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**O'Brien, Emma; Ćulum Ilić, Bojana; Veidemane, Anete; Dusi, Davide; Farnell, Thomas; Šcukanec Schmidt, Ninoslav**

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# Towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education – a case study analysis of European universities

European  
framework for  
community  
engagement

Emma O'Brien

*Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland*

BOJANA ČULUM ILIĆ

*University of Rijeka, Opatija, Croatia*

Anete Veidemane

*University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands*

Davide Dusi

*Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium, and*

Thomas Farnell and Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt  
*Institute for the Development of Education, Zagreb, Croatia*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to examine the development and piloting of a novel European framework for community engagement (CE) in higher education, which has been purposefully designed to progress the CE agenda in a European context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The proposed framework was co-created through the European Union (EU)-funded project towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education (TEFCE). The TEFCE Toolbox is an institutional self-reflection framework that centres on seven thematic dimensions of CE. This paper follows the development of the TEFCE Toolbox through empirical case study analysis of four European universities and their local communities.

**Findings** – The findings in this paper indicate that the TEFCE Toolbox facilitates context-specific applications in different types of universities and socioeconomic environments. Incorporating insights from

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The authors would like to dedicate this publication to the memory of Paul Benneworth, whose intellectual leadership and academic work was central to development of the TEFCE Toolbox and who will be sadly missed.



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engagement practitioners, students and community representatives the TEFCE Toolbox was successfully applied in universities with diverse profiles and missions. The process facilitated the recognition of CE achievements and the identification of potential areas for improvement.

**Originality/value** – Despite a range of international initiatives, there remains an absence of initiatives within the European higher education area that focus on developing tools to comprehensively support CE. The TEFCE Toolbox and case-study analysis presented in this paper address this gap in knowledge. The broader societal contribution and social responsibility of higher education have become increasingly prominent on the European agenda. The TEFCE Toolbox represents an innovative, robust and holistic European framework with the potential to support universities in reflecting upon their pursuit of addressing grand societal challenges, whilst promoting CE.

**Keywords** University social responsibility, Community engagement, Higher education, European Policy, University-community partnerships, Case-study

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Recent decades have borne witness to a closer alignment between higher education and society with many higher education institutions embracing their “third mission” of community engagement (Hazelkorn, 2016). Community engagement refers to partnerships between universities and their external communities encompassing public, business and civil society to address societal needs. The broader societal contribution of higher education is now re-emerging as a European policy priority with the demand for higher education to address societal challenges (European Commission, 2017). The increasing focus on the community engagement agenda in higher education has led to a range of initiatives at the international level to assess and support community engagement (Benneworth, 2013). Yet, with the exception of the Carnegie Foundation Elective Classification for Community Engagement in the US, most attempts to externally assess community engagement have had limited success and uptake (Farnell and Šćukanec, 2018). Moreover, there has been an absence of initiatives within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that focus on developing tools to comprehensively support community engagement. In addressing this gap, this paper examines the development of a novel European framework for community engagement in higher education, which has been purposefully designed to progress the community engagement agenda in a European context.

## Understanding community engagement

Since the establishment of the first European university [1] in Bologna in 1,088 universities have fundamentally been societal institutions (Benneworth, 2018). Universities have acted as the cradle of knowledge, a fount of innovation and creativity supporting people to fulfil their potential and fostering societal growth and development (Goddard *et al.*, 2018). Overtime, universities were perceived as “ivory towers” producing knowledge in seclusion from society, yet recent decades have borne witness to a closer alignment between higher education and society (Hazelkorn, 2016). There are increasing demands on modern universities to adopt strategies to meet the expectations of their stakeholders (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010). One such expectation pertains to social responsibility; a concept, which has become increasingly important within the European Union and the international debate regarding universities’ competitiveness and sustainability (Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña, 2017). Universities are required to function in a responsible way; namely, to foster greater equality of opportunity, to adapt the education they provide to the needs and demands of society, to ease the process of lifelong learning, as well as to develop approaches that address economic, social and environmental issues for the benefit of communities and

society (Vasilescu *et al.*, 2010). The concept of university social responsibility (USR) refers, therefore, to a policy of ethical quality of the university community's performance to be achieved via the responsible management of the external impacts the university generates (economic, social and environmental externalities), in an interactive dialogue with society and to promote sustainable human development (Reiser, 2007). In other words, USR regard universities' ability to disseminate and implement a set of specific principles "through the provision of educational services and transfer knowledge following ethical principles, good governance, respect for the environment, social engagement and the promotion of values" (Giuffré and Ratto, 2014, p. 233) and specifically to contribute to sustainable development and to proactive solutions to address societal and environmental challenges (Vasilescu *et al.*, 2010).

Universities have increasingly committed to consider the demands of their stakeholders and to incorporate social, labour and ethical concerns into their main functions (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2010). Consequently, the principles of social responsibility have been integrated into teaching and research activities, as well as into management and community engagement activities. Community engagement (CE), the concept used in this contribution, can therefore be seen as one of the main processes through which universities implement social responsibility (Larrán and Andrades, 2017). Community engagement is a multifaceted, multidimensional term that may be applied to a vast range of activities, with little consensus regarding a common definition of community engagement or set of principles (Ćulum Ilić, 2018). The concept of community engagement has continually evolved over time and is often considered an umbrella term incorporating practises such as: service learning (McIlrath and MacLabhrainn, 2007); engaged scholarship (Boyer, 1996); Community-Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) partnerships (Hall, 2009); civic engagement (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2016); and of knowledge mobilisation and knowledge impact (Levesque, 2008). Community engagement is often referred to as a "third mission" activity in addition to universities' first mission of teaching and research.

In an international review, Maassen *et al.* (2019) analysed trends in different countries worldwide of university engagement with society. Their analyses identified an increasing prominence of the topic of "engagement" in higher education, yet the engagement in question still had a primarily economic focus. Berghaeuser and Hoelscher (2019) suggested that the focus of German HEIs is on economic impact and knowledge/technology transfer, with much less attention paid to other ways of engaging with society. Whilst third mission activities have often been focussed on economic impact and engagement with industry, there is growing evidence that interactions between society and HEIs has widened beyond an economic focus (Benneworth *et al.*, 2009). In an analysis of recent international trends, Farnell (2020) suggested that the broader topic of universities' engagement with a society that goes beyond the economic sphere has become increasingly prominent in the policies and programmes of transnational institutions (the European Union (EU), United Nations (UN) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)), as well as at national and university level.

More recently, CE refers to partnerships between universities and their external communities to address societal needs. From this perspective, the term "community" includes public authorities, businesses, cultural institutions and civil society. In this study, community engagement is defined as "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" (Benneworth, 2018). In this understanding, "university knowledge helps societal partners to achieve their goals and societal partners' knowledge enriches the university knowledge process" (Benneworth, 2018). This broad definition

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acknowledges that joint community-university activities can be undertaken by university staff or students, whether as a part of their teaching and research, as a part of joint projects and initiatives or as a part of university governance and management (Farnell *et al.*, 2020a). Whilst intentionally broad, this definition does not encompass technology transfer and specific activities such as spin-offs, licenses and patenting activity (Benneworth, 2018), as these have already been broadly mainstreamed and systematised in a range of higher education contexts (Benneworth, 2015) and can, therefore, be considered separately.

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### **Towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education toolbox design and development**

The TEFCE framework was co-created through the EU-funded project *towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education* (TEFCE) [2]. The design process began with a critical synthesis of the current state of the art in community engagement including definitions, classifications and assessments (Benneworth, 2018). Farnell and Šćukanec (2018) provided a critical analysis and review of existing tools to assess community engagement in higher education, ranging from the Holland (1997) matrix for analysing institutional commitment to service to the US-based Carnegie Elective Classification of Community Engagement (Public Purpose Institute, 2021) and the UK-based EDGE self-assessment tool for public engagement (National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement [NCCPE], 2021).

Subsequently, Čulum (2018) provided in-depth analysis and classifications of various forms of community engagement activities and a summary of the main broad categories in which such activities take place including:

- Institutional engagement (policy and practice for partnership building).
- Public access to university facilities.
- Public access to knowledge/dissemination of academic findings.
- Engaged teaching and learning.
- Engaged research.
- Student engagement.
- Academic staff engagement.

Following this critical analysis and classification, the TEFCE Toolbox was designed. Organised around seven recognised thematic dimensions of community engagement in higher education (teaching and learning; research; service and knowledge exchange; students; staff; management policies and management engagement), the TEFCE Toolbox guides users through a process to identify community engagement practices at their institution and then encourages participative discussions with multiple stakeholders that results in an “institutional community-engagement heatmap” for the university as a whole indicating:

- The level of authenticity of community engagement practices.
- The range of societal needs is addressed through community engagement.
- The diversity of communities engaged with.
- The extent to which community engagement is spread across the university.
- The extent to which the engagement practices are sustainable.

The toolbox incorporates a customised analytical framework “SLIPDOT analysis” (referring to Strengths, Areas of Lower Intensity, Areas with Potential for Development, Opportunities and Threats). This allows for universities to gain further insight on community engagement whilst considering issues of geographical context, disciplinary mix, scarcity of resources, research and teaching base and future opportunities for development. The TEFCE Toolbox has been designed as an institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement in higher education. It provides tools for universities and communities to identify community engagement practices and reflect on their achievements and areas for improvement.

### Methodology

The TEFCE Toolbox prototype was enhanced and refined through a piloting case-study process involving four European universities in partnership with their local or regional authorities. The Toolbox was co-created and developed over an 18-month piloting process with feedback from over 160 users. The aim of the piloting was to assess the relevance and quality of the Toolbox in different contexts, institutions and with individual stakeholders (university management, engaged staff, students and the community). Thus, this paper sets out to address the research question – what are the insights from piloting the TEFCE Toolbox for community engagement regarding its feasibility and applicability in a European context? The choice of a case-study research methodology located within a qualitative research paradigm was deemed the most suitable vehicle for understanding the TEFCE piloting process through primary inquiry. Case study as a qualitatively orientated research design is well-documented in higher education studies (Harland, 2014). To explore the diverse application of the TEFCE Toolbox, the study followed a multiple case-study designs (Yin, 2015). Multiple case design refers to case study research in which several instrumental bounded cases are selected to develop a more in-depth understanding of a phenomenon under study (Mills *et al.*, 2010).

The TEFCE toolbox and its methodology was designed to enable the gathering of rich qualitative data through interviews, focus group and study visits that facilitated a mapping of community engaged practise at each institution. This provided insight on the breadth and depth of community engaged practise, as well as in-depth analysis and reflection on areas for improvement and future development. The collected data were analysed through the employment of cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This analytical technique is generally deemed useful for mobilising knowledge across cases and put that knowledge into service for broader purposes (Khan and VanWynsberghe, 2008). This facilitated the tweaking and further development of the TEFCE Toolbox. The analytical activities conducted as part of the cross-case analysis were not conducted in a linear but rather iterative way and took place in different periods pertaining specifically to four within-case analyses and cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This process allowed to adequately consider and investigate within-case complexity and case profiles before performing systematic cross-case comparisons (Rihoux and Lobe, 2009).

After each piloting visit, an in-depth exploration of the data collected and pertaining to the employment of the TEFCE toolbox at a specific institution was conducted. Each institution was, therefore, conceived as a standalone case. Conceptually, clustered matrixes were used to summarise all the data and findings about a case in tables. All cases were then compared to detect, examine – and determine the causes of/reasons for – similarities and differences across them. Matrixes of cross-case descriptions (i.e. tables that provide a cross-case comparison of the peculiar usage of the TEFCE tool at the four institutions) were then developed. All this provided opportunities to learn from the employment of the TEFCE toolbox in different settings, as well as socio-economic and institutional contexts. Ethical

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approval for the study was addressed by each institution, for example, at TU Dublin, ethical approval for the pilot study was approved by the Research Ethics and Integrity Committee. Over an 18-month period (07/18–11/19), the piloting process led to the incremental revision and development of the TEFCE Toolbox as shared through the following case-study exemplars.

### Findings

In this section, the findings of the TEFCE Toolbox piloting are presented for each of the participating universities – both in terms of what was discovered about their level of community engagement and the usability and relevance of the TEFCE Toolbox as perceived by stakeholders. The piloting process was framed as a formative, co-creation process, with each piloting visit resulting in revisions to the TEFCE Toolbox. Revisions included: language clarity on thematic dimensions, the inclusion of a heatmap tool and the addition of media friendly user guides and graphical representation.

#### *Case-study 1: Technische universität dresden, Germany*

*About technische universität dresden.* Technische Universität Dresden (TUD) has a long history spanning over 200 years. TUD is one of the largest and most dynamic technical universities in Germany and receives permanent funding within the framework of the excellence strategy of the federal and state governments. TUD offers a broad variety of 121 degree courses and covers a wide research spectrum. TUD is the largest university in the saxony region with over 32,400 students and 4,559 publicly funded staff members. Having been committed to sciences and engineering before the reunification of Germany, TUD now is a multi-disciplinary university, also offering humanities and social sciences, as well as medicine, making it one of only a few in Germany. As a “synergetic university” TUD closely cooperates with external research institutions, cultural, industrial and social organisations. TUD is embedded in the DRESDEN-concept network, which bundles and uses all synergies of Dresden’s numerous scientific and cultural institutes – for societal impact. TUD’s international outreach is underlined by TUD’s motto “knowledge builds bridges” and by a long history of cooperation projects in research and education, many of them being funded by the European Commission (Jannack *et al.*, 2020).

*Piloting towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education toolbox at Technische universität Dresden.* TUD was the first institution to pilot and test the TEFCE Toolbox. During a two-day piloting visit the project team, TUD and City of Dresden representatives and visiting international experts gathered to analyse the collected practices of community engagement at TUD. The team discussed how to categorise the collected practices according to the seven dimensions of the TEFCE Toolbox and how to assign a “level of engagement” for each based on the collected evidence. Participants took part in participative discussions on how to interpret practices, what data was missing to reach an assessment and how to turn the (collected) practices and evidence into institution-level conclusions.

Participation in the process led to the discovery of numerous community engagement practices at TUD, demonstrating that many teaching staff, researchers, administrative staff and students show a great commitment to ensuring they mobilise their knowledge and resources to the benefit of the university’s external communities and to society as a whole. The types of practices predominantly featured research or knowledge-exchange projects led by academic staff and students to meet societal needs. Most community engagement activities appeared to be undertaken by academic staff and students despite the lack of a central-university level policy for community engagement and generally did not receive specific

recognition from the university level. Interestingly, even some of the highly valuable central-level community engagement initiatives by the university did not appear to be framed as forms of community engagement. It was clear that TUD is a driver of technological innovation and has a strong impact on the city of Dresden, its region and beyond in terms of economic development and the broader social benefits that this brings. However, the concept of “engagement” itself (and in particular “community engagement”) does not yet appear to be present in TUD’s strategic documents and was not clearly recognised during the application of the Toolbox process.

Based on the mapping report and the focus group discussions with TUD staff at the workshops, the conclusions from the “top-down perspective” were the following: TUD has a wealth of community engagement practices in place, which have a huge potential for further development. TUD could, therefore, consider what kinds of mechanisms at the university level could formally recognise and acknowledge the value of community engagement to the university. Another conclusion, looking from the “bottom-up” perspective is that, whilst a range of different external communities are engaged with, they are still predominantly businesses, local government institutions and schools. Other less-resourced groups, such as civil society organisations, social enterprises and citizens are less prominent (Jannack *et al.*, 2020).

#### *Case study 2: University of Twente, The Netherlands*

*About the University of Twente.* The University of Twente (UT), founded in 1961, is one of four universities of technology in The Netherlands. Geographically, UT is located in the east of the country away from the country’s major cities in the west. Originally set up to revitalise the regional economy after the 1970s breakdown of manufacturing in Europe, it soon became renowned for its entrepreneurial profile. By 2020, the university has spawned more than 1,000 spin-offs, the highest number amongst all the universities in The Netherlands, despite its relatively small size and remote location. The UT is organised around five faculties with a strong focus on technical disciplines (Farnell *et al.*, 2020b). It is home to 11,740 students and employs 3,317 staff members.

Since 1997, the UT has been a member of the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU). ECIU is an international network of 13 research-intensive universities, with a collective emphasis on innovation, creativity and societal impact. In 2019, the consortium (12 EU members) became one of the 41 European Universities Alliances funded by the European Universities Initiative (2019–2022). The UT is also a member of 4TU, a network of four universities of technology in The Netherlands committed to strengthening technical knowledge. The UT’s new strategy – Shaping 2030 – emphasises a mindset of “choosing community over campus”. By connecting with people and their needs locally, globally, physically and virtually, the UT aims to build an open ecosystem and use insights to develop its future programmes (University of Twente, 2019).

*Piloting towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education toolbox at the University of Twente.* The UT was the second institution to test and develop the TEFCE Toolbox. The on-site visit gathered the TEFCE project team, UT representatives (researchers, educators, administrators, students) and community stakeholders to assess the UT’s efforts in community engagement. Two-day intensive discussions revealed that the UT had a considerable positive impact on the economic development of the Twente region. Its entrepreneurial profile and technical orientation were recognised as some of the UT’s main strengths. More recently, it had engaged in citizen science projects and research projects with societal relevance (e.g. sustainable and smart cities). Several educational programmes featured a strong focus on societal needs, some entailing community service (e.g. Crossing Borders).



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Additionally, students were recognised as significant drivers of community engagement. The Student Union, supported by the university, was known for organising some of the largest campus events, including tech fairs and festivals, bringing young people to the relatively remote campus.

When reflecting on the areas of lower intensity, it was noted that the UT's focus on technology and industry had led to less engagement with more vulnerable groups and broader societal needs – most external stakeholders were large, organised, well-resourced institutions (e.g. hospitals and regional authorities). This discovery encouraged the TEFCE team to develop an additional assessment tool – a heatmap – to identify communities engaged with and societal needs addressed. The heatmap would assign higher scores (temperature) to engagement activities targeting more vulnerable groups and addressing more pressing global and local challenges such as migration and climate change. In addition, the heatmap would also assess how widespread and sustainable these community engagement initiatives are (Farnell *et al.*, 2020d).

Reflecting on the future opportunities, the pilot participants proposed that the UT management could play a critical role in advancing community engagement on the UT campus. Such an approach would also be aligned with the objectives of the university's new strategy – *Shaping 2030*. By emphasising the importance of community engagement that addresses broader societal needs, the management could signal that such efforts are just as valued and recognised as partnerships established with businesses and more powerful actors. Moreover, the management team could bring together existing initiatives and stakeholders in a more centralised manner, amplifying the current efforts and creating new synergies (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2020).

Sharing their experiences of using the TEFCE framework – a UT team member noted: “there is no single recipe for successful university-community engagement. Every challenge requires its own approach, as does every community. Examining some of the UT's community engagement practices by making use of the TEFCE Toolbox has been a helpful and informative process, from which we hope will significantly and meaningfully contribute to the debate on effective methodologies for community engagement”.

### *Case study 3: University of Rijeka, Croatia*

*About the University of Rijeka.* The University of Rijeka (UNIRi) was founded in 1973 as a teaching-oriented university and has since undergone a series of transformations by embracing a stronger focus on research excellence and by acknowledging its role in supporting regional social and economic development. UNIRi is a home for 12 faculties, 4 departments, 9 R&D centres, 16,600 students, 1,300 academics and 174 accredited study programmes. In addition, the UNIRi has developed a system of accredited lifelong learning programmes so that it can ensure efficient diffusion of ideas and innovations in the community, ensuring the wider social development and raising the overall competitiveness of north-western Croatia. UNIRi is a member of The Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) alliance, a major strategic partnership established between eight young research-intensive European universities that aim to bring a radical change to European higher education. UNIRi will be the first university from this part of Europe to join the Young European Research Universities Network, whose members strive to contribute to responding to the developmental challenges of the societies we live in, adopting a European perspective on global issues. The UNIRi has just recently announced the 2021–2025 strategy, developed in consultation with both internal and external stakeholders. By leaning its future direction to the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs), the UNIRi, etc., aspires to become more socially responsible and embedded more in its community. Extending its

collaborative network to various public, private, non-for-profits, as well as citizens, UNIRi strives to create a unique ecosystem linking its academic pillars to various communities of needs and interests (Ćulum Ilić *et al.*, 2020).

*Piloting towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education toolbox the University of Rijeka.* The UNIRi was the third partnering institution to pilot and assess the TEFCE framework. The two-day pilot visit involved focus groups and participatory discussions with the UNIRi top management, academic staff, students, local stakeholders and visiting international experts. The overall conclusions regarding community engagement based on the Toolbox application revealed that UNIRi has undeniably had a strong and positive impact on the city of Rijeka and the Primorje-Gorski Kotar county in terms of its economic development and the broader social benefits implied.

UNIRi's areas of strengths were categorised according to five main points – university leadership, academics, students, engagement culture and university centres. It was observed that the current university leadership values the notion of university-community engagement and the role of universities as responsible institutional “citizens” in their community, which is reflected in UNIRi strategic documents. UNIRi leadership's deliberate choice to focus on promoting and developing community engagement, as well as on creating favourable policies and supportive structures, offers a positive environment for the further development of various aspects of community engagement.

Areas of lower intensity were mostly related to two aspects – research and university impact on the community. As for the research element, despite evidence of good practice, community-based research seems to be neglected as a research design. UNIRi's potential for development is categorised in the following areas:

- Leadership and policy.
- Relationship between centre and periphery.
- University centres.
- Mainstreaming community engagement, therefore actually aiming at the university management.

Whilst the current university leadership is recognised for its advocacy of community engagement, their legacy might be threatened and it is, therefore, necessary to secure the long-term sustainability of CE activities, as well as creating a favourable environment at different (institutional) levels.

Threats identified for further community engagement development at UNIRi were mostly related to external elements, for example, in terms of national higher education policies that are in favour of collaboration with business/industry. Numerous opportunities were identified with the membership of UNIRi in the YUFE alliance highlighted as a platform that opens several opportunities for broadening the ideas and constructive ways of how UNIRi can serve its community and society (Ćulum Ilić *et al.*, 2020).

Sharing their experience of using the TEFCE Framework, a senior member of UNIRi observed:

The TEFCE Toolbox has provided us with a unique opportunity to evaluate and further develop both institutional and individual capacities in the area of community engagement. The TEFCE Framework's most valuable tangible results is collecting UNIRi's fifty community-engaged practices, mapped to foster institutional self-evaluation.

*Case study 4: Technological University Dublin, Ireland*

*About technological university Dublin.* Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) is Ireland's first TU and was formally established in 2019 following a merger of three institutes of higher education. With a history stretching back over 130 years, TU Dublin is one of the largest third-level educators in Ireland and offers over 200 programmes to students from more than 85 countries. The university has over 28,500 students and offers pathways to graduation from foundation and apprenticeship to undergraduate and doctoral levels. With over 3,500 staff members, TU Dublin is located on three campuses across Dublin with a new campus development at Grangegorman in central Dublin, currently, the largest higher education development project in Europe. As a University of Technology, TU Dublin's mission is first and foremost to serve society. The three amalgamating institutions have a long history of engagement and partnership with many constituencies in the community, in business and enterprise, in the professions and with many other stakeholders across the greater Dublin region. TU Dublin research teams work across disciplines focussing on areas that will benefit business and society. Publicly funded, TU Dublin is one of eight members of the European University of Technology, EUT+ alliance committed to creating a sustainable future for students and learners in European countries, for the staff of each of the institutions and for the territories and regions where each campus is anchored (O'Brien *et al.*, 2020).

*Piloting towards a European framework for community engagement in higher education toolbox at technological university Dublin.* Following the mapping process, a two-day workshop took place at TU Dublin involving participatory discussion and workshops with TU Dublin staff, students, local community stakeholders and visiting international experts. TU Dublin was the final institution to pilot the TEFCE Toolbox and presented an opportunity to test the enhanced and revised toolbox and additional elements based on prior pilot visits. This included the incorporation of concise and clear guidelines for mapping thematic dimensions and the introduction of the heatmap assessment tool.

The overall conclusions regarding community engagement at TU Dublin based on the Toolbox application were.

TU Dublin has a long tradition of extensive community and civic engagement demonstrating a strong and positive impact on the city of Dublin and the surrounding region. At the highest level, there is a clear commitment to community engagement at TU Dublin. The new campus at Grangegorman has been designed with a focus on community benefit. Flagship projects such as the students learning with communities demonstrate the embedding of community engagement within teaching and learning at TU Dublin.

Regarding areas of lower intensity, whilst 1-in-3 study programmes in the city campus have an element that includes a community-based learning component for students, this has yet to be embedded within all study programmes. TU Dublin academic staff, students and external stakeholders stressed the importance of the service provided by the access and civic engagement office. Increasing centralised support would further assist academic staff in their commitment to community engagement. There is a need to establish a proper workload allocation model for academic staff for community engaged learning and associated teaching and research.

The new campus development at Grangegorman, represents significant potential for the development of community engaged practice at TU Dublin. Facilitating a move from disciplinary silos to interdisciplinarity could have a positive influence on community engaged practice at TU Dublin by broadening the scope and opportunity for community engagement. A threat remains that TU Dublin's new status, merger and strategic priorities could negatively influence the current structures and activities for community engagement. The current elaboration of TU Dublin's "infinite possibilities" Strategic Plan to 2030 (with its focus on the

three pillars of people, planet and partnership) provides an opportunity for broadening the definition of how TU Dublin can serve society. This provides an opportunity for TU Dublin to develop its community engagement agenda, particularly given the international attention for community engagement through the impact of the SDGs (O'Brien *et al.*, 2020).

Sharing his experience of participating in the TEFCE Toolbox process one TU Dublin team member commented:

Our participation in the TEFCE process has been timely and helpful in better understanding the strands or themes that higher education can focus upon to enhance their levels of community engagement. At TU Dublin, the report comes at an important juncture as we are now consolidating a major portion of our activity on a new campus at Grangegorman in Dublin's north inner city. This development provides real opportunities to further develop our community engagement activity and build greater links with our European and wider international partners.

Following case-study analysis, the final Toolbox design included the addition of rich media guides and user-friendly graphical representation to assist universities in the implementation process. The TEFCE Toolbox is an open access resource under creative commons license: CC BY 4.0.

## Discussion

The TEFCE piloting process provided useful insight on the feasibility and application of the Toolbox across four different European Universities. A summary table of the piloting process across all institutions is highlighted in Table 1. As can be observed from Table 1, the framework was designed to allow each institution to qualitatively gather information, which through a participatory process allowed the mapping of community engaged practise at each institution.

Table 1 highlights the flexible nature of the TEFCE tool and context specific nature of university community engagement through data collection, practise mapping and stakeholder involvement. As observed from the case-study findings, insightful information on community engaged practise was captured at each institution beyond a purely quantitative focus. For example, whilst scholars at TU Dublin collected 105 community engaged practises and

Description	TU Dresden (Germany)	University of Twente (The Netherlands)	University of Rijeka (Crotia)	TU Dublin (Ireland)
University Teams	15 members	7 members	25 members	12 members
Number of practises collected	38 practises 38 case studies	49 practices 16 case studies 33 short practices	50 practices 50 case studies	105 practises 9 case studies 96 short practises
Method of data collection	Targeted email outreach, meetings with practitioners	Targeted emails to practitioners, one-on-one interviews	Open call, targeted emails to practitioners	Desk-based research, one on one meetings, targeted emails to practitioners
Participants of piloting process	53 participants	26 participants	47 participants	34 participants
Total piloting participants			160	
Community involvement	City council and four external partners	Regional council and three external partners	City council and community in pilot process	City council and community in pilot process

**Table 1.**  
Summary of piloting  
process across four  
universities

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scholars TUD collected 38 practises, the toolbox was successfully applied at both institutions. TUD was the first university to pilot the TEFCE tool, and at the time of the study, TUD priorities were focussed primarily on technology and entrepreneurship. In contrast, Ireland has a positive policy context towards broader community engagement and TU Dublin has embedded community engagement in its mission and in many university activities. Cognisant of the different contexts in which community engagement may take place the TEFCE Tool facilitates a self-reflective learning journey for each institution. As observed from the case studies the inclusion of the SLIPDOT analysis provided a wealth of insights into strengths and areas for improvement for each institution.

Stakeholders welcomed that the Toolbox facilitated a participative approach facilitating both bottom-up and top-down involvement of staff, students, management and community representatives. Engaging with actors both within and outside the institution in the implementation process was deemed essential to obtain relevant insights. As observed, from [Table 1](#) community representatives were more visible and involved in the piloting at the UNIRi and TU Dublin than at TUD and the UT. The extent to which the community is involved in the process may differ in each context.

As a longer-term goal, the Toolbox stresses the empowerment of individual actors within and outside the university as one of the impacts that it hopes to achieve. Whilst it is acknowledged that empowerment may be difficult to assess, the experiences of the piloting institutions, especially the UNIRi and TU Dublin, confirmed that individuals that participated in the process had a meaningful input and that participants felt they had “a voice” and appreciated the process. User feedback throughout the piloting process also identified that through differentiating each of the thematic dimensions by the level of engagement, the Toolbox retained a critical approach that promotes university-community partnerships that benefit both universities and the communities. The incorporation of the heatmap facilitated this self-reflective analysis of authentic and mutually beneficial community engagement.

Overall, study findings indicated that the TEFCE Toolbox was exploratory and respectful of differences in institutional, socioeconomic and cultural contexts. As observed from the case studies the TEFCE Toolbox was successfully applied at four universities that were diverse in terms of:

- their institutional profiles (technological and comprehensive universities);
- their institutional missions and priorities (from a primary focus on technology-driven innovation to a broader focus on diverse societal needs);
- their size and level of integration (student populations from 11,000 to 36,000 and campus-based integrated universities to universities with dislocated and autonomous faculties/departments);
- their geography (from capital cities to small towns) and
- their socioeconomic and cultural contexts (from countries with relatively high and relatively low levels of gross domestic product per capita; from western to south-eastern Europe).

In a TEFCE follow-up project, the Toolbox will be tested in several other universities in Europe and beyond linking the Toolbox findings to university action planning for community engagement.

### **Policy implications**

There has been an increasing focus on community engagement in the EHEA. Its vital role in creating societal value is recognised in recent policy documents ([Bologna Process, 2020](#);

Council of the European Union, 2018; European Commission, 2017, 2020) and supported through large-scale projects such as the European Universities Initiative (European Commission, 2019). Initiatives of the United Nations, particularly through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, have also contributed to placing higher education institutions' role in responding to societal needs and community engagement higher up on the policy agenda.

Considering the growing priority of community engagement on the higher education policy agenda, the TEFCE toolbox is well-timed. By gradually upscaling the TEFCE Toolbox from a handful of pilot institutions to a larger number of European institutions, higher education institutions could benefit from a tool that is structured and balanced across multiple dimensions yet remains flexible and customisable. However, to drive systematic, transformational change towards recognising community engagement as a priority area in higher education, a system level top-down and bottom-up approaches are needed. Future work in the development of a system level approach for higher education community engagement is underway (Farnell *et al.*, 2020b; Farnell *et al.*, 2020c).

## Conclusion

There are numerous tools for supporting and assessing community engagement in higher education. However, to date, not many have succeeded in becoming mainstream, mainly because community engagement is difficult to measure (Benneworth, 2018). This study identified that the TEFCE Toolbox represents an innovative framework for supporting community engagement. Informed and inspired by existing self-assessment tools and frameworks, the TEFCE Toolbox aims to move beyond them by placing emphasis on participatory approaches and focussing on the authenticity of engagement. This is attained by allowing for a flexible and context-specific understanding of what forms community engagement can take and by adopting an approach that is qualitative, developmental, reflective and participative, rather than quantitative, judgemental, normative and desk-based.

Although this paper provides theoretical and practical insights from four pilot case studies on developing the TEFCE community engagement framework, it is not without its limitations. The study was limited by its application in four universities in a European context. Additionally, the Toolbox was adjusted after each of the pilot visits, meaning that a slightly different version was tested in each institution. Nonetheless, this approach allowed for an exploratory, qualitative research approach with rich insights and ongoing feedback loops, to properly develop and pilot the tool. Findings from this study indicated that the TEFCE Toolbox works in multiple contexts, captures a diverse range of community engagement activities and critically reflects on communities engaged with.

The broader societal contribution and social responsibility of higher education have become increasingly prominent on the European agenda and there is broad acceptance of the need to give increased priority to community engagement. The TEFCE Toolbox represents a potential European framework for community engagement in higher education, well-suited to support universities in their pursuit of addressing grand societal challenges and cooperation with the wider community.

## Notes

1. This paper uses the term “university” to refer to all forms of tertiary education institutions, including research-intensive universities and universities of applied science.
2. For further information on the TEFCE project visit the website: [www.tefce.eu](http://www.tefce.eu)

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**Corresponding author**

Emma O'Brien can be contacted at: [emma.obrien@tudublin.ie](mailto:emma.obrien@tudublin.ie)