

Standard Policy Brief Template

Under the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022)
[Section for Higher Education](#) | Division for Education 2030

Type: One organisation | Alliance

TITLE: A NEW FRAMEWORK TO MEASURE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Author(s): Project 'Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education'
(TEFCE)

Date : 14.3.2022

Abstract

The role of universities in addressing societal challenges is increasingly a policy priority and community engagement in higher education is central to that debate. While there have been attempts to measure community engagement through quantitative benchmarks, none of those attempts have yet been successful, since engagement takes different forms depending on the university, its communities and its external environment.

As a response to this challenge, a consortium of European universities and experts developed a new proposal for supporting community engagement in higher education, without resorting to a metrics-based approach. The resulting 'TEFCE Toolbox' is an institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement in higher education, representing a robust and comprehensive framework for universities and their communities to examine their engagement and identify where they can improve.

The TEFCE Toolbox builds upon previous tools but provides a novel approach, guided by four principles:

- Authenticity of engagement
- Empowerment of individuals
- Participative steering (combining bottom-up and top-down approaches)
- Collaborative learning rather than competition.

The implementation of the TEFCE Toolbox involves collection and analysis of community engagement practices and discussions with stakeholders, resulting in an institutional report. The TEFCE Toolbox has four distinct tools to be used in the process:

- A list of dimensions of engagement
- A rubric of levels of engagement
- An institutional community engagement 'heatmap'
- A self-reflection tool ('SLIPDOT').

The TEFCE Toolbox benefits institutions (by uncovering the wealth of mutual benefits of community engagement) and individuals (by recognising the value of their community engagement practices).

Members of the TEFCE project:

Technische Universität Dresden (Germany)
 Institute for the Development of Education (Croatia)
 University of Twente (the Netherlands)
 Technological University Dublin (Ireland)
 University of Rijeka (Croatia)
 Ghent University (Belgium)
 City of Dresden (Germany)
 Knowledge Point Twente, Region of Twente (the Netherlands)
 City of Dublin (Ireland)
 City of Rijeka (Croatia)
 Catalan Association of Public Universities (Spain)
 PPMI Group (Lithuania)
 The European Consortium of Innovative Universities (the Netherlands)

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Acronyms

TEFCE: Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education

The TEFCE Toolbox for Community Engagement in Higher Education was developed as part of the project *Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education* (TEFCE, www.tefce.eu), funded through the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission. The following policy brief provides an overview of the results of the TEFCE project – the development of the TEFCE Toolbox, an institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement in higher education (Farnell et al., 2020). The TEFCE Toolbox is available as an open access resource on the web site www.tefce.eu/toolbox and is available in 5 languages (English, Spanish, Catalanian, German and Croatian).

1. Introduction to TEFCE Toolbox

Policy background

The role of higher education in responding to societal challenges is re-emerging as a policy priority in many countries (Benneworth et al., 2018; Farnell, 2020). This priority is featured in the EU's *Renewed Agenda for Higher Education* and in the Horizon 2020 programme. It is also reflected in the expectation that universities should contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Community engagement in higher education is central to this debate, and is thus an increasingly relevant topic for policymakers, universities and their communities.

Purpose of the TEFCE Toolbox

The TEFCE Toolbox guides universities and their external communities through a process to examine their community engagement in a robust and comprehensive way. The TEFCE Toolbox serves as a reference tool for universities, communities and policymakers to better understand the dimensions of community engagement and as a practical tool for universities to determine how well they perform according to each dimension, as well as where they can improve.

Development of the TEFCE Toolbox

The TEFCE Toolbox is the result of a co-creation process involving over 170 participants from 8 countries over 18 months. The initial proposal was developed based on a mapping of the state of the art in community engagement in higher education, involving a review of over 250 sources (including books, research papers and policy tools) (Benneworth et al., 2018). A prototype of the TEFCE Toolbox was piloted and refined during workshops at four higher education institutions (University of Rijeka, Croatia; University of Twente, the Netherlands; TU Dresden, Germany; and TU Dublin, Ireland), involving discussions between university and community representatives, and the resulting evaluation showed the positive impact of the Toolbox on the institutions that applied it (O'Brien et al, 2021).

European potential of TEFCE Toolbox

The TEFCE Toolbox can be implemented in different institutional and local contexts. It thus has the potential to become a robust tool that will support European universities in institutionalising their cooperation with the wider community. Due to its flexibility and openness, it could be applied at a European scale and could be promoted by the different European-level organisations and initiatives. The TEFCE Toolbox therefore has the potential to become a European framework for community engagement in higher education.

2. Key definitions and principles

Defining 'community', 'engagement' and 'societal needs'

Community engagement is about how universities address societal needs in partnership with their external communities. More precisely, the TEFCE project proposes the following definitions of 'engagement', 'community' and 'societal needs'.

- **Community:** refers to 'communities of place, identity or interest', thus including organisations from government, business, civil society organisations and citizens, whether at the local, regional, national or global level.

- Engagement: refers to a process whereby universities undertake joint activities with external communities in a way that is mutually beneficial, even if each side benefits in a different way.
- Societal needs: refer to political, economic, cultural, social, technological and environmental factors that can influence quality of life in society.

The TEFCE project adopts ‘community engagement’ with a broad definition that can provide an overarching term for other terms that are sometimes used such as ‘civic’, ‘public’, ‘regional’, and ‘societal’ engagement.

Approach: guiding principles of TEFCE Toolbox

The four principles guiding the TEFCE Toolbox, and differentiating it from previous tools for community engagement, as well as from metric-driven and competitive approaches to performance assessment, are the following:

1. Authenticity of engagement: The TEFCE Toolbox's interpretative framework valorises authentic community engagement that provides the community with a meaningful role and tangible benefits from partnerships.
2. Empowerment of individuals: The TEFCE Toolbox aims to recognise and award value for different kinds of individual efforts and results in community engagement, thus encouraging universities to develop empowering environments for individuals at the university.
3. Participative approach combining bottom-up and top-down steering: The TEFCE Toolbox is based on mapping diverse community engagement practices through narratives collected from university staff and community partners, rather than on ‘best practices’ selected by senior management.
4. Learning journey rather than benchmarking: The TEFCE Toolbox results in a qualitative discovery of good practices and a critical reflection on strengths and areas to improve, both achieved through a collaborative learning process

3. TEFCE Toolbox: overview of the process

Stages	Description	Timing
1. Quick scan	Setting up a university-community team and launching initial discussion on mapping community engagement at the university.	Month 1
2. Evidence collection	Collecting narratives about community engagement practices from university staff, students and external community partners.	Months 2-3
3. Mapping report	Identifying good practices and assigning a level of community engagement for each (sub)dimension, resulting in a mapping report.	Month 4-5
4. Self-reflection	Open discussions among university management, staff, students and the community on strengths and areas of improvement.	Months 5
5. Institutional report	Celebrating good practices, presenting TEFCE Toolbox results and highlighting areas for further improvement.	Months 5-6

4. TEFCE Toolbox: overview of the tools

Tool 1: Dimensions of engagement

The first tool provides a classification of the community engagement activities. Its purpose is to help users understand the scope of what is meant by a community-engaged university and to help them identify engagement practices at their institution.

Figure 1: Dimensions of engagement

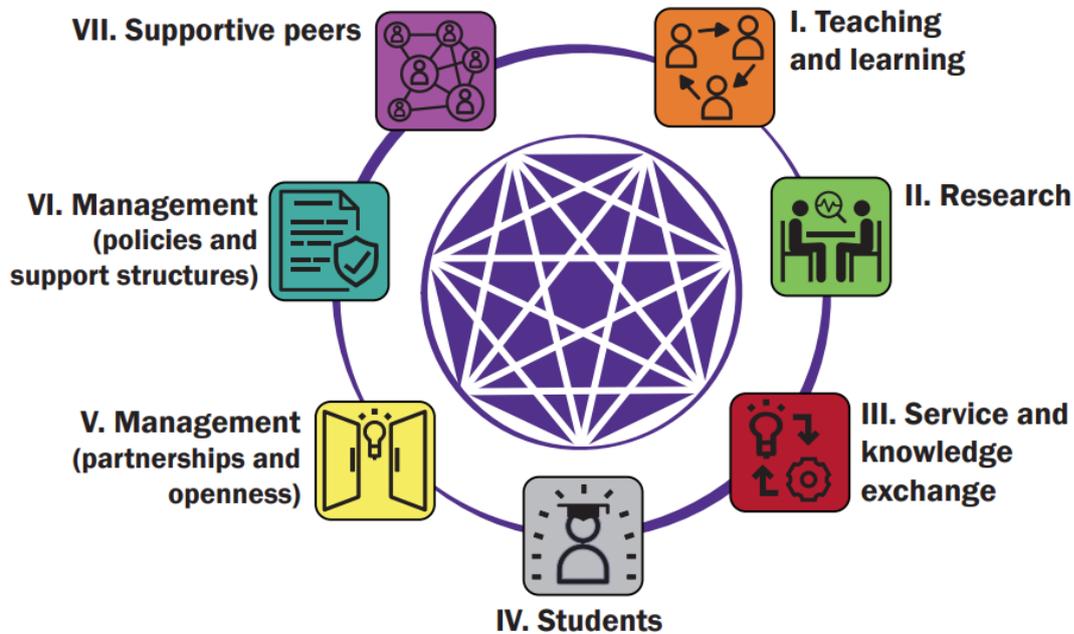


Table 1: Dimensions of engagement

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

Tool 2: Levels of engagement

The second tool provides a rubric defining different levels of engagement for each of the 20 sub-dimensions of community engagement. Its purpose is to allow users to critically analyse their engagement practices and to determine the level of authenticity of engagement.

Table 2: Example of self-reflection rubric (Sub-dimension I.2 – “The university has study programmes or courses that include a community-based learning component for students”)

Community-based learning is included in relevant study programmes at the university and...	
Level 1	... benefits students to develop their knowledge and skills, although there is little evidence yet of their outcomes for the community.
Level 2	
Level 3	... has demonstrated benefits for students and supports community partners in addressing a short-term problem or need.
Level 4	
Level 5	... builds capacities of community partners and bring equal benefits to the students, teaching staff and university as a whole.

Tool 3: Institutional community-engagement heatmap

The third tool provides a colour-coded matrix to synthesise the findings for each dimension of engagement and to further determine the extent to which community engagement is multifaceted and embedded at the university.

Figure 2: Institutional community-engagement heatmap

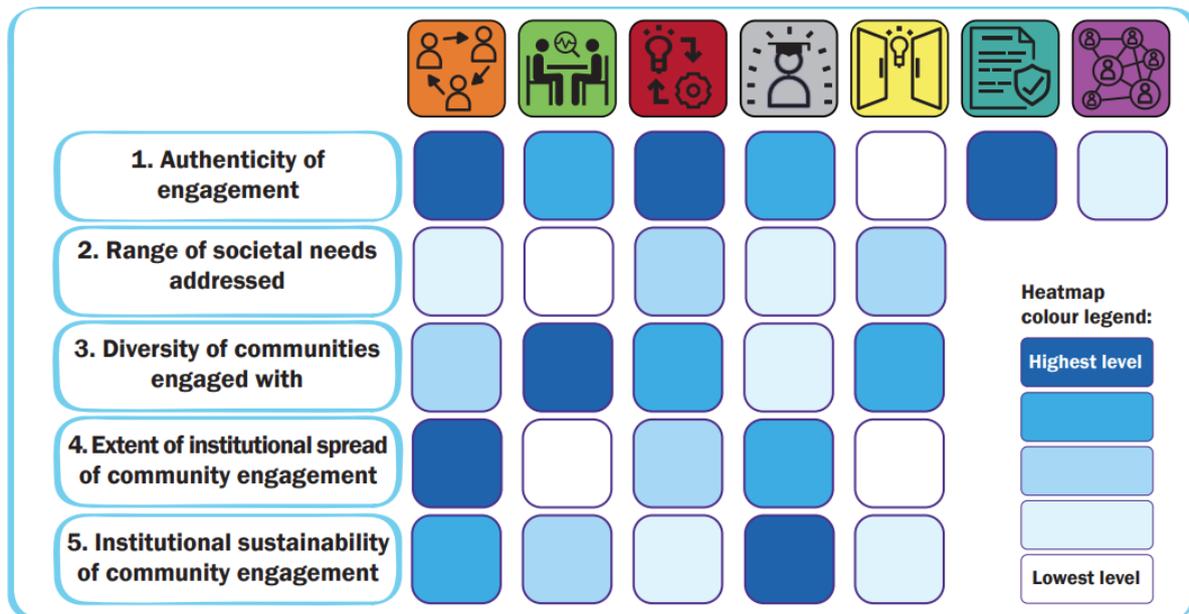


Table 3: Institutional community-engagement heatmap

Characteristics of engagement	Heatmap level			
	Lowest level			Highest level
1. Authenticity of engagement	Lower levels: superficial engagement, no evidence yet of mutual benefit Higher levels: authentic engagement, with tangible benefits for communities			
2. Societal needs addressed	Lower levels: needs of labour market and industry Higher levels: global ‘grand challenges’ (e.g. climate change) or local social needs			
3. Communities engaged with	Lower levels: well-resourced institutions (business, government) Higher levels: low-resource partners (schools, NGOs, social enterprises, citizens)			
4. Institutional spread	Lower levels: engagement practices only present at one or two university departments Higher levels: engagement practices that take place across the entire institution			

5. Institutional sustainability	<u>Lower levels</u> : engagement through short-term projects <u>Higher levels</u> : engagement that has been institutionalised, with adequate funding
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Tool 4: ‘SLIPDOT’ analysis

The fourth and final tool provides a customised SWOT analysis developed by the TEFCE project team to facilitate self-reflection discussions between all stakeholders about the results of the entire TEFCE Toolbox process. Its purpose is to validate the conclusions, acknowledge achievements and define areas for improvements.

Table 4: SLIPDOT analysis

Areas of Strength	Areas of Lower Intensity	Areas with Potential for Development
Areas where the university is doing particularly well in terms of community engagement	Areas of community engagement that are not highly developed at the university (due to it not yet being a priority, due to limited capacity or other reasons)	Areas of community engagement that the university could realistically improve in the future.
Opportunities		Threats
<u>Internal</u> : e.g. Level of support among leadership and academic staff		<u>Internal</u> : e.g. Lack of support among leadership and academic staff
<u>External</u> : e.g. Level of community support; in line with national policy; availability of funds and programmes		<u>External</u> : e.g. Lack of community support; not in line with national policy; lack of funds and programmes

5. Target groups and benefits of the TEFCE Toolbox

Target group 1: Universities with an interest in community engagement and societal impact

The benefits of the TEFCE Toolbox for universities with an interest in community engagement and societal impact are that the framework allows them to both discover and demonstrate the value that the university brings to communities in terms of public benefit (and social impact, if applicable) and the value that communities bring to the university. It also creates an evidence-basis for planning improvements to the university’s performance in terms of (a) increasing social impact and (b) enriching the university’s research and teaching through community engagement.

Target group 2: University staff, students and community partners with an interest in community engagement and societal impact

The benefits of the TEFCE Toolbox for universities staff, students and community partners is that it increases both motivation and a sense of recognition due to the acknowledgement of the value of their engagement activities by the university. It also increases the sense of inclusion and ownership of staff, students and external partners in institutional developmental processes.

6. Next steps: a growing network

In addition to four European universities applying the TEFCE Toolbox in 2019, the network of institutions interested in applying the Toolbox is growing. An additional 4 universities from Austria, Belgium and Spain are now applying the TEFCE Toolbox as part of a follow-up project (Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement – SHEFCE), and other universities from Belgium,

Hungary, the UK and even Brazil and New Zealand have expressed their interest to make use of the TEFCE Toolbox.

The network supporting this initiative is also expanding. In the new SHEFCE project, a range of international stakeholders will discuss how to further develop a European framework for community engagement in higher education, including the European University Association, the European Student Union and the OECD, as well as national partners such as the NCCPE (UK) and Campus Engage (Ireland). Contact and cooperation has also been established between the TEFCE/SHEFCE projects and the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement in Higher Education, as well as with the UNESCO Chair for Community Engaged Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. The TEFCE and SHEFCE projects could provide the basis for a lasting framework to support all institutions committed to advancing community engagement in higher education, both in Europe and beyond.

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