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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AS A RENEWED FOCUS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová – Katarína Chovancová*

Introduction

The value of education, its essence and its scope, belongs to the spiritual identity of Europe, which for centuries has been linked to the awareness of certain qualities that enabled people to orient themselves in the world and interpret it in a certain way. A truly educated person was understood to be a thoughtful and prudent individual who was well aware of the ambiguities of the world and was accompanied by an unrelenting passion for seeking answers to crucial questions. Our present day differs from this traditional ethos of education primarily in its emphasis on the practical dimension of education and its professional application. Current discussions about education and schools are characterized by the fact that education is largely understood as a tool that should serve practical purposes.

1. Community engagement in higher education

Community engagement of higher education institutions has become a key focus in the European Higher Education Area. This approach represents a novel perspective on understanding how higher education intersects with the broader world. HEIs should take an active role in addressing the main social challenges, incorporating local, regional, and societal issues into their frameworks. The evolution of universities into knowledge hubs prompts crucial conversations about the core elements of higher education that should guide everyday practices. A

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notable outcome of these shifts within the university landscape is the increased attention to nurturing civic competencies among students highlighting the importance of contributing not just to personal or corporate interests but to the broader community (Steinberg, Hatcher, and Bringle, 2011). It is essential for the global academic community to recognize the responsibilities and commitments that are critical for universities in the 21st century. Institutions are increasingly aware of their duty to engage with and address the goals and challenges faced by the world and the communities they serve, ultimately aiming to enhance humanity and promote sustainability. These new types of commitments are referred to in a variety of terms, ranging from outreach, knowledge transfer, social role, social responsibility, public engagement, civic engagement, community engagement, to *third mission*.

2. Guiding principles to build an engaged university

Holland (2001) articulates the concept of the engaged university as an institution that actively pursues direct interaction with external constituencies and communities, facilitating a mutually beneficial exchange, shared use, and application of knowledge, information, human potential and expertise, as well as resources. **Bridger** and **Alter** (2007) further assert that an engaged university collaborates with local populations to promote a diverse array of community interactions that enhance both individual and social well-being. Moreover, an engaged university not only adapts to the evolving landscape of higher education but also engages with various organizations across different geographical scales (Goddard and Vallance, 2013).

Benneworth et al. (2018) define a nuanced framework for understanding the dimensions of effective community engagement as it pertains to academic institutions. The salient features of this framework include:

- The presence of an external ‘community’ that actively participates in core activities related to knowledge creation within the university.
- The existence of ‘productive interactions’ within these communities, which yield tangible benefits for the community involved.
- A mutual benefit structure is established between the university and the community: the knowledge generated by the university assists societal partners in accomplishing their respective objectives, while the insights and expertise of these partners enhance the university’s knowledge-generating processes.

- A co-determination dynamic emerges within the knowledge community, wherein both university and community stakeholders collaboratively shape activities to ensure reciprocal advantages.
- An established interdependence exists between the university and the community, grounded in the mutual benefits derived from their relationship, enabling societal partners to exert meaningful influence over decisions made by university representatives.
- Engagement is governed by a logic of knowledge processes, whereby mutual interactions substantively enrich the university's knowledge activities, even in instances where these interactions do not yield immediately visible financial returns.
- Participating entities have developed established working routines, norms, and values that foster the mutual respect necessary for co-determination, thereby facilitating the generation of mutual benefits.

In the discourse surrounding community engagement, numerous scholars (Holland, 2001; Bridger and Alter, 2007; Nicotera et al., 2011; Jongbloed et al., 2008) underscore the imperative of reciprocity, respect, and accountability between academic institutions and the communities they serve. Distinctions are frequently drawn between developmental initiatives conducted in the community and those executed in collaboration with the community (Bridger and Alter, 2007). As noted by **Holland** (2001), the endeavours of an engaged campus are attuned to and considerate of the needs and opportunities present within the community, aligning appropriately with the institution's mission and academic capabilities. Consequently, community engagement is inherently bidirectional, necessitating the establishment of relationships that confer mutual benefits (Nicotera et al., 2011). An engaged university actively utilizes pedagogical practices, scholarly inquiry, and accumulated knowledge to interact with the public and society at multiple levels. Such institutions are primarily expected to address community challenges—ranging from poverty and inequality to health disparities—while being intrinsically linked to the principles of civic engagement and social responsibility (Watson et al., 2011).

3. A community-engaged European university alliance: the case of EMERGE

The European Commission's (2017) Renewed Agenda for Higher Education highlights the importance of university community engagement, emphasising the

role of universities in addressing Europe's social and democratic challenges. This involves incorporating local and societal issues into curricula, engaging the community in research, offering adult learning opportunities, and establishing connections with local communities. This perspective is in line with the UNESCO Report, "Reimagining our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education", which posits that education should be reoriented to foster collaboration and solidarity, equipping everyone with the skills to act, transform and build a future anchored in social, economic and environmental justice (Jacob et al., 2015).

Community engagement is an important focus of European university alliances, established since 2018. By developing long-term structural and strategic and sustainable cooperation between higher education institutions in European university alliances, this European Union initiative aims to improve the international competitiveness of higher education institutions in Europe and promote European values and identity. One of European University Alliances, EMERGE European University Alliance, brings together nine universities, united by the conviction that by working together we can better serve their students, territories and communities. EMERGE universities are located in the "Margins" of Europe, geographically distant from the central or metropolitan areas within their respective countries. The nine campus locations reflect the remarkable diversity of Europe in geographic, social, economic and linguistic terms. They all face similar challenges, related to their remoteness and poor connectivity in particular in terms of transport links and access to resource

Within these regions, marginal communities are particularly likely to suffer disadvantages and alienation, thus creating pockets of deprivation – margins within margins. These communities are categorised in many different ways. They can be defined as Minorities: from minority groups (LGBTQ+ communities, gender minorities, ethnic minorities, language minorities etc...), to marginalised groups (living in poverty, digital poverty, migrant groups, refugees, asylum seekers, etc.), and disadvantaged groups (people with disabilities, health and mental health problems, neurodivergent individuals, etc.) It is this intersection of marginal regions and marginal communities that lies at the heart of EMERGE: partners aim to empower their territories and communities by taking advantage of the expertise linked to their different profiles and focuses.

This is why EMERGE proposes a radical shift, which reverses the classical order of three university missions. Community engagement is at the heart of EMERGE identity: it is literally the First Mission of EMERGE. Although the three

missions constantly interact and shape each other, it is the alliance's societal and territorial mission that drives partners' approach in research and education and defines the way they operate as universities.

The concept of community engagement is being implemented following three main values (sustainability, inclusion and resilience) and three strategic objectives (engaging the margins; educating the margins; connecting the margins). There is a wide variety of activities carried out and/or planned to support the community engagement at all levels. It all starts with raising awareness across campuses and an alliance-wide mapping applying TEFCE methodology (Benneworth et al., 2018) and continues with common strategic framework for community engagement within the Alliance and series of community engagement activities with and for margin communities. One of the dedicated events held this year was a staff week and a blended intensive program in community engagement provided by Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica in May 2025 which made community officers and community engagement experts from partner universities liaise. The aim of the event was to familiarize participants with service-learning and its potential applications not only in the participants' everyday teaching practice, but also in improving their own educational journey and creating more favourable conditions for connecting academic and community life.

The intensive educational program at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica is a contribution to the program of activities for the first year of operation of the EMERGE European university alliance. Other activities for students offered by Matej Bel University as part of its involvement in EMERGE include certificates of completion of selected courses focused on Europe, short-term and semester mobility, professional and community engaged internships, and teaching practice abroad. Teachers and other staff are offered mobility opportunities and networking in research. The portfolio of available activities will continue to expand.

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