

A NEW FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT GREATER SOCIETAL IMPACT OF UNIVERSITIES IN EUROPE

Newly launched 'TEFCE Toolbox' supports universities' community engagement without using metrics or ranking

The EU-funded project *Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education* (TEFCE) has launched the TEFCE Toolbox, an institutional self-reflection framework that supports universities to improve how they address societal needs through partnerships with their external communities. Developed and piloted over two years through a process involving 180 experts and practitioners from eight EU Member States, the TEFCE Toolbox presents an innovative, robust and holistic framework to support universities' community engagement. The TEFCE Toolbox is available as a fully open-access resource at www.tefce.eu/toolbox.

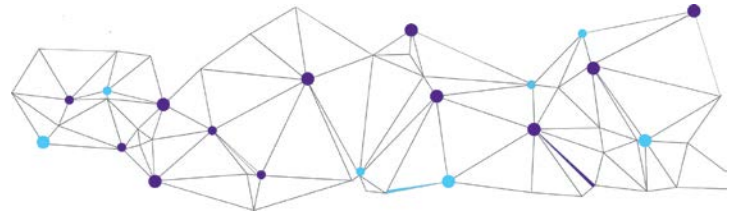
Universities play a crucial role in addressing societal needs, from supporting social development at the local level to helping solve global societal challenges. Community engagement refers to how universities address societal needs through partnerships with their communities. The term 'communities' can include public authorities, businesses, schools, cultural institutions and civil society, but also socially vulnerable groups that do not easily connect with higher education.

While many policymakers agree on the importance of the universities' community engagement and societal impact, measuring community engagement is notoriously difficult. Community engagement always varies depending on the university, its communities and its external environment. For this reason, the TEFCE project team has argued that there is little value in comparing community engagement 'performance' between universities.ⁱ Instead, the TEFCE project has developed a new framework to support community engagement, without using metrics, ranking or bureaucratic self-assessment questionnaires.

The TEFCE Toolbox is 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 room for improvement. Organised around seven thematic dimensions of community engagement in higher education, the TEFCE Toolbox guides users through a process to identify community engagement practices at their institution and then encourages participative discussions that result in a 'institutional community-engagement heatmap' for the university as a whole indicating:

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

The TEFCE Toolbox was developed by experts from the Institute for the Development of Education (Croatia), the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (the Netherlands),ⁱⁱ the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG, Belgium) and the University of Rijeka (Croatia). The final version of the TEFCE Toolbox was the result of a co-creation process involving over 180 participants from eight countries over 18 months at four universities with diverse institutional



profiles (University of Rijeka, Croatia; University of Twente, the Netherlands; Technische Universität Dresden, Germany; and Technological University Dublin, Ireland).

The TEFCE Toolbox has the potential to become a robust tool that will support universities in institutionalising their cooperation with the wider community. Universities interested in applying the TEFCE Toolbox can download the TEFCE Toolbox on the website www.tefce.eu and can receive support from the network of TEFCE experts and partner institutions in its implementation.

ⁱ Benneworth, P. S., Ćulum, B., Farnell, T., Kaiser, F., Seeber, M., Šćukanec, N., Vossensteyn, H., & Westerheijden, D. F. (2018). *Mapping and Critical Synthesis of Current State-of-the-Art on Community Engagement in Higher Education*. Zagreb: Institute for the Development of Education.

ⁱⁱ Paul Benneworth, one of the co-authors of the TEFCE Toolbox and a leading global expert on community engagement, died unexpectedly on 12 May 2020 at the age of 46. The authors would like to dedicate this work to his memory: <https://www.tefce.eu/news/in-memoriam-paul-benneworth>