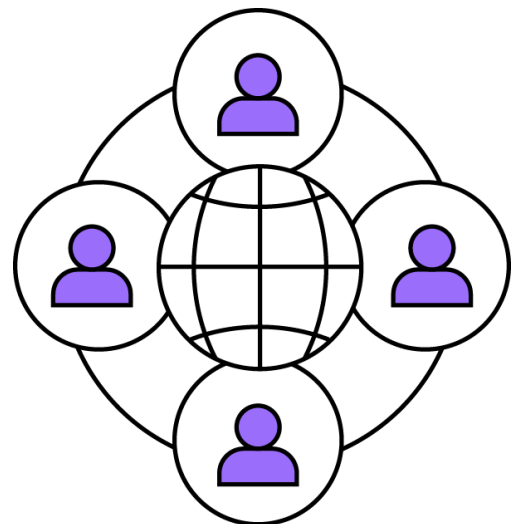


OpenEU

The Open
European
University

D7.2 OpenEU Community Engagement Playbook



Version History

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the Playbook

The purpose of this playbook is to provide a comprehensive guide for community engagement within the OpenEU Alliance, focusing on inclusivity, digital readiness, and sustainability in higher education.

The strategies in this playbook are drawn from the learnings from T.7.1.1 Evidence collection and mapping report and T.7.1.2 Participative dialogue, that consisted of 45 community engagement case studies, a literature review of 58 sources, and four participatory seminars, held by Daugavpils University, that focused on underrepresented groups in higher education: women in STEM, young scientists, migrants and refugees, and rural residents. Both manual review and AI-assisted pattern recognition were used to analyse results. Both the strategies and best practices in this playbook reference the OpenEU's IGEP (Inclusive Gender Equality Plan), the OpenEU Policy for Ethical and Green Digital Practices, the OpenEU Communication and Dissemination Plan, and the OpenEU Open Science and Innovation Policy.

1.2 Definition and Scope of Community Engagement

What

Community engagement within the OpenEU Alliance encompasses activities at the local, national, and Alliance-wide levels, involving both internal and external communities. The role of community engagement involves responding to social needs¹ and active participation of community members in decision-making processes.

Who

Internal collaborators within the OpenEU Alliance, especially in Work Packages (WP): WP3, WP6, WP7, and WP8.

¹ European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture & PPMI. (2020). *Community engagement in higher education: trends, practices and policies: analytical report*. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/071482>.

	External collaborators including: citizens, civil society organizations, businesses and industry, the education community, and policymakers, reaching local, regional, national, and trans/international communities.
Objective	To aid in feeding back tasks between WPs and collaborating with external stakeholders in co-designing online, offline, and blended strategies that foster long-term community engagement.
How	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategies for facilitating engagement• Best practices with guidelines

1.3 Roles and Responsibilities in Community Engagement

Community engagement within OpenEU is designed to support collaboration, transparency, and strategic alignment across WPs. The following roles are defined to support this effort:

- **OpenEU Secretariat**
Acts as a central coordination body, ensuring alignment of community engagement efforts with the broader strategic goals of the Alliance. Supports Work Package Leaders (WPLs) and Subtask Leaders with guidance and facilitates cross-WP information flow.
- **Community Board**
Provides strategic oversight and thematic guidance on community engagement. Advises on best practices, ensures inclusivity and diversity in engagement approaches, and supports the development of shared resources.
- **Work Package Leaders (WPLs)**
Responsible for ensuring that engagement efforts are aligned with WP objectives and that relevant stakeholders are informed and involved. Consult with the Secretariat and Community Board to share updates and coordinate efforts.
- **Subtask Leaders**
Operationally responsible for implementing community engagement activities within specific tasks (ex. stakeholder outreach and event coordination). Subtask Leaders are expected to maintain regular communication with WPLs and the Secretariat to ensure coherence.

2. Strategies Facilitating Engagement

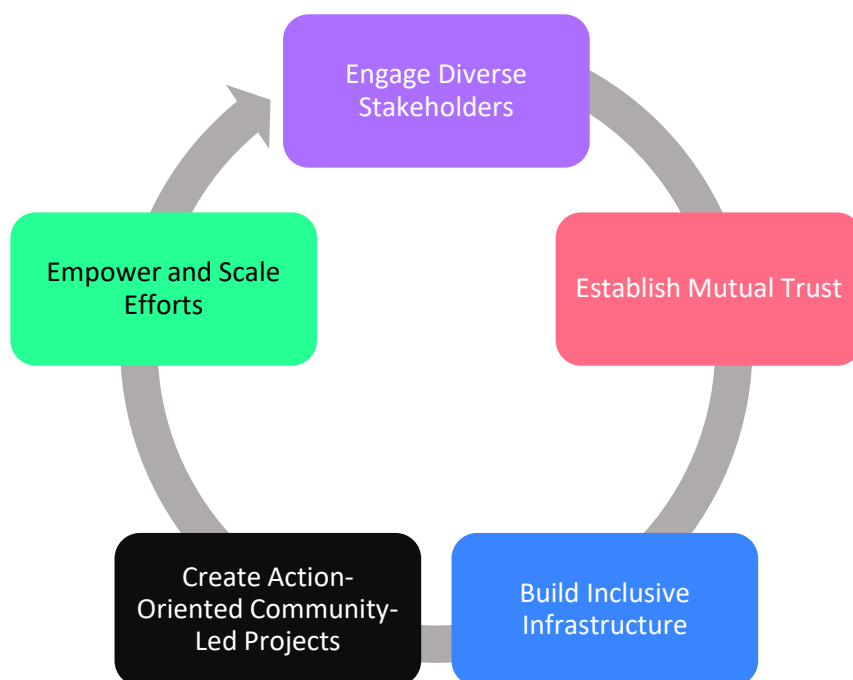


Figure 1: Community Engagement Feedback Loop

Co-creating community engagement initiatives is a collaborative process, not only between diverse stakeholders, but also between OpenEU Alliance WPs. Based on findings from T.7.1.1 Evidence collection and mapping report and T.7.1.2 Participative dialogue, the following feedback loop can be drawn from successful community engagement practices.

2.1 Engage Diverse Stakeholders

Engaging a wide range of stakeholders is essential for creating meaningful community impact. Using the ORION Open Science model² and Engage2020³ as a framework, this process involves reaching out to groups

² ORION Open Science. (n.d.). *Co creation activities*. <https://www.orion-openscience.eu/activities/co-creation>

³ Engage2020. (2014). *Public Engagement Methods and Tools*. <https://engage2020.eu/media/D3-2-Public-Engagement-Methods-and-Tools-3.pdf>

from diverse backgrounds, sectors, and perspectives—including citizens, civil society organizations, businesses and industry, the education community, policymakers, and underrepresented voices. This step is particularly relevant for WP2, WP3, WP4, WP7, and WP8. By actively involving diverse stakeholders, projects benefit from a broader range of ideas, experiences, and resources. This inclusivity not only enriches the decision-making process but also ensures that initiatives are more responsive to the actual needs of the community.

2.2 Establish Mutual Trust

Focus on shared understanding of a community's needs and priorities through active listening to identify key barriers. Trust is cultivated through transparent communication, consistent actions, and a genuine commitment to listening and responding to concerns. This step is relevant within building the OpenEU foundations in WP1 and WP5 and through building trust with external stakeholders in the other WPs.

Establishing trust also means acknowledging past challenges, being honest about limitations, and following through on promises. Shared understanding helps align efforts, reduce misunderstandings, and foster a sense of collective ownership over both the process and the outcomes.

Within the TEFCE Toolbox framework⁴ from the Erasmus+ project, Steering Higher Education for Community Engagement (SHEFCE), trust is evidenced not as an attitude but as a practice. It is demonstrated through sustained, mutually beneficial partnerships in which community partners co-create activities, experience tangible benefits, participate in shared governance and reflective dialogue, and remain engaged over time within embedded institutional structures.

2.3 Build Inclusive Infrastructure

Create culturally sensitive systems, spaces, and processes that are accessible and welcoming to everyone, using the OpenEU's IGEP as a guide. This goes beyond physical spaces to also include digital platforms and communication channels that accommodate diverse needs. The OpenEU Policy for Ethical and Green Digital Practices, can offer guidance here. This step is highly relevant to WP3, WP4, WP6, WP7, and WP8.

Inclusive infrastructure ensures that all community members—regardless of age, ability, language, or background—can participate fully and benefit

⁴ Farnell, T., Benneworth, P., Ćulum Ilić, B., Seeber, M., & Šćukanec Schmidt, N. (2018). *TEFCE Toolbox for Community Engagement in Higher Education: An Institutional Self-Reflection Framework*. <https://community-engagement.eu/toolbox>

equally. Educational infrastructures must function as spaces for bridging, that is, they must be designed and promoted as social infrastructures⁵, beyond the material support that sustains them.

2.4 Create Action-Oriented Community-Led Projects

Launch pilot projects, mentorship programs, and flexible learning pathways that prioritize tangible outcomes and are rooted in the lived experiences and aspirations of community members. This step is particularly relevant to WP2, WP3, WP4, WP6, and WP7.

By centring local leadership and fostering grassroots innovation, such initiatives are more likely to be sustainable. Action-oriented projects build momentum, which can inspire further engagement and investment from the community. European Universities alliances can foster regional and civic engagement through these initiatives, including challenge-based learning.⁶

2.5 Empower and Scale Efforts

Scale successful pilots sustainably using evidence-based criteria, including participation rates, community satisfaction, or other measurable impact. Empowering communities means equipping individuals and groups with the tools (both physical and digital), resources, and authority they need to take meaningful action. This involves fostering local leadership, building capacity through training and mentorship, and ensuring that community members have a genuine voice in decision-making processes, reflecting the shift from “research *for* society” towards “research *with* society”⁷. Support in finding tools to improve community engagement efforts and resources for evaluating the success of community engagement initiatives can be found in the TEFCE Toolbox⁸.

This step is relevant to all WPs and correlates to Phase 2: Engagement (Project Activities and Dissemination) in the OpenEU Communication and

⁵ Klinenberg, E. (2018). *Palaces for the people: how social infrastructure can help fight inequality, polarization, and the decline of civic life*. Penguin Press.

⁶ Grumbainaitė, I., Colus, F., & Buitrago Carvajal, H. (2025). Report on the outcomes and transformational potential of the European Universities initiative. *Publications Office of the European Union*. Retrieved from: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/db43f6ca-da14-11ef-be2a-01a>

⁷ Stifterverband. (2025). Fostering transdisciplinary and participatory research and public engagement with research https://www.stifterverband.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/fostering_transdisciplinary_and_participatory_research_and_public_engagement_with_research.pdf

⁸ Farnell, T., Benneworth, P., Ćulum Ilić, B., Seeber, M., & Šćukanec Schmidt, N. (2018). *TEFCE Toolbox for Community Engagement in Higher Education: An Institutional Self-Reflection Framework*. <https://community-engagement.eu/toolbox>

Dissemination Plan. Scaling these efforts requires creating partnerships that allow successful initiatives to grow and be replicated in other contexts.

3. Best Practices

3.1 Embrace Co-Creation and Collaborative Partnerships

Co-creation and collaboration are foundational to successful community engagement. These practices ensure that community members and stakeholders are not passive recipients but active contributors to the design and implementation of initiatives. Adopting Open Science practices as described in the OpenEU Open Science and Innovation Policy, and supporting citizen science efforts, allows for such co-creation to occur. Engaging communities in this way fosters shared ownership, builds trust, and leads to more innovative and contextually relevant solutions.

Guidelines:

- Conduct stakeholder mapping to identify all relevant actors and learn the community's needs and challenges.
- Engagement workshops and sessions are co-created.
- Establish collaborative decision-making structures, e.g. by employing Decidim.
- Maintain continuous feedback loops throughout the project lifecycle.

3.2 Ensure Accessibility, Inclusivity, and Digital Readiness

Accessibility, inclusivity, and digital readiness are critical to equitable community engagement. These principles ensure that all individuals—regardless of age, ability, language, location, or background—can participate meaningfully in engagement efforts. Since community needs and cultural norms vary significantly across regions, engagement strategies should be guided by the OpenEU IGEP framework of non-sexist, non-discriminatory language guide and complete the IGEP Event Checklist. Community engagement practices should follow the OpenEU policy for Ethical and Green Digital Practices by developing partnerships with NGOs and local communities on digital inclusion and sustainability.

Guidelines:

- Facilitate spaces for interaction so that diversity can manifest itself, understanding it as an inherent part of being human, which must be recognised in order to build equitable relationships.
- Design inclusive physical and digital spaces, preferably following the recommendations of groups affected by barriers and specialised in overcoming them.
- Provide language support and culturally sensitive communication following OpenEU IGEP.
- Combine in-person and virtual engagement formats to maximize accessibility.
- Tailor strategies to local contexts in constant communication with the communities involved.

3.3 Design Action-Oriented and Structured Engagement

Community engagement should be grounded in real-world challenges and structured to produce tangible outcomes. Action-oriented projects empower participants by involving them in meaningful problem-solving and decision-making processes. Identifying key factors that warrant attention can facilitate institutional transformation and long-term impact.⁹

Guidelines:

- Support community needs assessments.
- Develop clear action plans with defined goals and timelines.
- Form task forces or working groups to lead initiatives.
- Monitor progress and evaluate outcomes regularly.

3.4 Address Barriers for Non-Traditional Learners

Migrants, refugees, and rural residents often face systemic barriers due to rigid educational structures. Supporting these non-hegemonic learners requires flexible, adaptive systems that recognize diverse educational backgrounds and life experiences. As the IGEP in section 2.5 highlights, it is important to provide resources so underrepresented groups can see clear pathways into, through, and beyond every program. Identifying and

⁹ Talbot, D. (2023). Knowledge, Knowers, and Capabilities: Can the Capabilities Approach Help Decolonise the Curriculum? *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 24(2), 216–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2023.2200240>

addressing these barriers is essential to ensure broad and equitable participation.

Guidelines:

- Recognize informal and non-traditional learning experiences through credentialling.
- Adapt admission criteria to accommodate irregular educational histories.
- Provide bridging programs and academic support for non-traditional learners.

3.5 Explicitly Tackle Power Imbalances

Power asymmetries—particularly between universities and communities—can undermine the authenticity and equity of engagement efforts. Addressing these imbalances is essential for fostering mutual respect and ensuring that all stakeholders have a meaningful voice in shaping initiatives.

Guidelines:

- Introduce shared decision-making structures that include community representatives.
- Rotate leadership roles among institutional and community stakeholders.
- Facilitate training on equity, inclusion, diversity, and power awareness.
- Have transparent, accessible communication channels and oversight mechanisms in place to highlight and attend (re)production situations of inequalities.

3.6 Integrate Mental Health and Well-being Support

Mental health challenges, especially among young researchers and marginalized students, can hinder sustained engagement and academic success. Including well-being as a core component of engagement strategies promotes resilience and inclusion.

Guidelines:

- Integrate mental health support into engagement and learning environments.

- Promote inclusive, low-pressure spaces for participation.
- Provide access to counselling and peer support networks.

3.7 Foster Mentorship, Capacity Building, and Sustainability

A lack of mentorships is a recurring barrier, particularly for early-career researchers and underrepresented groups. Structured mentorship programs can foster confidence, skill development, and long-term engagement. Trust is the cornerstone of any successful engagement initiative, and sustainability ensures that the benefits of engagement endure beyond the initial project cycle.

Guidelines:

- Establish structured mentorship programs with clear goals and roles.
- Pair experienced mentors with new participants from underrepresented groups.
- Use inclusive, adaptable digital tools for the online environment.

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Grumbinaitė, I., Colus, F., & Buitrago Carvajal, H. (2025). *Report on the outcomes and transformational potential of the European Universities initiative*. Publications Office of the European Union.
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