

An alternative approach to measuring community engagement in higher education

Universities across the globe are increasingly being called on to contribute to their surrounding communities and regions, especially so as they are mobilised in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting on these emerging demands within Europe, Thomas Farnell, presents the TEFCE project and its role in the development of a European framework for community engagement in higher education, based on a qualitative and participatory approach, rather than one driven by metrics. Outlining the aims of the framework and what makes it different to previous approaches, he argues why the time might be right for such a project to embed itself in a European context.

Discussions about the societal impact of universities and their engagement with various societal actors are now [commonplace around the world](#), notably in the UK, Australia and the US, but also Latin America. In most of the European Union, however, the emergence of these debates has been more gradual and fragmented. EU policies supporting universities' broader societal role were framed for a long time in purely economic terms, focusing on innovation, technology transfer and cooperation with industry.

This is now changing: recent EU documents refer for the first time to [civic universities](#) and to 'service to society' as a 'fourth mission' of higher education. Assuming that this newly emerging priority will remain on the policy agenda in Europe, policymakers will soon be asking the inevitable follow-up question: 'how do we measure it'? To tackle this question, a consortium of universities, university networks, experts and local councils from eight EU countries have been working since 2018 on the EU-funded project *Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education* ([TEFCE](#)).

Defining 'community' engagement?

Throughout the project, we have framed the discussion about universities' interactions with society through the term 'community engagement'. There are dozens of other terms used to describe such interactions: 'public', 'civic' and 'regional' engagement; 'knowledge exchange'; or the 'civic university'. In the TEFCE project, we chose to define the term in a purposefully broad way: community engagement is about how universities address societal needs in partnership with their communities – a term that can include public authorities, businesses, schools, civil society and citizens.

According to this definition, community engagement can take place through virtually all university activities, and the TEFCE project proposed seven thematic dimensions of community engagement (Figure 1). In practice, community engagement includes activities such as community-based learning, participatory research, projects with external organisations, policy advocacy, student volunteering and providing access to university facilities.

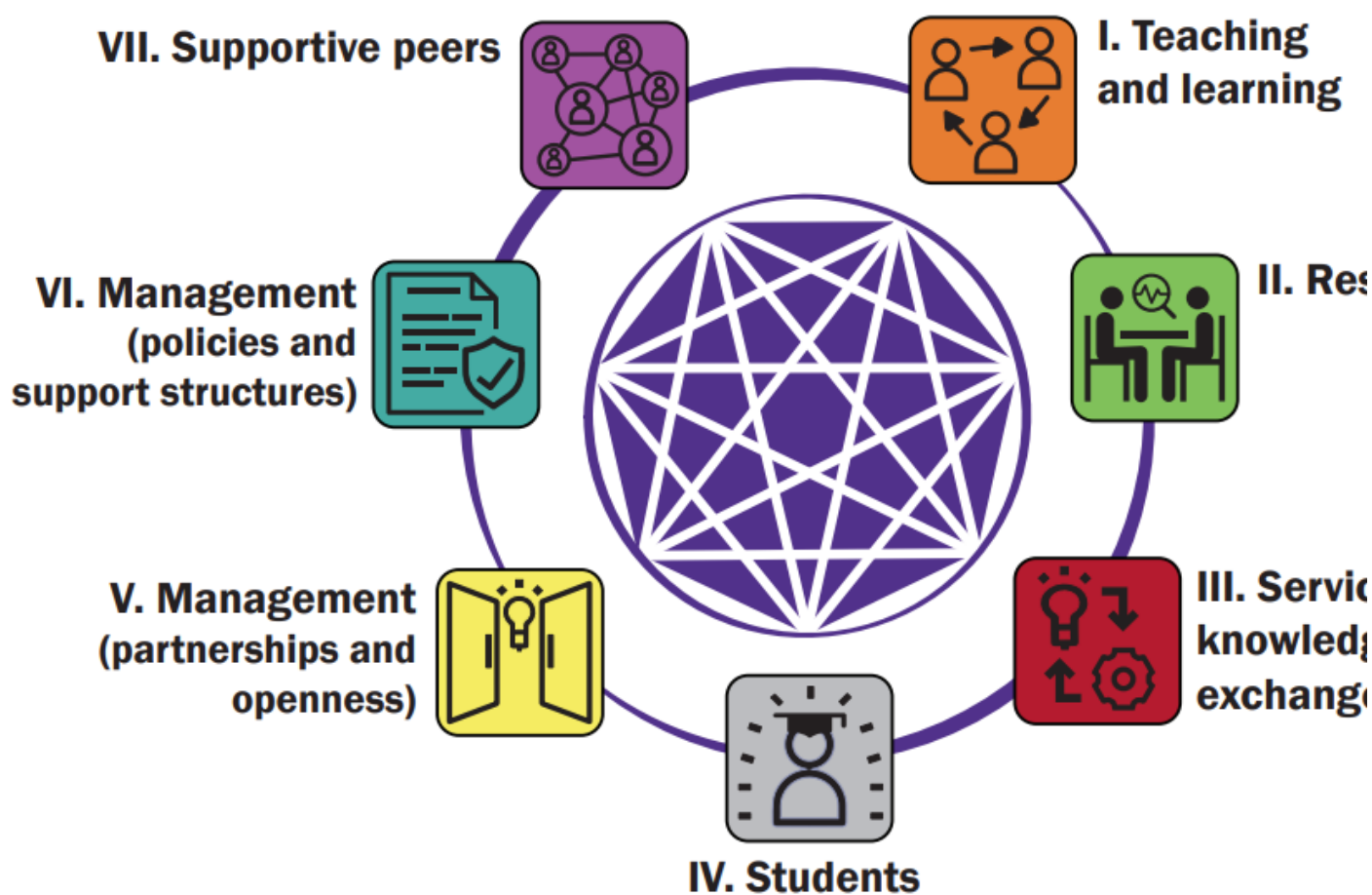


Figure 1: TEFCE dimensions of community engagement

Measuring without metrics

When trying to assess how an institution is performing, many rush towards developing metrics and rankings. The latest Times Higher Education 'Impact Rankings' does precisely this: it ranks universities according to how well they contribute to the UN's sustainable development goals. Another recent initiative by a consortium of universities from the UK, the US and Australia also [proposed a ranking methodology for university engagement](#).

We analysed and discussed at length the merits and shortcomings of different forms of performance assessment in higher education and how these could be applied to community engagement. Our [conclusions](#) were that developing meaningful metrics for community engagement would probably be impossible, and even if it were possible, would not be valuable. We reasoned the following:

- **Community engagement is notoriously difficult to measure:** Community engagement is context specific – which communities are engaged with and what kind of engagement takes place depends on a range of factors including geography, socioeconomic development, institutional missions and academic disciplines. None of the previous attempts to develop community engagement metrics have successfully addressed this challenge.
- **Assessment of community engagement should be an institutional learning journey rather than a narrow performance assessment:** The ultimate purpose assessing community engagement should be to allow universities to identify community engagement activities, help them understand how they perform (by demonstrating the value and mutual benefits generated by such activities) and assist them in eventual improvement. It is difficult to see how a metrics-based approach could lead to such outcomes.

An alternative approach: the TEFCE Toolbox

The TEFCE project therefore adopted an alternative approach and developed an [institutional self-reflection framework for community engagement in higher education: the 'TEFCE Toolbox'](#). The toolbox begins with mapping the range of community engagement activities that are carried out across the university. It then provides a framework allowing universities to critically reflect on their community engagement. The result is a 'heatmap' indicating areas in which the university performs best, and areas which are in most need of further development. The heatmap is structured according to the seven dimensions of community engagement and to five criteria, presented in the figure below:

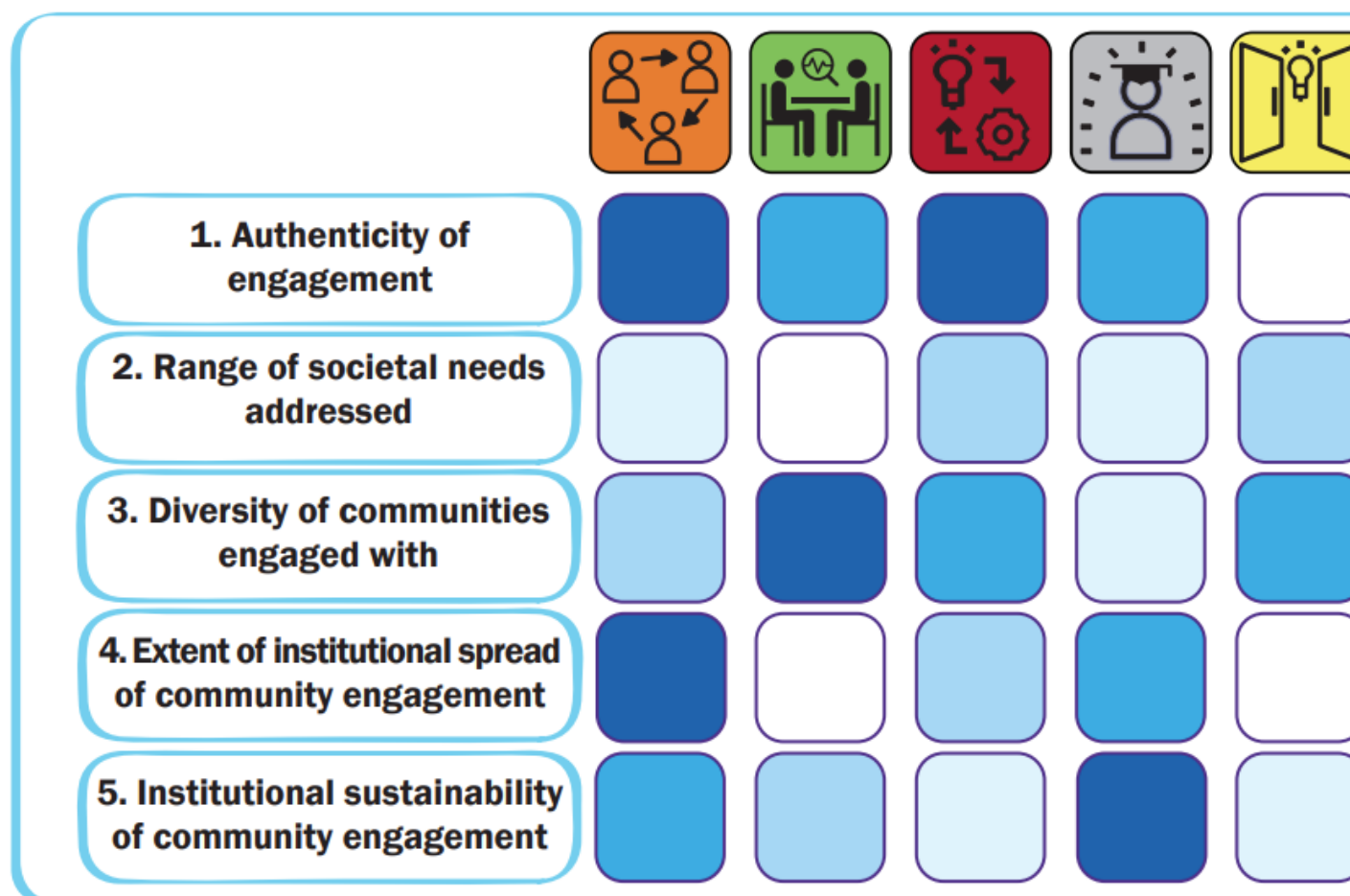


Figure 2: TEFCE Toolbox – institutional community engagement heatmap

There are many other international tools to assess community engagement in higher education, such as the US' [Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement in Higher Education](#) and the UK's [EDGE Tool](#). The TEFCE Toolbox builds upon these to do something slightly different. Firstly, it is centred around a critical approach to determining *authenticity* of engagement, i.e. the extent to which engagement is mutual beneficial, and the extent to which communities are able to co-determine and co-create activities. Secondly, it is participatory: the findings are validated through open discussions within the university and with external partners. Thirdly, it is the first tool that aims to be applied by universities across different countries, irrespective of socioeconomic, cultural or institutional contexts.

Leading the debate on community engagement

As part of the TEFCE project, four universities with diverse institutional profiles and from four different countries (Croatia, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands) successfully piloted the Toolbox and [confirmed its value](#). Users particularly valued that the Toolbox raises the visibility of the value of community engagement, supports the intrinsic motivation of community-engaged staff, students and external partners, and that it facilitates a learning journey, rather than tools that focus on compliance or competition.

Since then, a follow-up EU project ([SHEFCE](#)) will see four more universities from Austria, Belgium and Spain applying the TEFCE Toolbox. The new project consortium includes a range of international stakeholders that 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). These projects could provide the basis for a lasting European framework to support community engagement in higher education. Ultimately, our hope is that when the question is asked, universities will be ready to provide a robust, qualitative answer to how they engage with society rather resorting to metrics.

Dedication: The TEFCE project is indebted to the work of Paul Benneworth, who was one of the leading authors of the TEFCE Toolbox, and was a frequent contributor to the LSE Impact blog. Paul died unexpectedly in May 2020 at the age of 46, and our work in the TEFCE project is dedicated to his memory.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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