A New Approach to Self-Assessment of Community Engagement: A Case Study of Technological University Dublin

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ABSTRACT

Building upon existing international tools, the TEFCE (Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement of Higher Education) Toolbox for community engagement represents an innovative, robust, and holistic framework to support universities in reflecting upon their community engagement. Through a case study approach, this paper highlights the piloting of the TEFCE Toolbox at Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), Ireland. Through an inclusive and participatory methodology, the process facilitated the recognition of community engagement achievements and the identification of potential areas for improvement.

Keywords: university community partnership, assessment frameworks, institutional self-reflection, participatory approaches, qualitative methodology

The European Union-funded project Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education (TEFCE, www.tefce.eu) sought to develop innovative and feasible policy tools at the university level for supporting, monitoring, and assessing the community engagement of universities. The TEFCE project defines community engagement as a process whereby universities engage with external organiz-ations to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial even if each side benefits in a different way. This paper presents a case study of the implementation of this toolbox at Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) and offers insights for any university seeking to undertake a participatory approach to self-assessment of their community engagement activities.

Understanding Community Engagement

The engagement of universities[1] with external communities to address societal challenges has gained increased prominence in recent years (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña,

2017; Pinheiro et al., 2015). This is reflected in the debate on the roles of universities in meeting the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021; Global University Network for Innovation [GUNI], 2019) and on the importance of Responsible Research and Innovation (European Commission, 2020). The global COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of community engagement by universities, and the need to mobilise knowledge and resources in rapid response to the crisis (Farnell et al., 2021).

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). More recently, community engagement (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

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[1] This paper uses the term 'university' to refer to all forms of tertiary higher education institutions.

society. Benneworth et al. (2018) suggested that, "Community-engagement is a process whereby universities engage with external organisations to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial, even if each side benefits in a different way" (p. 7). This broad definition reflects a point that is strongly emphasised in the literature: that the principle of mutual benefit is central to community engagement (Sandmann, 2008; Benneworth, 2009; Goddard et al., 2016; American Council on Education, n.d.; National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement [NCCPE], n.d.). Moreover, in this understanding, "university knowledge helps societal partners to achieve their goals and societal partners' knowledge enriches the university knowledge process" (Benneworth et al., 2018).

The increasing international emphasis on connecting universities with society has led to the development of several tools to assess and evaluate community engagement ranging from the Holland (1997) matrix for analysing institutional commitment to service to the Carnegie Elective Classification of Community Engagement (American Council on Education, n.d., and the UK-based EDGE self-assessment tool for public engagement, NCCPE, n.d.) (Furco & Miller, 2009; Le Clus, 2011; Farnell & Šćukanec, 2018). Despite the range of international initiatives, there remains an absence of tools that address the context-specific nature of community engagement (Laing & Maddison, 2007; Hazelkorn, 2016). In addressing this situation, Farnell et al. (2020) proposed the development of an alternative approach to existing methods. The TEFCE Toolbox builds upon existing tools and adopts a slightly different approach, placing an emphasis on participatory approaches (university and community partner dialogue) and focusing on the authenticity of engagement.

Organised around seven recognised thematic dimensions of community engagement in higher education (Teaching and Learning, Research, Service and Knowledge Exchange, Students, University-level Engagement Activities, Institutional Policies, and Supportive Peers), the TEFCE Toolbox guides users through a process to identify community engagement practices at their institution and then encourages participative discussions with multiple stakeholders (internal and external) 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 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 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. Through an empirical case study, this paper follows the implementation of the novel TEFCE Toolbox within "a large public university in Ireland" and its surrounding communities, and it explores the insights on community engagement gained through the process. The primary objective of the research for the case study was to undertake a detailed self-assessment of the university's community engagement activity and offer recommendations for future actions by the university.

METHODS

The unit of analysis of this case study is TU Dublin City Campus and the data gathering for this case study was prescribed by the TEFCE Toolbox piloting methodology.

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The various stages and methodology of the TEFCE Toolbox are outlined in Table 1, and its application at TU Dublin is detailed in the proceeding section.

From March to November 2019, a two-member research team (also known as the local project team) engaged multiple stakeholders through a longitudinal and multi-phased approach to data collection. First, a series of one-to-one meetings was conducted with several representatives from TU Dublin (institutional leadership, academic and support staff, and students), the Grangegorman Development Agency (a national flagship urban regeneration initiative), and various community organizations to establish the TU Dublin pilot team. These meetings provided an opportunity to share the goals of the TEFCE project with community-engaged staff.

Second, a quick scan meeting, which is an initial discussion designed to assess the type and extent of community engagement at the university, was undertaken by the TU Dublin pilot team in April 2019. During the half-day meeting, the pilot team shared with the local project team their knowledge of the various community engagement practises across TU Dublin and sketched them across the various dimensions of the TEFCE framework. The pilot team also suggested follow-up contact details to enable the local project team to investigate

further practise at TU Dublin. At this meeting, some preliminary levels of community engagement were assigned across each of the dimensions (TEFCE Toolbox Stage 1).

Third, the local project team undertook desk and field-based research to uncover community-engaged practices at TU Dublin. Between June and November 2019, the project team engaged in desk-based research (i.e. reviewing reports, news articles, and a database of community-engaged practice that had been gathered by TU Dublin for a Carnegie Community Engagement Application and recent application by the organization for Technological University Status) and several face-to-face meetings with university and community representatives (TEFCE Toolbox Stage 2). TEFCE templates requesting details of sample community engagement activities were circulated to informants for completion. At the end of the process, nine detailed samples were gathered, in addition to another document containing details of 21 exemplars (a further database of basic information regarding 120 exemplars was also available) (TEFCE Toolbox Stage 3).

Fourth, a two-day peer-learning visit was organized whereby the pilot team and the expert team, members of whom developed the TEFCE piloting methodology, gathered at the TU Dublin flagship campus to discuss the

Table 1. *TEFCE Toolbox Methodology*

Stage 1	Quick scan	Initial discussion by university/community team on the type and extent of community engagement at the university.
Stage 2	Evidence Collection	Collecting stories of community-engaged practitioners throughout the university.
Stage 3	Mapping Report	Using the TEFCE Toolbox matrix to map the level of community engagement of the university and to identify good practices, resulting in a background report.
Stage 4	Participative Dialogue	Open discussions among university management, staff, students, and the community on strengths and areas of improvement.
Stage 5	Institutional report	Promoting good practices and impact, and critical self-reflection for planning improvements to university-community engagement.

Source: Farnell et al. 2020

findings. On the first day an extensive array of presenters from both TU Dublin and the local community shared vignettes of community-engaged practise at TU Dublin (TEFCE Toolbox Stage 4). The first day also provided an opportunity for the TU Dublin pilot team to share their recommendations on improving the TEFCE Toolbox. The team suggested that while the toolbox was a useful way for gathering qualitative data related to community engagement, elements of the process were complicated and demanding. Overall, the team agreed that developing a partnership approach and gaining stakeholder support is key to successful implementation of the Toolbox. On the second day, the expert team and the pilot team analysed community engagement at TU Dublin using the SLIPDOT framework. After the piloting visit, the narratives about the community engagement practices were finalised (where necessary) and an institutional report was developed (TEFCE Toolbox Stage 5).

Analysis of TU Dublin Using the TEFCE Framework

The TEFCE framework guided TU Dublin to assess its level of community engagement according to seven thematic dimensions: Teaching and Learning, Research, Service and Knowledge Exchange, Students, University-level Engagement Activities, Institutional Policies, and Supportive Peers. It should be noted that the framework is not intended to catalogue all community-engaged practices of a university, but instead it aims to initiate a robust, qualitative evidence-collection process that the users believe reflects the variety and diversity of the university's community engagement activities.

Based upon a review of community-engaged practices happening in TU Dublin, an analysis of activities was undertaken using the TEFCE framework. The following are the broad findings detected for each thematic dimension of the framework.

1. Teaching and Learning

While strategic plans exist at univer-

sity level, some schools and locations are not yet proactively involved in embedding community-engaged practices in teaching and learning activity. Additionally, TU Dublin remains more heavily biased towards engaging with enterprises, and further work is required to support vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups through teaching and learning. The Students Learning with Communities (SLWC) program is a leading example of how community engagement with underserved communities may be embedded into teaching and learning to enhance the learning experience for students, academics, and external communities.

2. Research

The authenticity of engagement is genuine as TU Dublin has made a strategic commitment and provided appropriate resourcing to supporting research activity in this space. The research activity that occurs seeks to engage with vulnerable communities in a meaningful manner, but research activity remains within a small group of active researchers, which makes institutional sustainability a challenge. The current situation is that there is a strong engagement focus by the university with industry and enterprise.

3. Service and Knowledge Exchange

TU Dublin originated from a vocational educational background when it was originally founded in the late 19th century. Throughout its history, it has offered a wide array of education programs for apprentices and craftspeople, which has ensured that the organisation has continuously addressed service and knowledge exchange. Furthermore, university staff have frequently contributed to the development of professional organizations, which means that TU Dublin staff are frequently members of national and international policy and practitioner expert groups addressing a variety of societal needs at very high levels of government and professional bodies.

4. Students

The historic background of TU Dublin

providing vocational education through apprenticeship programs has meant that students have always been close to practice and linked to industry. The nature of apprenticeships is experiential learning, and this tradition has been maintained by students and teachers alike as the organisation has grown into an internationally ranked university.

5. University-level Engagement Activities

The university has particularly strong relationships with professional bodies and with trade associations, since it has trained their people for over a century. The collaboration has developed into exemptions for professional examinations and the co-design of content and structure of programs. The university is deeply committed to continuing this rich history of collaboration and has embedded this allegiance to mutually beneficial partnerships with external communities through its strategies and resourcing. The master plan for the new flagship Grangegorman campus has been developed over several years arising from deep consultation and mutually beneficial partnerships between TU Dublin, Dublin City Council, and the local community.

6. Institutional Policies

Across its different incarnations as an educational institution (the various Technical Colleges, Dublin Institute of Technology, and TU Dublin), the commitment to interacting with local communities has always been very strong. However, in recent times an even deeper commitment has been made by senior management to this activity by recognising its value to education through its proactive initiatives (e.g., Access and Civic Engagement Office) and through its reward mechanisms for staff and students who effectively engage in such activities.

7. Supportive Peers

The biggest challenge facing the sustainability of this dimension is the need by staff to publish in academic journals. While the university recognises and values community engagement, academic careers are more likely to be enhanced by publications than by community engagement, particularly if a person is seeking to get a position in another university that might not value community engagement in the same manner as TU Dublin. Balancing the desire to engage in community-based activities while also developing one's career will continue to be a struggle for many staff members.

The analysis was undertaken by employing each subdimension of the seven thematic dimensions which led to a meticulous uncovering of the key activities, plus their strengths and areas of lower intensity, relating to the university's community engagement endeavours. The review recognized that the university did not seek to be strong in every dimension or subdimension, since strategic decisions were taken by senior management about where its resources and priorities should be allocated.

The analysis of the dimensions also enabled the university to get a very strong understanding of its current position regarding its current commitments to community engagement. This process was assisted by participative dialogue with stakeholders including community partners and utilisation of the SLIPDOT analysis framework. Table 2 presents an overview of the SLIPDOT analysis at TU Dublin with detailed discussion and examples provided in the proceeding section.

Overall, it was recognised that 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 in terms of economic development and the broader societal benefit that this brings. At the highest level (senior management) within the university, there is a clear allegiance to community engagement and the new campus at Grangegorman has been designed with a focus on community benefit. For example, through the Grangegorman Development Agency, TU Dublin has collaborated with partners including the Health Service Executive (HSE), Dublin City Council, and the the local comm-

Table 2. *TU Dublin City Campus TEFCE SLIPDOT Analysis*

STRENGTHS
- Development of the new city campus could help to strengthen CE activities at TU Dublin.
- TU Dublin management demonstrates a clear commitment to CE (i.e., institutional recognition).
- Organisational structures for CE help academics in the implementation of CE activities.
- TU Dublin encourages students' engagement in problem-solving to aid their communities.
- TU Dublin engages in extensive dialogue with different internal and external stakeholders, creating a socially responsible learning and teaching environment.
- Dublin City Council and TU Dublin have worked in partnership on the development of the Grangegorman campus alongside several other partners.

LOWER INTENSITY
- CE at TU Dublin is not institution wide (i.e., not all study programmes have a CE component).
- Need for proper workload allocation for lecturers that will enable effective CE implementation.
- More help is needed for CE from centralized services.
- There is a limited support structure at TU Dublin for engaged research.
- TU Dublin has a primary focus on research activities that produce economic benefits and on publishing scientific articles. CE does not have the same level of priority as research.

POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPMENT
- Bolster CE through greater interdisciplinarity across departments in TU Dublin.
- Improve organisational structures that are necessary for effective implementation of CE.
- Focus more on community stakeholders with fewer resources and less so on industry sector.
- Collaborate with other universities on CE. The Higher Education Authority (public agency) could provide funding that fosters collaboration on CE between universities.
- Maintain structures for building relations with community (e.g. foster work of the Grangegorman Development Agency).

OPPORTUNITIES
- The newly merged university strategy represents an opportunity for building CE strategic goals.
- Focus more towards SDGs, which could serve as a driver for positive change.
- Include students more actively in the campus development plans.
- National depopulation trends could help with creating collaborative CE goals, which, in turn, could support the development of disadvantaged areas around the new campus.
- European support for CE could lead to new funding for CE in Ireland and at the EU level.
- Potential opportunity for universities that are successful in implementing CE activities to be incentivized financially (e.g., KPIs for CE in performance agreements).
- Collaboration between TU Dublin, local, and national government on developing the Grangegorman area represents a potential for the enhancement of CE activities.

THREATS
- A change in current priorities at TU Dublin, due to the new merger, could negatively impact CE.
- Compliance and regulations (as a consequence of the merger and of the development of new structures and procedures) could hinder development of CE at TU Dublin.
- Hierarchy at TU Dublin could hinder flexibility in decision-making regarding CE activities.
- "Research on the top, CE on the bottom" – new strategic priorities of the newly established university could hinder development of CE.
- Grangegorman campus will receive a substantial number of students in a very short period; student integration into the local community may present a challenge.
- New Public Management (NPM) tools introduce competition in the HE sector and the HEIs will try to sell CE using NPM-wording and NPM-approach: This is inconsistent with the spirit of CE.
- Insufficient funding for CE at TU Dublin.

Source: O'Brien et al., 2021

Note: CE=community engagement, SDG=Sustainable Development Goals, KPI=Key Performance Indicator, HE=Higher Education, HEI=Higher Education Institution

unity in delivering a vision for the regeneration of Dublin's North West Inner City. Flagship projects such as the Students Learning with Communities demonstrate the embedding of community engagement within teaching and learning at TU Dublin. Furthermore, the university's leading role in several community development research projects (e.g., Area Based Childhood, ABC project) highlights its commitment to the co-creation of academic and community knowledge for societal benefit.

Regarding areas of lower intensity, just one in three study programs has an element that includes a community-based learning component for students, and so this aspect of learning has yet to be embedded within all study programs. During the research gathering, TU Dublin academic staff, students, and external stakeholders stressed the importance of the service provided by the Access and Civic Engagement office. It was argued that increasing centralised support would further assist academic staff in their commitment to community engagement. Additionally, there is a need to establish a proper workload allocation model for academic staff for community-engaged learning and associated teaching and research. Unfortunately, community engagement currently has less emphasis for many staff due to their personal need to focus on scientific research and publishing.

The new campus development at Grangegorman represents significant potential for the further development of community-engaged practice at TU Dublin. Facilitating a move from disciplinary silos to inter-disciplinarity could have a positive influence on community-engaged practice at TU Dublin. Through the national office of Campus Engage, there is significant potential for TU Dublin to collaborate with other Irish universities in the field of community engagement. Moreover, the foundational structures and relationships that have been established with the local community with the support of the Grangegorman Development Agency should continue to be fostered. A threat remains that TU Dublin's new status and strategic priorities could negatively influence the current structures and activities for community engagement. Yet with the institution's track record across the Dublin region and its new strategic plan, it is envisaged that positive developments relating to community engagement will continue at TU Dublin.

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 a great opportunity for broadening the definition of how TU Dublin can serve society. Developed through the lens of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 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. European trends in higher education are supportive of community engagement and, building on this report, there is scope for collaboration and enhanced community engagement at TU Dublin.

CONCLUSION

Informed and inspired by existing self-assessment tools and frameworks, the TEFCE Toolbox aims to build upon them by placing emphasis on participatory approaches and focusing 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, judgmental, normative and desk-based. Embarking on a learning journey, institutional findings are validated through dialogue between the university and its external communities. In addition to TU Dublin, the TEFCE tool has been applied in several diverse universities (O'Brien et al., 2021) recognising the TEFCE Toolbox as a novel framework for community engagement in higher education that can be utilised across different countries, irrespective of institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural contexts. Universities are being increasingly

called upon to contribute to their surrounding communities and regions, and the TEFCE Toolbox is a novel, alternative framework that supports universities in this pursuit.

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