship or community-led dissemination should be explored to reinforce equity and reciprocity.

The practical application of community-engaged research in teaching varies across disciplines and contexts. The following examples illustrate how community-engaged research has been successfully embedded into university courses, demonstrating its adaptability and transformative potential in real-world learning environments.

Example 1:

Public Health Students and Community Needs Assessment

In a third-year public health course, students partnered with a local health NGO to conduct a needs assessment among older adults regarding access to preventive health services. Students designed the research tools in collaboration with the NGO, carried out interviews, and presented their findings at a community roundtable. The results directly informed a new outreach programme initiated by the NGO.

Example 2:

Urban Planning Students and Participatory Mapping

A service-learning course in urban planning engaged students in participatory mapping with residents

of a low-income neighbourhood to document environmental hazards and access to green spaces. The students worked closely with a neighbourhood council, and their data and visualisations were later used to support a municipal funding application for green infrastructure.

Example 3:

Education Students and Inclusive Teaching Research

Pre-service teachers in a pedagogy course collaborated with a local elementary school to investigate inclusive classroom strategies. Through observations, interviews, and focus groups with teachers and students, the university students helped identify areas for improvement and co-developed a set of recommendations and training materials with their school partners.

Example 4:

Environmental Science Students and Climate Adaptation Strategies

In an interdisciplinary environmental science course, students collaborated with a coastal municipality facing increasing flood risks due to climate change. Together with local planners and NGOs, students co-developed a research project to assess community perceptions of flood resilience measures and mapped zones of highest vulnerability. Their findings informed the city's climate adaptation strategy and sparked a community workshop series on sustainable water management.

Example 5:

Biology Students and Invasive Species Monitoring

Undergraduate biology students partnered with a regional park authority to monitor the spread of invasive plant species in a protected wetland ecosystem. Working alongside park rangers and community volunteers, students conducted field research, analysed species distribution patterns, and developed public information materials to raise awareness and engage local schools in monitoring efforts. The project contributed to an ongoing ecological restoration initiative.

Example 6:

Engineering Students and Water Purification Solutions

In a senior engineering design course, students collaborated with a rural community organisation to research and prototype low-cost, locally adaptable water purification systems. The students conducted on-site needs assessments, tested materials, and iterated solutions in partnership with community members. Their work led to the installation of a pilot system and informed grant applications for scaling the solution across neighbouring villages.

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AND ENABLERS

Incorporating community-engaged research into teaching is rewarding but complex. Common challenges include limited time for research project coordination, varying levels of student preparedness, and logistical hurdles such as research fieldwork, coordinating students' schedules and other obligations, funding, and ethics approval. Additionally, community partners may face constraints in capacity or continuity.

Successful community-engaged research integration relies on enablers such as institutional support, clear communication, and strong community relationships. Co-created assessment rubrics, flexible course design, and recognition of community expertise also contribute to meaningful engagement.

Faculty development opportunities and peer mentoring can support higher education teachers new to community-engaged research.

Instead of drawing a classical conclusion, let us say here at the end that, when thoughtfully embedded into academic courses, community-engaged research transforms learning into a process of mutual inquiry, societal relevance, and civic formation. It empowers students to transition from knowledge consumers to active co-creators and from classroom learners to community changemakers. For universities committed to societal impact and democratic engagement, community-engaged research offers a compelling model for reimagining the classroom as a space of connection, collaboration, contribution and students' agency empowerment.

4.2.5. INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENTS AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

Community-engaged research flourishes within institutions that are both strategically committed and structurally prepared to support such work. An institution's policies, strategic documents, and leadership rhetoric play a pivotal role in legitimising and resourcing community-engaged research. Universities committed to community-engaged research often reflect this through mission statements aligned, for example, with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2017), the principles of Responsible Research and Innovation (European Commission, 2012), or declarations such as the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi) Barcelona Declaration, Talloires Declarations and many others that complement each other. Institutional commitments should translate into tangible support mechanisms such as funding schemes, staff development opportunities, and community engagement offices.

Despite growing interest in third mission activities, challenges persist in terms of fully integrating and recognising community-engaged research within academic evaluation and funding structures. As illustrated by Burstein (2005), motivation and ownership in collaborative research stem from the alignment of institutional goals with the self-determination of participants. Universities should therefore build cross-sectoral strategies that support this alignment, including recognition of engagement in career progression, interdisciplinary structures, and collaborative governance. Frameworks such as the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification and the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG, 2015) guide embedding engagement across institutional functions. Maiter et al. (2008) further argue that ethical frameworks must be internalised at all institutional levels to prevent instrumentalisation of community knowledge.

What plays a critical role in supporting or hindering community-engaged research is institutional culture. Cultures that value collaboration, reciprocity, inclusivity, and reflection foster the kind of long-term partnerships needed for impactful community-engaged research. Leadership at all levels—from rectors and deans to department heads—should champion community-engaged research not only in words but also through action and the allocation of resources. This includes legitimising diverse forms of knowledge and ensuring ethical co-production (Maiter et al., 2008). Transformational leadership in this context involves facilitating spaces for dialogue, experimentation, and community validation of research agendas; it requires a commitment to nurturing engagement cultures grounded in ethical and inclusive practices.

To end this section, let us draw your attention once more to some of the core issues. Community-engaged research is not just a method - it is a transformative stance toward knowledge creation that redefines the role of the university in (contemporary) society. It challenges traditional academic boundaries by recognising that knowledge is co-produced, that learning is reciprocal, and that research must be responsive to lived realities. As a dynamic and relational practice, community-engaged research

calls on researchers, educators, students, and communities to share power, embrace complexity, and collaborate toward change. Whether integrated into teaching, embedded in institutional strategies, or practised in collaboration with diverse community actors, community-engaged research represents a commitment to relevance, justice, and societal impact. Its greatest strength lies not in standardisation, but in its responsiveness to context and people. In an era where the legitimacy and public mission of universities are increasingly questioned, community-engaged research offers a hopeful, rigorous, and actionable path forward—anchored in mutual trust, community-defined priorities, and a shared vision for more inclusive and equitable futures.

5. REFLECTION, EVALUATION AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

5.1. STRUCTURED STUDENT REFLECTIONS IN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING

We do not learn from experience… we learn from reflecting on experience.
— John Dewey

This simple yet profound statement by John Dewey, a pioneering philosopher and educational reformer, serves as the cornerstone of this section. Dewey's life's work emphasised that education should not be about the passive transmission of knowledge but should instead stem from real-life, meaningful experiences. However, as he rightly pointed out, experience alone is not enough. It is the act of *reflection* - of analysing, questioning, and making sense of our experiences - that transforms them into learning. Dewey reminds us that experience alone does not automatically result in learning. It is only when we *pause*, *analyse*, and *interpret* our experiences that authentic learning occurs. Think of how many times people go through the same situation - whether personal, social, or even global - and emerge unchanged. That is because the mere repetition of an experience does not equal growth. Without conscious reflection, we are doomed to recycle old patterns, miss lessons, and repeat mistakes.

Dewey's wisdom is grounded in the idea that learning is an active and intentional process. Reflection allows us to interrogate what happened, how we felt, what assumptions we held, what surprised us, and how it might shape our future actions. This is especially relevant in various modes of community-engaged teaching and learning, where emotional, ethical, and social dimensions intersect with academic learning.

In a way, Dewey is calling for a reflective pause - a moment of metacognition - where we ask ourselves:

- *What have I learned?*
- *Why does this matter?*
- *What does this mean to me?*
- *What will I do differently next time?*
- *How has this shaped who I am or who I want to become?*

It is in that reflective space that transformation begins.

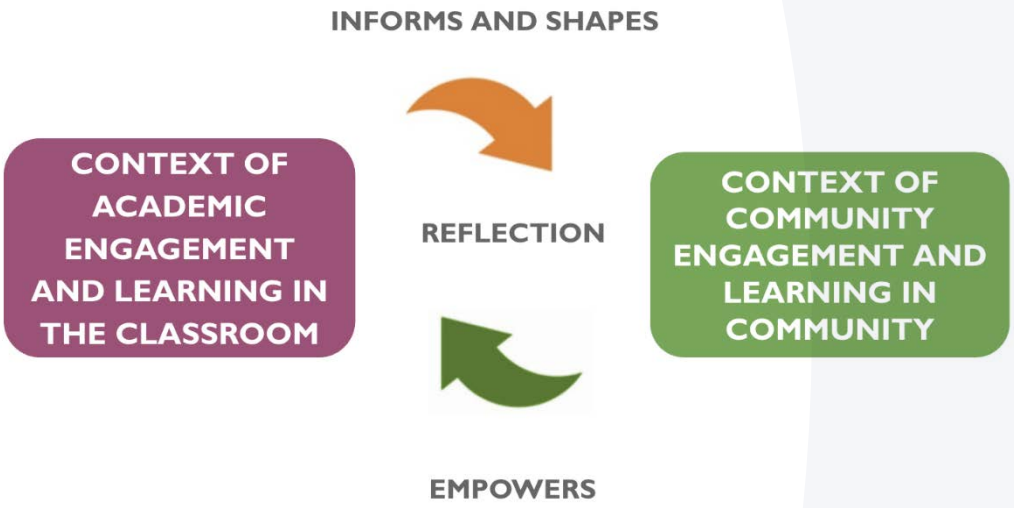
In the context of **community-engaged teaching and learning (CETL)**, structured reflection is not an optional add-on; it is a fundamental component. It is the mechanism through which civic engagement becomes a pedagogical tool, and through which personal transformation can catalyse social change. When students are guided to critically examine their experiences, assumptions, role in the community, and the broader social implications of their actions, learning deepens and becomes more enduring.

Structured reflection, when intentionally designed and embedded throughout the service-learning course, helps students to:

- Make sense of complex social issues;

- Bridge academic theories with real-life community challenges;
- Explore their own values, ethical standpoints, and responsibilities;
- Envision future civic and professional paths rooted in solidarity and social justice.

Visual 5-1. Reflection in academic and community-engaged contexts



Reflection is, therefore, widely acknowledged as the cornerstone of meaningful learning within community-engaged teaching and learning. It is the process through which students critically analyse their (prior) knowledge and value dispositions related to the phenomenon of the community-engaged course/project/experience, the community experiences themselves, make connections with academic content, and engage in personal and social transformation. Without structured reflection, community-based activities risk being reduced to only acts of charity and solidarity, rather than intentional learning opportunities embedded in pedagogical practice.

Reflection is what transforms experience into insight. In the context of CETL, it becomes the bridge that connects service with learning outcomes. It allows students to transfer knowledge gained from academic contexts to real-world community challenges, and vice versa. Crucially, reflection deepens students' understanding of social issues, builds their civic identity, and nurtures dispositions for active citizenship. It also introduces a critical pedagogical element, where learners are encouraged to question assumptions, recognise structural inequalities, and imagine more just alternatives.

In what follows, we explore the **phases, models, and variations** of structured reflection, emphasising its role as a vital bridge between community engagement and transformative education.

5.1.1. STRUCTURED STUDENT REFLECTIONS: MODES AND PHASES

Structured reflection in CETL is not a one-time event, but a process that unfolds in three interrelated phases (Merriam & Bierema, 2014): before the action (service/experience), during the action, and after the action.

Visual 5-2. Structured reflection

Source: Merriam & Bierema, 2014

1. REFLECTION BEFORE THE ACTION:

This phase invites students to critically examine their prior knowledge, values, expectations, and feelings about the upcoming service. Prompts might include:

- What do I already know about this issue or community?
- What are my beliefs or assumptions?
- What do I hope to learn or achieve?

2. REFLECTION DURING THE ACTION:

Conducted in real time, this reflection helps students stay present and critically aware of their experiences. They are encouraged to observe, ask questions, and analyse interactions as they happen. This supports real-time learning and adaptive responses. Questions include:

- What am I noticing?
- How are people responding to our presence?
- What challenges are emerging and why?

REFLECTION AFTER THE ACTION/ON THE ACTION:

This post-engagement phase focuses on drawing connections between the experience and learning goals. It enables students to assess personal growth, understand the broader impact of their actions, and consider future commitments. Reflective prompts might include:

- What did I learn, and how did I change?
- How did our actions impact the community?
- What values or insights have emerged?

INSPIRING REFLECTION THROUGH GUIDING QUESTIONS

The following list of questions is organised according to the three key phases of structured reflection in service-learning: before, during, and after the community engagement experience. Rather than serving as a rigid checklist or recipe, these prompts are meant to inspire deeper thinking, foster self-awareness, and encourage critical engagement with both the learning process and the broader social context. Educators and students are invited to adapt, select, or creatively expand on these questions to suit their course objectives, community settings, and personal journeys.

Reflection, after all, is not about having the correct answers - it is about asking the right questions.

BEFORE THE SERVICE PROJECT

1. What are some personal perceptions that you have about the agency you will be working with?
2. What characteristics make a community successful?
3. What are some of your perceptions or beliefs about the population you will be serving?
4. What is the identified problem or community need?
5. How is your community partner site addressing that need?
6. Why are you needed?
7. What concerns, if any, do you have about working in the community?
8. What do you hope to gain from this experience?
9. How does your service-learning experience relate to the learning objectives of the course?
10. What would you like to change about your community?
11. Report a civic experience you have had in the past. Include comments about what type of difference you made to those you served. How did you feel about your service? What, if any, attitudes or beliefs changed for you as a result of your service?
12. What communities or identity groups are you a member of? How might this be related to your commitment to service?
13. What do you think you will do, and what attitude do you think you will have?
14. What needs will your project help address or fulfil?
15. What do you think are the causes of those needs?
16. How do you think people contribute to this problem? How do we help to solve it?
17. How does what you perceive your role in this project to be compare with how others think you will see your role?

DURING THE SERVICE PROJECT

18. How is your service-learning experience related to the readings, discussions, and lectures in class?
19. What happened?
20. What did you observe?
21. What issue is being addressed, or what population is being served?
22. How is your experience different from what you expected?

23. Identify three areas where you could use additional guidance and learning to be more effective.
24. Identify three strengths you demonstrated in your service placement.
25. Relate your service experience to the text/reading/chapter.
26. What resources are missing from the volunteer site, and how can you, as students, remedy this situation?
27. What is the relationship of your service to the "real world"?
28. How have you been challenged during your community work experience? Have you felt like an outsider at your site? How does being an outsider differ from being an insider?
29. What new questions do you have?
30. What new ideas do you have?
31. Has the reflection discussed over the last week been effective?
32. What do you think is (will be) the most valuable service you offer?
33. What books have you read?
34. Describe your community-engaged experience. Include a description of the agency or organisation you will be working for. What is their purpose? How big are they? What is their history? What is their mission? What are their goals?
35. How does the community-engaged experience relate to your long-term personal and/or career goals?
36. What have you learned about yourself since the beginning of your service?
37. Have you ever felt hopeless or inadequate in your service? How has this impacted your service? How has this been addressed?
38. What did you do today (or this week)? What did you learn? Did you make a difference?
39. Identify a person, group, or community that you got to know this semester who is significantly "other" for you. What are the needs or challenges facing them that particularly got to you? How have you allowed yourself to be changed as a result of knowing these individuals?
40. Who impacts the way you view the situation or experience? What lens are you viewing from?
41. What did you like or dislike about the experience?
42. What did you learn about the people and the community?
43. What are some of the pressing needs and issues in the community? How does this project address those needs? What is the root cause of the problem addressed? What should others do about this issue?
44. What would you like to learn more about related to your topic or issue? What information can you share with your peers or the community?
45. Have you encountered a challenging situation that you would like to discuss with your instructor?

AFTER THE SERVICE PROJECT

46. Describe what you have learned about yourself as a result of your service.
47. What have you learned about your community?

48. What have you contributed to the community?
49. What values, opinions, and beliefs have changed?
50. In your opinion, what was the most important lesson learned during the course?
51. Do you have a different picture of the community now that you've done the volunteer work/project?
52. Have you acquired a new skill or clarified a long-held interest?
53. What learning occurred for you in this experience? How can you apply this learning?
54. What follow-up is needed to address any challenges or difficulties that may arise?
55. If you could redo the project, what would you do differently?
56. What specific skills have you used at your community site?
57. Describe a person you've encountered in the community who made a strong impression on you, positive or negative.
58. Talk about any disappointments or successes of your project. What did you learn from them?
59. Complete this sentence: Because of my service-learning, I am…
60. What about your community involvement has been an eye-opening experience?
61. Do you see the benefits of doing community work? Why or why not?
62. How have the environment and social conditions affected the people at your site?
63. What institutional structures are in place at your site or in the community? How do they affect the people you work with?
64. Has the experience changed your worldview? If so, how?
65. Has your service experience expanded your career options?
66. Would you be interested in continuing your involvement with this group or social issue? If so, why and how should this be done?
67. What were the most difficult or satisfying parts of your work? Why?
68. Talk about any disappointments and successes of your project. What did you learn from them?
69. How were your values expressed through your community work?
70. What sorts of things made you feel uncomfortable when you were working in the community?
71. Did anything surprise you? If so, what?
72. What were the most difficult and most satisfying parts of the service for you? Why?

THE "4 C'S" MODEL OF EFFECTIVE REFLECTION

To ensure that reflection in service-learning goes beyond superficial responses and fosters deep learning, Eyler, Giles, and Schmiedes (1996) proposed the **"4 C's" model** - a widely adopted framework for designing meaningful reflective practice. This model emphasises that adequate reflection is not accidental or incidental; it must be intentionally structured to support student learning and community engagement.

The four core principles—**Contextualised, Continuous, Challenging, Connected** —help educators create reflective environments that are rigorous, relevant, and transformative. Each principle contrib-

utes to shaping reflection as a dynamic process that empowers students to make sense of their experiences and develop as critically engaged citizens.

Continuous - Reflection is an ongoing process embedded throughout the course, from preparation to conclusion. Multiple opportunities for reflection help students integrate learning with evolving real-world challenges.

Challenging - Reflection must prompt students to think critically, question assumptions, and explore diverse perspectives. A safe yet intellectually demanding environment is essential for fostering such inquiry.

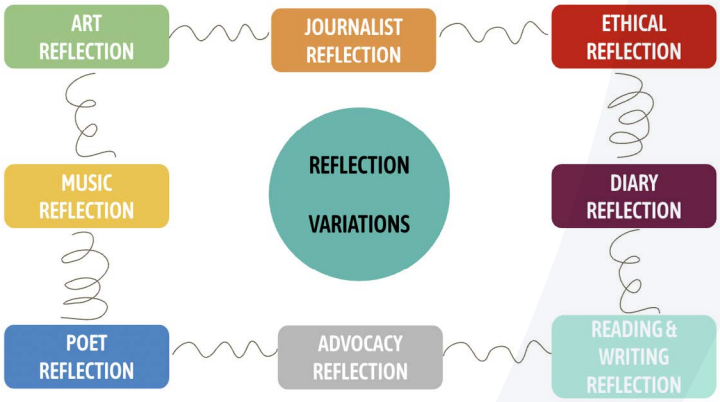
Connected - Reflective activities should be directly linked to course objectives and learning outcomes. They help students bridge the gap between theory and practice, connecting disciplinary knowledge with civic engagement.

Contextualised - Reflection must relate meaningfully to both the community context and the student's personal experience. It should take into account cultural, social, and individual dimensions of learning.

5.1.2. VARIED MODES OF REFLECTION

To accommodate diverse learning styles and engage students creatively, a wide range of structured reflection formats should be employed. These include both more traditional and artistic modes, and can be used through the phases (before, during and after):

Visual 5-3. Variations of assignments of a reflective nature



ARTISTIC AND CREATIVE MODES

Artistic reflection challenges students to explore their community engagement experience through metaphors, concepts, visual expressions, colours, lines, and other elements. While it should never be imposed, it is certainly worth considering as part of multi-modal reflective assignments, as it may align with the learning styles of some students. Activities may include writing poems or short stories, taking photographs, or creating paintings or drawings that symbolically express their experience of community engagement.

Poet Reflection: Students compose poems before and after the project to explore shifts in their perceptions and emotions. Poems can be presented at project celebrations.

Music Reflection: Through songwriting, collaborative performances, and recorded reflections, stu-

dents express the emotional and social dimensions of their engagement.

Art Reflection: Includes drawing, photography, posters, and collages. Students may document before-and-after scenes to analyse changes and their contributions.

MEDIA AND ADVOCACY MODES

Media and advocacy reflections invite students to engage with their service-learning experiences through critical communication and civic voice. These modes go beyond personal introspection, encouraging students to interpret and amplify the social relevance of their work. Whether through journalistic inquiry—such as analysing media narratives, conducting interviews, or producing podcasts—or through advocacy efforts like writing to policymakers or proposing public awareness campaigns, students are empowered to articulate their insights, question dominant discourses, and contribute meaningfully to public dialogue and social change.

Journalist Reflection: Involves analysing local media coverage of project themes, conducting interviews, and creating student-led newsletters, journals, or podcasts that document the service-learning journey, while addressing community/societal issues as part of their engagement.

One example of an assignment that can be developed as part of this particular structured reflection is the PRO-CON MATRIX assignment. It challenges students to integrate diverse ideas, perspectives, and sources, and to articulate their position regarding the validity and strength of the arguments presented. In completing the task, students are encouraged to draw upon what they have learned in class, relevant literature, and their personal experience of community engagement. The matrix can be developed either in relation to specific theoretical frameworks or based on students' personal opinions and reasoning.

Advocacy Reflection: Students write persuasive letters or policy briefs to policymakers, simulate debates with opposing stakeholders (e.g., a sceptical mayor), or propose media projects promoting community issues. Students could write letters or proposals to TV stations, radio stations, or publishers to advocate for their show or segment on a selected topic related to the community needs/issues they wish to address.

WRITING AND ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

Writing-based and ethical reflection modes provide students with structured opportunities to process their experiences in depth, linking personal insights with academic content and broader social concerns. Through reflective journaling, students develop a sustained, evolving narrative of their learning journey, capturing not only what they did but also how they thought, felt, and changed along the way. The variety of journal types enables personalisation and flexibility, allowing students to connect course theory with real-world engagement in ways that suit their learning styles.

In parallel, ethical reflection challenges students to grapple with complex dilemmas, recognise conflicting values, and confront real-life tensions encountered in the field. This mode of reflection cultivates ethical awareness and a sense of responsibility, encouraging students to move beyond passive observation toward critical citizenship. Together, these modes facilitate a thoughtful integration of self, theory, and society, which is essential for transformative learning in service-learning contexts.

Diary Reflection: A continuous, personal log capturing the student's thoughts, learning curves, and growth over time. There are usually four common types of reflective journals:

Key Phrase Journal - Students create a unique list of key terms and phrases that they use to identify, describe, and connect their real-life experiences with core concepts from the course content.

Double-Entry Journal - Left side: Students describe their engagement - personal thoughts, impressions, and reactions related to their service-learning experience. Right side: Students analyse how their impressions and descriptions relate to key theoretical concepts discussed in class.

Three-Part Journal - Divided into three components: (I) Description of the service experience, including interactions, relationships, and specific moments that touched, confused, or moved them, as well as decisions made regarding future actions. (II) Analysis of the relationship between course content and lived experience, integrating concepts that help interpret their engagement and inform future behaviour. (III) Personal development - students reflect on how their community engagement experience connects to beliefs, values, and personal goals.

Critical Incident Journal - Students focus on a specific crucial incident during their community engagement. They are expected to explore their thoughts, emotional responses, and possible actions or reactions, and connect them to relevant theoretical frameworks that help unpack the situation.

Reading & Writing Reflection: Engages students in analysing relevant literature, media, and conflicting viewpoints, culminating in essays, opinion pieces, or fictional dialogues exploring the project themes.

Ethical Reflection: Promotes critical examination of ethical dilemmas arising in the project context, encourages students to co-create case studies, and reflects on values and social responsibilities.

Everyday ethical dilemmas – for example, media analysis – students are provided with a set of newspaper articles focusing on a relevant theme of interest. They conduct a discourse analysis, identifying conflicting value orientations and explaining how course content, assigned readings, and their community engagement have helped them better understand such situations, different perspectives, and potentially adopt or revise their own stance.

Ethical dilemma encountered - students can also write a reflection on a specific moral dilemma they experienced during their community engagement. This includes a description of the context, the people involved, their roles and power dynamics, how the student felt, what actions they took, how they coped with the dilemma, and a reflection on their own behaviour and reactions, as well as the consequences. Wherever possible, the reflection should be connected to relevant course content.

WHAT CRITICAL REFLECTION IS AND IS NOT?

Structured reflection in community-engaged teaching and learning (CETL) is not a superficial or routine activity, but rather a deep intellectual and personal process that lies at the heart of meaningful experiential learning. It challenges students to critically engage with their community experiences, examine their assumptions, connect theory with practice, and develop a sense of civic responsibility.

This table, inspired by the previous work of Pigza (2010) and Merriam & Bierema (2014), outlines the essential characteristics of what critical reflection in CETL courses truly is - and clarifies common misconceptions about what it is not. Understanding this distinction is crucial to creating learning environments where reflection serves as a transformative force, not just a requirement.

Critical reflection in CETL courses is…	Critical reflection in CETL courses is not…
Reflection is a form of critical thinking that supports learning goals and the achievement of learning outcomes, expecting students to observe wisely and cleverly, demonstrate inductive or deductive reasoning, and consider multiple perspectives, theories, and types of data. Reflection is an intellectual activity that differs from dominant academic culture by intentionally involving the whole person, connecting community experiences with educational content, and cultivating students' awareness of themselves as active participants in community and public life. Reflection is a process that contributes to creating educational environments where a diverse population of students can grow by recognising the influence of identity and context, and by being invited to construct and share their own sense of meaning.	Reflection is not a didactic or methodological review of activities and events during community engagement. Reflection is not an emotional filter for positive feelings resulting from engagement in the community, nor a filter for feelings of guilt for not doing more. Reflection is not a time for emotionally charged "soap opera" conversations. Reflection is not a tidy and straightforward exercise that neatly closes the experience.

Integrating structured, diverse, and meaningful reflection into community-engaged learning ensures that students not only act but also grow. It transforms community engagement into a pedagogical tool that cultivates self-awareness, critical thinking, empathy, and democratic participation. Structured reflection must therefore be deliberately designed, facilitated, and assessed as a central component of community-engaged learning.

5.2. MONITORING, EVALUATION AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT IN UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Effective and sustainable community engagement in higher education relies on mutually beneficial partnerships between the university and the community. Evaluating the impact of community engagement is crucial for the university to identify areas for improvement in the "service" aspect and to enhance the quality of service provided. Furthermore, this evaluation allows the university to present its results and benefits to the community, the general public, the media, and potential donors.

Understanding the concept of "evaluation" as assessing the value of activities is essential. It determines the significance or quality of programme results. Proper evaluation of community engagement will enable the university to identify and assess diverse activities, including those that have proven effective and those that may require refinement or modification. It also helps to highlight promising activities, enabling the university to allocate its resources effectively to achieve the most significant impact in the future.

Evaluation of the impact of community engagement does not need to be overly time-consuming. It may concentrate on a specific aspect or the whole programme. Crucially, it is not merely an exercise. Instead, it should identify shortcomings, anticipate potential risks, and provide guidance for im-

provement. Evaluation frameworks should be implemented to ensure that community and academic partners share respect for the values, strategies, and actions that promote genuine collaboration to address problems affecting the welfare of the focus community (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010).

Planning the evaluation process is paramount. One must decide on the most efficacious instruments and the optimal approach, depending on the targeted objectives. Establishing the appropriate plan from the outset ensures the acquisition of all requisite data and only the data needed, thereby eliminating the need for additional time spent later sorting out the relevant information. Cognisance of the evaluation scope from the inception likewise facilitates the selection of the most appropriate tools for the given course or project.

The community impact measurement and evaluation can focus on diverse stakeholders. These may include community partners and beneficiaries of the community-engaged initiatives within and beyond the partnership organisations and the broader community. Not all community-engaged projects are implemented within an organisational or institutional setting. The service recipients may or may not be affiliated with an organisation. In this guide, the term "community impact" encompasses all stakeholders in the evaluation.

Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2024) distinguish between **monitoring and evaluation**. Monitoring involves collecting the facts and figures related to community-engaged initiatives, courses, or programmes. This can include, for example, the number of community partners, the number of beneficiaries served, and the number of community-engaged projects or activities implemented. Evaluation, on the other hand, entails using the collected information to answer questions about the performance of the university's community engagement, identify gaps and areas for improvement, and demonstrate the outcomes and impact, such as the difference the university makes or the added value it brings to the community. The evaluation will analyse monitoring information, feedback, case studies, and collected experiences. Monitoring information describes what has occurred, while evaluation represents a further step, making a value judgment based on this descriptive information to determine whether the impact is sufficient and whether the resources invested in the programme are worthwhile.

Evaluation is a continuous process, not a one-time event, and should include measures throughout the engaged project's life cycle to assess the context, methods used, and impacts (Luger et al., 2020). While quantitative data provides numbers and statistics, qualitative data offers insights into the experiences and stories of community partners and beneficiaries.

5.2.1. TYPES OF EVALUATION

There are two general approaches to evaluation: **formative evaluation** and **summative evaluation**.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

The formative evaluation provides an enhanced understanding of the service-learning program and relevant and timely feedback to the university and community partners. The role of formative assessment may vary for the initial introduction of service-learning or the commencement of collaboration with a particular community partner, and differ for an established community-engaged programme or partnership. Indeed, in the case of a new programme or partnership, the role of formative evaluation is quite crucial. It confers significant benefits and substantial added value to all the staff involved, as the early identification of any shortcomings allows for their prompt correction and minimisation of negative impacts. The significance of formative evaluation in longer-term programmes may be that it enables early and relatively effortless adaptation to changing conditions.

Examples of the questions for the formative evaluation:

1. How do you view the implementation of service-learning from its inception to the present?
2. What works?
3. What does not work?
4. What do you think should be improved?
5. How can we improve it?

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

Summative evaluation is employed when it becomes necessary to assess the attained results and to determine the continuation or termination of the service-learning programme. In this instance, the review seeks not to identify suggestions for enhancement, but to affirm and certify the achievement or non-achievement of the established objectives.

According to the subject of the evaluation, a distinction is made between **process evaluation** and **effects evaluation**.

PROCESS EVALUATION

Process evaluation focuses on how a given intervention, in our case, service-learning, is implemented in a particular organisation. Process evaluation focuses on the context (context evaluation) or the implementation itself (implementation evaluation). Context evaluation examines how the context affects community engagement and identifies factors that facilitate or hinder implementation. Implementation evaluation focuses on how community engagement is implemented in the concrete practice of the organisation.

EFFECTS EVALUATION

The effects evaluation (also referred to as results or outcomes evaluation) focuses primarily on describing, exploring, and determining changes in the target group or other stakeholders resulting from the intervention (Fitzpatrick, Sander, & Worthen, 2004). The primary purpose of this evaluation is to analyse changes in the target group's behaviour after their participants were exposed to the intervention. In our case, the effects evaluation focuses on the effects that community engagement has on the communities, community partners, and beneficiaries.

5.2.2. DIFFERENT MODELS FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY-ENGAGED ACTIVITIES ON THE COMMUNITY

Several theoretical frameworks were developed to evaluate the impact of community engagement on the community. Working with these models can help you establish the theoretical foundation for your evaluation.

GELMOND'S TWOFOLD CLASSIFICATION OF THE EFFECTS OF COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING

Gelmon et al. (2018) suggested a twofold classification of the effects of community-engaged learning on community partners: (1) effects on community partner organisation and (2) effects on uni-

versity-community partnership. While the first one includes economic and social benefits, as well as the ability to accomplish the organisation's mission, the latter consists of effects on the relationship between the community and the university – i.e., the quality of university-community interactions, satisfaction, and sustainability of the partnership. The authors also offer a helpful assessment matrix for the community impact assessment (Table 5-1).

Table 5-1 Matrix for the community assessment

What do we want to know? (concepts)	How will we know it? (Indicators)	How will we measure it? (methods)	Who/what will provide the data? (sources)
Variables about the community partner organisation			
Capacity to fulfil the organisation's mission	Types of services provided Number of beneficiaries served Number of students involved A variety of activities are offered Insights into assets and needs	Survey Interview Focus groups Documentation review Critical incident review	Community partner Students Faculty Advisory committees Governing board
Economic benefits	Identification of new staff Impact on resource utilisation Identification of funding opportunities	Interview Focus groups Documentation review	Community partner Students Faculty Governing board
Social benefits	New connections and networks Number of volunteers Impact on community issues	Interview Focus groups Documentation review	Community partner Students Faculty Governing board

What do we want to know? (concepts)	How will we know it? (Indicators)	How will we measure it? (methods)	Who/what will provide the data? (sources)
Variables about the community-university partnership			
Nature of community-university partnership	Creation of a partnership Kinds of activities conducted Barriers/facilitators	Interview Documentation review Critical incident review	Community partner Faculty Governing board
Nature of community-university interaction	Involvement in each other's activities Communication patterns Community awareness of university programs and activities University awareness of community programs and activities	Interview Focus groups Documentation review	Community partner Students Faculty Advisory committees
Satisfaction with partnership	Perception of mutuality and reciprocity Responsiveness to concerns Willingness to provide feedback	Survey Interview Focus groups	Community partner Faculty Governing board
Sustainability of partnership	Duration Evolution	Survey Interview Critical incident review	Community partner Faculty Governing board

Source: Gelmon et al., 2018

TRIPARTITE MODEL FOR ASSESSING COMMUNITY IMPACT

Lau & Snell (2020) propose the Conceptual Framework of Community Impacts Arising from Service-Learning. In this tripartite model, the community impact is analysed from three perspectives: the community partner, the end beneficiary, and the intervention itself.

Visual 5-3. Tripartite Model for Assessing Community Impact

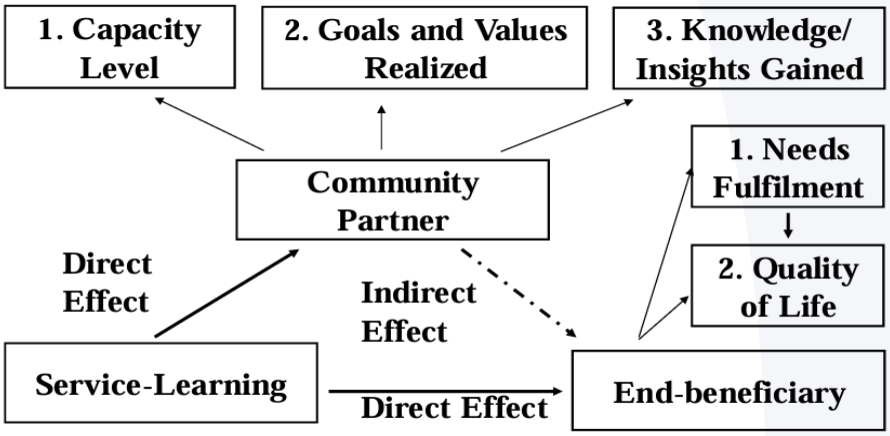


Figure 1. The Proposed Tripartite Model for Assessing Community Impact.

Source: Lau & Snell, 2020

The model in Figure 5-3 identifies three domains of impact on the community partner organisation: (1) increased capacity, (2) furtherance of goals and values, and (3) knowledge/ insights gained. The model also identifies (a) needs fulfilment and (b) quality of life as two broad impact domains for end-beneficiaries. Lau and Snell (2021) also developed a Community Impact Feedback Questionnaire based on this model, which can be found in the tool section.

IMPACT MEASUREMENT MATRIX BASED ON THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF CAPITAL AND STAKEHOLDERS

Inspiring for community impact assessment in community engagement, this model can also be used to measure the impact of volunteering, focusing on different target groups for which volunteering can make a difference: volunteers, volunteer-involving organisations, users/beneficiaries, and the broader community. In our case, we included only the last three groups in assessing the impact of community engagement. The model also identifies different ways in which volunteering can make a difference and includes **dimensions**:

- Human capital - people's knowledge, skills and health;
- Economic capital - benefits or costs with a financial value;
- Social capital - more cooperative relationships between people;
- Cultural capital - a sense of individual identity and understanding of others' identity.

The table below shows how each stakeholder mentioned above can be impacted in each dimension. The impact varies from organisation to organisation and project to project. Still, it can help you decide which aspects to assess and communicate.

Table 3 Impact measurement matrix based on the different types of capital and stakeholders

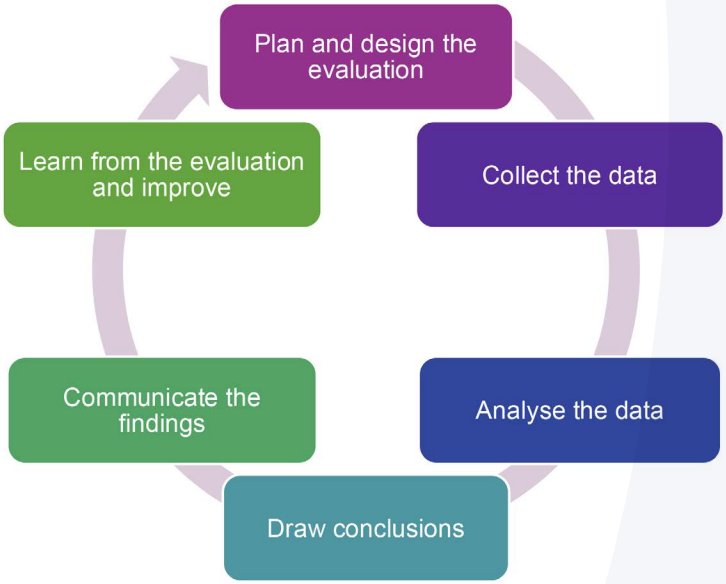
	Organisation	Beneficiaries	Community
Human capital (people's knowledge, skills, attitudes, health)	- increased personal development and skills of staff - increased motivation of staff to develop professional skills - increased staff satisfaction and retention	- increased personal development (self-esteem, empathy, optimism) - increased skills and abilities - improved physical and mental health - more significant sense of well-being among beneficiaries	- improved skills and a more productive workforce - increased personal development - increased level of awareness of the local community regarding local problems
Social Capital (more cooperative relationships between people)	- improved organisational working procedures - more significant income for the institution - job creation - improvement of human interaction relationships within the organisation - increase in the organisation's visibility	- new friendships, contacts and network - greater involvement in local activities, groups, or clubs - increased level of empowerment for acting	- increased social networks - enhanced trust and participation - more organisations working together
Economic Capital (benefits of costs with a financial value)	- increase the financial value of the organisation's activities (higher impact for the exact costs)	- increased access to services that they would otherwise have to buy - increased employability opportunities due to newly developed skills and personal development	- enhanced value for the money in public services - increase of investment financial value (higher impact for the exact costs) - reduced anti-social behaviour
Cultural Capital (sense of one's own identity and understanding of others' identity)	- Services are more reflective of cultural diversity within the community - greater diversity in the organisation	- more significant sense of belonging to a group, taking part in culture, and expressing values - increased understanding of others' cultures and values - increased opportunities to practice or express trust - development of desirable behaviours - improvement of civic activism (beneficiaries can become volunteers)	- Volunteering is recognised, promoted, and practised as a desirable behaviour model - new values are being promoted within the community - solidarity, human dignity, human rights

Source: Bere, Bere & Pintea, 2019

5.2.3. PLANNING THE COMMUNITY-ENGAGEMENT EVALUATION

Evaluating the community impact of university-community engagement is a multi-step process that helps ensure accountability, mutual benefit, and continuous improvement. Based on literature in the fields of community engagement and impact evaluation, we offer a set of straightforward steps to guide institutions, faculty, and community partners in assessing outcomes. These steps are designed to be flexible and applicable to various types of engagement initiatives, ranging from collaborative research and capacity-building to long-term partnerships. An overview of the process is illustrated in Visual 5-4.

Visual 5-4: Steps of evaluation of service-learning community impact



PLANNING AND DESIGNING THE EVALUATION

The first step in evaluating community engagement initiatives is **thoughtful planning**. This involves identifying why the community impact is being assessed and **for whom the evaluation is intended**. These guiding questions shape the entire evaluation design—what data you collect, who participates in the process, how you analyse findings, and how the results are communicated.

CLARIFYING THE PURPOSE OF EVALUATION

A clear understanding of the evaluation's purpose is essential. The information gathered through the assessment of community impact can serve multiple functions, such as:

- Supporting the institutionalisation of community engagement at the university or faculty level;
- Communicating success stories to academic leadership or external stakeholders;
- Providing accountability to funders and fulfilling reporting requirements;
- Supplying evidence for grant proposals or funding applications;
- Showcasing achievements of engaged learning or research initiatives;
- Increasing the visibility of community benefits resulting from university activities;

- Informing the development or refinement of community-engaged programs or courses;
- Identifying effective practices ("what works") in engagement;
- Deepening understanding of the impact on community partners and contexts.

Your answers to the questions "Why do we want to assess community impact?" and "Who is this assessment for?" will directly inform:

- The evaluation questions you ask,
- The stakeholders you involve,
- The types of data you collect (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed), and
- The format and language used in reporting the results.

For example, if the primary goal is accountability to funders, you may focus on measurable changes experienced by community members or organisations as a result of the project.

Suppose the goal is improving the design of future community-engaged activities. In that case, the evaluation may need to focus more on process evaluation, identifying how specific strategies or actions contributed to observed outcomes.

Planning with purpose ensures the evaluation process is meaningful, efficient, and ethically grounded, and that it strengthens both the university's engagement practices and its relationships with community partners.

DESIGNING THE EVALUATION

The second step is designing the evaluation. In this step, you need to answer the questions:

- What do you want to assess, and whose perspectives matter?
- What data do you need?
- Who has the data you need?
- What resources do you have (time, staff, money, facilities, and equipment)?
- How will you evaluate the impact of the service-learning community?
- What are the methods and tools you will use?
- What are the ethical issues connected with assessing community impact, and how will you ensure the respect of the moral rules of your community impact evaluation?

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ASSESS — AND WHOSE PERSPECTIVES MATTER?

Once you have defined the purpose of your community impact evaluation and identified the intended users of the findings (e.g. institutional leadership, funders, community partners), the next step is to clarify what you want to assess and which stakeholder groups you will focus on. The evaluation models outlined in the previous section help you frame your evaluation questions and organise your process. Identify the groups that are most significantly impacted by the university-community engagement activity. These might include:

- Community partner organisations (e.g. NGOs, schools, local governments)
- Service or project beneficiaries (e.g. individuals receiving support, education, or services)
- Wider community or population groups are impacted indirectly

- University stakeholders (e.g. faculty, students, or institutional units) involved in or affected by the collaboration
- The community-university partnership itself, especially in long-term or strategic initiatives

Focus is essential: you likely will not be able to evaluate everything and everyone. Start by selecting the most relevant groups and the most meaningful types of change you hope to understand.

WHAT DATA DO YOU NEED?

To comprehensively evaluate the community impact of your engagement efforts, you will need to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Each provides a different lens for understanding impact, and together they offer a more complete picture.

Quantitative Data ("Hard Data")

Quantitative data refers to measurable, numerical information that can describe the scope, scale, or intensity of your project. For example:

- Number and type of engagement activities or services delivered
- Number of community members or beneficiaries reached
- Number and profile of partner organisations involved
- Number of hours contributed by students, staff, or faculty
- Economic value of time or services contributed
- Number of materials, tools, or resources produced (e.g. workshops, toolkits, reports)

Qualitative Data ("Soft Data")

Qualitative data captures the depth, meaning, and experience of impact. This includes more intangible or relational outcomes that are often not captured in numbers, such as:

- Improved relationships between university and community actors
- Increased trust or satisfaction among partners or beneficiaries
- Personal or organisational stories of change
- Enhanced visibility or legitimacy of a community initiative
- Community members feel more heard, empowered, or supported
- Institutional learning from the partnership

In many evaluations, qualitative data plays a central role in making sense of the numbers and bringing the community's voice into the evaluation process.

WHO HAS THE DATA YOU NEED?

Be intentional about whose perspectives are most appropriate for the kind of impact you are trying to assess. For example:

- To understand beneficiary outcomes, it may be necessary to speak directly with service recipients or their families.
- To explore the impact on a community organisation's capacity or strategy, data should come from staff and leadership within that organisation.

- To evaluate the partnership process, consider gathering perspectives from both university and community representatives.

Also consider power dynamics and expectations: while students may be required to reflect extensively, community partners often have limited time and capacity to engage in evaluation processes. Approach participation with flexibility, respect, and reciprocity.

WHAT RESOURCES DO YOU HAVE?

Every community impact evaluation requires an investment of time, personnel, funds, and resources. It's essential to match your evaluation design to the resources realistically available to you.

Consider the following:

Time:

- What is your timeframe?
- Are there important deadlines (e.g. end of semester, grant reporting)?

People:

- Who is available to support the evaluation (e.g. staff, faculty, students, community partners)?
- What evaluation or facilitation skills do they bring?
- Who will collect and analyse the data?

Budget:

- Are there costs associated with printing, travel, translation, incentives, or staffing?
- Do you have access to institutional or external funding?

Facilities and Equipment:

- What tools do you need (e.g. digital recorders, software for analysis, meeting space)?

If you are new to evaluating community impact or working with limited resources, consider **beginning with small projects**. Focus on a few key stakeholder groups and indicators, and build your capacity gradually. Even a modest, well-structured evaluation can generate valuable insights for improving practice and strengthening community-university partnerships.

HOW WILL YOU ASSESS COMMUNITY IMPACT IN UNIVERSITY–COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Evaluating the community impact of university–community engagement requires a thoughtful approach that aligns with your goals, stakeholders, and institutional context. Once you have defined what you want to assess and whose perspectives are relevant, the next step is to decide how to determine impact and which tools and methods to use.

There are two widely used approaches for evaluating community impact in higher education engagement initiatives:

1. Pre/Post (Before and After) Assessment

This method involves gathering data from community stakeholders before the engagement activities begin and again after the activities have been implemented. The differences between these data

points can show what has changed.

Example:

If your university project aims to increase digital literacy among older adults, you could ask participants to complete a short skills questionnaire at the start and again after several workshops have been conducted.

- This method is especially effective when:
- The anticipated outcomes are specific and measurable;
- You can plan data collection well in advance.

The expected impacts are likely to occur within a defined timeframe.

Remember: not all outcomes are immediate. Consider whether short-, medium-, or long-term effects are most relevant, and plan your data collection accordingly.

2. Retrospective or Post-Only Assessment

If baseline (pre-activity) data were not collected, or if the project is already underway or completed, a retrospective or post-only approach may be used. This involves asking participants to reflect on perceived changes that resulted from their involvement.

Example:

Community members might be asked whether their organisation's visibility, capacity, or client satisfaction improved as a result of the collaboration with the university.

While not as robust as a pre/post model, this method is often more feasible and can still yield valuable insights, especially when using well-structured interviews or focus groups.

The choice of methods should be driven primarily by your evaluation questions, while also considering feasibility, ethical standards, and the capacity for data analysis. It is neither ethical nor practical to gather data that cannot be processed or used meaningfully. Standard methods for evaluating community impact include:

- Questionnaires for community partners, service recipients, or residents;
- Observation during community engagement activities;
- Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders;
- Focus groups allow for the gathering of diverse perspectives in a single session.
- Reports produced by community partners or project staff.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN EVALUATING COMMUNITY IMPACT

Ethics must be a core consideration in any university–community engagement evaluation. Impact assessments involve real people, authentic partnerships, and often sensitive topics. Ethical evaluation is about more than avoiding harm—it's about building respectful, reciprocal, and transparent processes.

Key ethical principles to consider:

- Informed consent: Participants must be fully aware of the evaluation purpose, what their participation involves, and how the data will be used.
- Anonymity: When sharing results, ensure that individuals cannot be identified—especially

when discussing sensitive or critical feedback.

- Confidentiality: Data should only be accessible to a limited group of named evaluators or researchers.
- Data protection: Ensure compliance with relevant data protection laws and institutional policies (e.g. GDPR in the EU). Avoid collecting personal data unless necessary.
- Approval processes: If the evaluation is to be used for research purposes or publication, obtain approval from the relevant ethics review board or committee before data collection.

Ethical evaluation also means being mindful of the time and capacity of community partners. Unlike students or university staff who may be required to participate, community partners are often voluntarily involved and may have limited resources to contribute to data collection. Be flexible, and consider offering something in return, such as access to findings, joint presentations, or support in their evaluation efforts.

COLLECTING THE DATA

Once you have developed a sound evaluation design, the next step is to collect the relevant data. It is essential to gather only the data that is necessary and aligned with your evaluation questions. Over-collecting can be burdensome for both university and community participants, while under-collecting can leave critical insights unexamined.

Whenever possible, consider whether existing data can be used. Many community partners or university programs already generate relevant information—such as attendance records, satisfaction surveys, reports, or impact statements—which can be incorporated into the evaluation to reduce duplication and workload.

In many university–community engagement initiatives, especially in community-engaged learning, research, or co-created projects, students themselves can play a meaningful role in data generation and reflection.

For example:

Student reports or reflective assignments can include documentation of outputs (e.g. materials created, workshops delivered, hours served). Students may be asked to include structured feedback from community partners or beneficiaries as part of their reporting or reflection process. Where appropriate, students can conduct interviews or surveys with community stakeholders, provided they are trained and the activity aligns with ethical guidelines and partnership agreements. This approach not only supports data collection but also enhances student learning by encouraging critical reflection on the outcomes of their engagement.

ANALYSING COLLECTED DATA

All the data collected during the previous stage of the process must be compiled and analysed to extract the relevant information and conclusions from it. As mentioned, collected data can be expressed in numbers (quantitative) or words (qualitative). Each type of data requires a slightly different approach to analysis.

DRAFTING THEIR CONCLUSIONS

After collecting and analysing your data, the next step is to draw conclusions based on the evidence. This is a critical phase of the evaluation process, where you make sense of what the findings reveal

about the community impact of your university's community engagement efforts.

When interpreting your results, consider:

- Are there alternative explanations for the observed outcomes?
- Have you accounted for external factors that may have influenced the results (e.g. policy changes, parallel programs)?
- Are the findings consistent across different data sources (quantitative and qualitative)?
- Be transparent about both the strengths and limitations of your data. Identifying inconsistencies or gaps is not a failure—it's an opportunity for learning and course correction.

COMMUNICATING THE RESULTS OF THE COMMUNITY IMPACT EVALUATION

To ensure you gain the maximum value from the effort invested by students, faculty, community partners, and other target groups, it is essential to strategically plan how the evaluation process and results will be shared. Consider how to communicate your findings not only to those directly involved, but also to broader audiences who can learn from your work—such as other university departments, community organisations, funders, or professional networks.

Effective communication of results:

- Acknowledges the contributions of all partners;
- Reinforces transparency and accountability;
- Helps build trust and strengthen relationships.
- Contributes to the broader knowledge base in the field of university–community engagement.

The data, insights, and experiences gained throughout the evaluation process have multiple applications, beyond the original purpose. These could include:

- Informing future program or course design;
- Supporting funding proposals or institutional reporting;
- Sharing best practices within your institution or professional community;
- Contributing to academic publications or conference presentations;
- Facilitating dialogue and reflection among partners. Learning from the evaluation and improving

LEARNING FROM EVALUATION AND IMPROVING

In the final stage of the evaluation process, it is essential to actively use the findings to deepen understanding, celebrate what is working well, and identify areas for improvement. This step is at the heart of why evaluating community impact matters—it allows both universities and community partners to reflect, adapt, and grow.

Do not just focus on the outcomes. Take time to assess the evaluation process itself:

- Was it useful and meaningful for all stakeholders?
- Were the methods appropriate and inclusive?
- What would you do differently in future evaluations?

Once you have reviewed your findings, shift your attention toward practical improvement. Use the evaluation as a tool to strengthen your community engagement practices by setting realistic, specific, and achievable goals. Based on what you have learned, this may involve:

- Revisiting and refining intended outputs and outcomes, to ensure they are clear, relevant, and measurable;
- Adjusting the scope, timing, or methods of engagement activities to better align with community priorities or institutional capacity;
- Enhancing collaboration and communication with community partners, to promote mutual understanding and shared ownership;
- Improving student preparation and support, so they are better equipped to engage ethically, effectively, and reflectively;
- Addressing resource gaps, including time, funding, staffing, or tools, to make engagement more sustainable and equitable for all participants.

By using the findings thoughtfully and collaboratively, you contribute to a culture of continuous learning and mutual accountability—key principles of meaningful university–community engagement.

GLOSSARY

Term / Concept	Short Definition / Description
University - Community Engagement (UCE)	A strategic, reciprocal partnership between higher education institutions and communities aimed at co-creating knowledge, addressing societal challenges, and promoting social justice.
Civic University	A model of a university that integrates community engagement into its mission, governance, teaching, and research to address societal needs.
Community-Engaged Research	A collaborative research approach involving community members as equal partners in all stages of the research process to address community-identified needs.
Participatory Action Research (PAR)	A democratic research approach where researchers and participants co-investigate and co-create solutions to shared challenges.
Community-Engaged Learning	An educational approach that integrates meaningful community involvement with instruction and reflection, enriching the learning experience and fostering civic responsibility.
Community-Based Learning	An instructional strategy that connects academic content to community-based experiences to deepen learning.
Service-Learning	A teaching method that combines academic learning with meaningful community service, guided by structured reflection.
Structured Reflection	An intentional and critical process that helps students link community experience with academic content, civic identity, and social awareness.
Student-Centered Learning	An educational approach that prioritises the needs, agency, and active participation of students in their learning journey.
Transformative Learning	A learning process that challenges students' assumptions and promotes critical reflection, leading to personal and social change.
Epistemic Justice	Recognition and inclusion of diverse knowledge systems and voices, particularly from marginalised communities, in research and education.
Co-creation	Collaborative design and development of knowledge, projects, or solutions between academic and community stakeholders.
Reciprocity	A key principle of UCE is that all partners mutually benefit and contribute their knowledge and resources to achieve a common goal.
Mutual Benefit	Ensuring that both the university and the community gain value from engagement efforts, such as knowledge sharing or capacity building.

Term / Concept	Short Definition / Description
Co-learning	A reciprocal process where university and community partners learn from and with each other during engagement activities.
Power Asymmetry	Unequal power relations between universities and communities can affect the authenticity and effectiveness of engagement.
Quintuple Helix Model	A model of innovation that includes university, government, industry (business), civil society, and the environment as key drivers of sustainable development.
Institutionalisation	Embedding community engagement into the structures, policies, and culture of a university for long-term sustainability.
Ethical Engagement	Practices in community engagement that prioritise respect, consent, transparency, and accountability in university-community relations.
Community Partnership	A formal or informal collaboration between a university and a community organisation, based on shared goals and mutual respect.
Community Engagement Unit	An institutional structure that supports, coordinates, and promotes university-community engagement activities.
Impact Assessment	A process to evaluate the effects of community engagement activities on students, faculty, institutions, and communities.
Reflective Practitioner	An educator or researcher who regularly engages in critical self-reflection to improve their practices and contribute ethically to society.
Sustainability	The capacity of community engagement activities to be maintained over time, embedded in institutional structures and supported by continuous collaboration.
Cultural Humility	A lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and respectful engagement across cultural differences.
Communities of Practice	Groups of people who share a concern or interest in a topic learn how to do it better through regular interaction.
Engaged Scholarship	Academic work that integrates research, teaching, and service with public purpose and community collaboration.

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