



Alliance for Community Engagement
in European Higher Education



Strategic Foresight Analysis

The European University Community Engagement Guide

A foresight-based framework of 16 Strategic Pressure Points for
community engagement in European higher education

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01

Executive Summary



01 Executive summary

Community engagement has become a central dimension of today's universities. Across Europe, higher education institutions are expected to respond to societal challenges, foster democratic dialogue, and contribute to local and regional development. Engagement is no longer peripheral; it is a visible marker of public value and institutional legitimacy.

At the same time, expectations toward engagement are expanding faster than institutional capacity. Universities are asked to engage widely and visibly across areas such as inclusion, mental health, skills development, digitalisation, sustainability, and social cohesion - often without corresponding adjustments in governance structures, resources, or decision-making processes.

In this context, community engagement can no longer be treated as a collection of activities or projects. It requires explicit strategic choices: decisions about priorities, limits, responsibilities, and scope. Questions such as how far universities should engage, with whom, and under what conditions have become unavoidable leadership concerns.

The European University Community Engagement Guide was developed to support universities in navigating these choices. Rather than offering best-practice models or prescriptive solutions, it provides a foresight-based framework for strategic reflection, helping institutions align engagement ambitions with institutional missions, capacities, and long-term sustainability.

At the core of the Guide is a set of 16 Strategic Pressure Points for community engagement which identify system-level areas where multiple pressures converge and where decisions can no longer be postponed. They function as strategic lenses, highlighting recurring tensions, governance gaps, and cumulative pressures that shape engagement over time. Rather than describing isolated problems, the Strategic Pressure Points identify areas where institutional ambitions, societal expectations, and organisational capacities intersect, creating the need for strategic choices. They should be treated as starting points and can be used to: inform the development or revision of engagement strategies, structure internal dialogue across roles and departments, design workshops or leadership discussions, or support future experimentation and learning.

The Strategic Pressure Points are organised into six thematic areas that reflect recurring areas where universities face strategic choices about institutional capacity, learning and skills, trust and knowledge, participation and influence, values and civic responsibility, and sustainable engagement ecosystems. Together, they provide a strategic map of engagement tensions.

A central message of the Guide is that many engagement challenges stem not from a lack of commitment, but from the growing complexity of engagement environments and the absence of clear governance mechanisms for navigating competing expectations, priorities, and institutional responsibilities. As a result, engagement is often visible and energetic, while institutions continue to explore how it can be more systematically supported, prioritised, and embedded within decision-making structures.

The Guide is designed for university leaders, governance bodies, engagement professionals, academic staff, and others involved in community engagement. It supports them by identifying where pressure is accumulating, clarifying the consequences of action or inaction, highlighting common system-level traps, and legitimising boundary-setting and prioritisation.

AT A GLANCE

- 16 Strategic Pressure Points
- 6 thematic areas
- 2 ready-to-run workshop formats
- 1 template for defining your own Pressure Point

02

Introduction



02 Introduction

About the ACE Project

The European University Community Engagement Guide was developed within the Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership project "Alliance for Community Engagement in European Higher Education (ACE)". The project brings together higher education institutions and expert organisations committed to strengthening the role of universities as active partners in society and advancing community engagement across Europe. The consortium consists of Lodz University of Technology (Poland) as project coordinator, together with University of Tartu (Estonia), Technological University of the Shannon (Ireland), University of Belgrade (Serbia), Accreditation Council for Entrepreneurial and Engaged Universities (Germany), and the European E-Learning Institute (Denmark). The partners combine expertise in community engagement, higher education policy, institutional development, quality assurance, and digital learning.

The overall objective of ACE is to support universities in developing more effective approaches to community engagement. Through foresight analysis, peer learning, capacity building, practical tools, and international collaboration, the project seeks to strengthen the ability of higher education institutions to respond to evolving societal needs and contribute to positive social change.

The European University Community Engagement Guide constitutes one of the project's core outcomes and represents the final result of Work Package 2 (WP2): Strategic Foresight Analysis of University Community Engagement in Europe.

Who is this Guide for?

The Guide is intended for university leaders, governance bodies, engagement professionals, academic and professional staff, and facilitators supporting institutional reflection on community engagement.

Readers may use the Guide in three ways: as a strategic framework, as a reflection tool for leadership and governance discussions, or as a practical resource for workshop-based institutional learning.

About Work Package 2: Strategic Foresight Analysis

Work Package 2 was designed to develop an evidence-informed and future-oriented understanding of community engagement in European higher education. Rather than focusing solely on existing practices or current policy debates, WP2 adopted a strategic foresight perspective, aiming to explore emerging developments, future challenges, and opportunities that may shape the evolution of community engagement over the coming years.

The work was carried out through a multi-stage foresight process combining Horizon Scanning, Stakeholder Dialogues, Cross-Impact Analysis, and Cross-Phase Integration. Together, these activities brought evidence from literature, policy developments, institutional practices, stakeholder experiences, and foresight methods into a shared analytical framework. Each stage of the process was documented and synthesised in a dedicated project report, providing a cumulative evidence base that informed the development of the Strategic Pressure Points presented in this Guide.

The process began with Horizon Scanning, which identified emerging trends, developments, and signals of change relevant to community engagement. These findings were subsequently explored through Stakeholder Dialogues organised across Poland, Estonia, Serbia and Ireland, involving both university representatives and community stakeholders. The dialogues helped capture diverse perspectives, identify recurring challenges and opportunities, and validate the relevance of observed developments.

The resulting insights were then examined through Cross-Impact Analysis, which explored how individual trends and developments interact, reinforce one another, and shape wider institutional and societal dynamics. Finally, Cross-Phase Integration brought together the findings from all stages of the process to identify strategic questions, and areas

where future decisions may become important. A detailed description of the methodology and the foresight process underpinning the development of the Guide is provided in the ACE Strategic Foresight Design.

The Guide presented here is therefore not a catalogue of good practices nor a traditional policy report. It represents the final synthesis of the WP2 foresight process and offers a framework for reflecting on the strategic choices, tensions, and governance questions that are likely to influence the future of community engagement in European higher education.

As the primary outcome of Work Package 2, this Guide should be understood as one element of a broader suite of ACE project results. Additional resources, including the ACE Alliance and Platform, the ACE Toolkit, and the ACE Empowerment Training Programme, are being developed in subsequent work packages. Together, these complementary outputs provide universities with a coherent framework, practical tools, networking opportunities, and capacity-building support for advancing community engagement. All results will be publicly available through the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform.

03

Community Engagement



03 Community engagement

Defining Community Engagement

Community engagement is understood in many ways across higher education. Depending on the institutional context, it may refer to collaboration with communities, civic engagement, participatory research, knowledge exchange, public dialogue, regional development, service learning, or broader forms of societal engagement.

Despite these differences, most contemporary approaches share several common principles. Community engagement is generally understood as a collaborative process based on reciprocity, mutual benefit, participation, and the co-creation of knowledge and solutions (Farnell, 2020; Benneworth et al., 2015). It moves beyond one-directional outreach activities and emphasises partnerships in which universities and communities work together to address shared opportunities and challenges, reflecting a broader shift from outreach towards more collaborative and reciprocal models of engagement (Scully & Cuthill, 2010; Farnell, 2020).

As part of the ACE project, consortium partners explored a range of existing definitions and conceptual approaches to community engagement, reflecting different perspectives and traditions within higher education, policy, and community development. These definitions were reviewed and discussed collectively to establish a shared understanding of community engagement that would be operationally meaningful for the project.

Following this process, the consortium adopted the definition proposed by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, as it was considered the most consistent with the project's objectives, values, and understanding of university-community relationships:

Community engagement is the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial creation and exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership between higher education institutions and the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2006).

This definition reflects several principles that are central to the ACE project and to this Guide. It positions engagement as a mutually beneficial relationship rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge or services. It highlights the importance of partnership, reciprocity, and collaboration, while recognising universities as active contributors to addressing societal challenges and advancing the public good, consistent with broader discussions of the civic role of universities (Goddard et al., 2016).

For the purposes of this Guide, community engagement is therefore understood not as a separate activity or institutional add-on, but as an approach that connects teaching, research, and societal contribution.

Why Community Engagement Requires Strategic Choices Today

Community engagement has become a very important dimension of higher education. Across Europe, universities are expected not only to educate and conduct research, but also to contribute to social inclusion, democratic participation, local and regional development, sustainability, innovation, and responses to complex societal challenges. Universities are working with communities, public authorities, civil society organisations, businesses, and other stakeholders to address issues that extend beyond traditional institutional boundaries (European Commission, 2022a; EUA, 2021). They are experimenting with new forms of collaboration, participation, knowledge exchange, inclusion, and societal engagement (Farnell, 2020; EUA, 2021).

These developments create significant opportunities. Community engagement can strengthen public trust, improve the relevance of research and education, support societal innovation, and reinforce the role of universities as civic institutions (Goddard et al., 2016; Farnell, 2020). It can also create new forms of learning, collaboration, and knowledge exchange that benefit both universities and their communities.

At the same time, community engagement is taking place in a rapidly changing environment. Universities face growing expectations to be inclusive, responsive, participatory, digitally connected, socially responsible, and capable of addressing a widening range of societal challenges (European Commission, 2022a; UNESCO, 2021a). These expectations often interact with resource constraints, governance arrangements, competing priorities, and evolving institutional missions. As a result, community engagement often entails difficult choices about priorities, capacities, and long-term commitments.

In this context, community engagement can no longer be understood solely as a collection of different activities. It requires sustained strategic reflection on how different ambitions, expectations, and institutional responsibilities can be balanced over time (Farnell, 2020; Goddard et al., 2016).

The purpose of this Guide is to support universities in navigating these choices. Rather than offering best practices, or predefined solutions, it provides a foresight-informed framework for identifying areas where strategic decisions may be required and where tensions are likely to emerge as community engagement continues to evolve.

The Guide is intended for university leaders and governance bodies, engagement professionals, academic staff involved in community-based teaching, research, and engagement activities, as well as others responsible for shaping institutional approaches to community engagement. It supports reflection on where strategic choices are required, highlights common traps and limitations, and helps institutions consider how far, how fast, and in what ways they should engage.

From Activities to Strategic Choices

Much of the existing literature on community engagement focuses on successful practices, partnership models, methods, and institutional achievements. These perspectives provide valuable insights into how engagement can be organised and strengthened. This Guide complements these approaches by focusing on a different question:

What happens when multiple goals, expectations, and responsibilities begin to compete with one another?

Universities face evolving expectations to:

- expand inclusion while maintaining sustainable capacity,
- support participation while preserving clear decision-making responsibilities,
- increase flexibility while sustaining educational coherence,
- respond to societal challenges while maintaining strategic focus,
- strengthen European collaboration while remaining locally relevant.

These tensions cannot be permanently resolved. They require ongoing choices, prioritisation, and governance. The challenge facing universities is therefore not simply how to expand engagement, but how to navigate competing expectations in ways that remain credible, sustainable, and consistent with institutional missions (Goddard et al., 2016).

04

From emerging engagement practices to strategic questions



04 From emerging engagement practices to strategic questions

Across the ACE foresight process, a wide variety of engagement initiatives and institutional practices were identified. While they differed in scale and context, many raised similar questions about coordination, responsibility, institutional support, and long-term impact.

These questions emerged consistently across Horizon Scanning, Stakeholder Dialogues, and Cross-Impact Analysis. Rather than focusing on individual examples, the foresight process gradually revealed recurring patterns visible across different institutions, engagement domains, and national contexts.

Importantly, these patterns should not be understood as shortcomings. They reflect the fact that community engagement continues to evolve. At the same time, they highlight areas where ambitions, expectations, institutional capacities, and governance arrangements interact, raising questions that require strategic reflection.

The sections below summarise the recurring opportunities and strategic questions identified throughout the foresight process. Together, they formed an important foundation for the development of the Strategic Pressure Points presented later in this Guide.

Recurring Opportunities Across Community Engagement

Alongside recurring strategic questions, the foresight process revealed several positive patterns that appeared consistently across institutions and national contexts. They suggest that community engagement is becoming a more dynamic and strategically important area of higher education.

Growing Diversity of Engagement Approaches

Universities are experimenting with a wide range of engagement activities, from citizen science and community-based learning to participatory governance, lifelong learning, civic dialogue, and collaborative research. Rather than relying on a single model of engagement, institutions are developing approaches tailored to different communities, societal challenges, and disciplinary contexts. This diversity creates opportunities for innovation, flexibility, and responsiveness while expanding the ways in which universities contribute to society.

Strong Commitment from Staff, Students, and Community Partners

Across many examples, successful engagement initiatives were driven by the creativity and commitment of academics, professional staff, students, and community partners. These actors often demonstrated a willingness to invest time and build relationships. Their contributions highlight the existence of significant social capital and engagement capacity that can support future institutional development.

Emerging Cultures of Collaboration and Co-Creation

The foresight process revealed growing interest in forms of engagement based on reciprocity, partnership, and shared learning. Many universities are moving beyond traditional outreach models towards approaches that recognise communities as contributors and co-creators of knowledge. These developments create opportunities for more inclusive forms of participation and for stronger connections between academic expertise and lived experience.

Growing Recognition of Engagement as a Strategic Mission

Community engagement is gaining greater visibility within institutional strategies. Across different contexts, engagement is frequently recognised as an important dimension of university missions alongside teaching and research. This growing visibility creates opportunities to strengthen its legitimacy, institutional support, and long-term sustainability (EUA, 2021; Farnell, 2020).

Increased Attention to Public Value and Societal Relevance

Universities are actively seeking ways to align teaching, research, and engagement activities with societal needs and community priorities (Goddard et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2021a). This reflects a broader shift towards demonstrating public value, strengthening trust, and contributing to positive social impact. Across many examples, engagement was viewed not as an additional activity but as a way of ensuring that universities remain responsive and connected to the societies they serve.

Recurring Strategic Questions Across Community Engagement

At the same time, the foresight process revealed several recurring questions that appeared across different forms of engagement, institutional contexts, and stakeholder perspectives. They do not indicate weaknesses or failures. Rather, they reflect the growing scale, diversity, and strategic importance of community engagement within higher education. As engagement expands, universities often face choices regarding how it should be organised and governed.

How Can Diverse Engagement Activities Work Better Together?

The expansion of engagement has created a rich ecosystem. As its diversity grows, universities face questions about how these activities can be coordinated and aligned with broader institutional priorities. The challenge is not simply increasing engagement but ensuring that different initiatives contribute to a coherent and mutually reinforcing engagement ecosystem.

How Much Responsiveness Is Sustainable?

Many engagement activities emerge in response to new community needs, societal challenges, or funding possibilities. This responsiveness can be an important strength, allowing universities to remain relevant and adaptive. At the same time, recurring questions emerged about continuity and the capacities needed to sustain engagement beyond immediate opportunities or short-term initiatives.

How Can Engagement Survive Beyond Individual Commitment?

The foresight process highlighted the important role of individual initiative in driving engagement. However, it also raised questions about how successful practices can be sustained over time. As engagement becomes more central to university missions, institutions need to support individual commitment with organisational support and structures that enable engagement.

What Counts as Value in Community Engagement?

As engagement gains greater visibility and institutional attention, expectations around evidence, impact, and accountability also grow. Universities are considering how to understand, recognise, and communicate the value of engagement. This includes not only measurable outcomes, but also long-term relationships, mutual learning, and trust.

How Do Universities Choose Between Competing Engagement Opportunities?

The growing range of engagement opportunities means that universities are confronted with choices about focus, scope, resource allocation, and institutional responsibilities. Across the foresight process, recurring questions emerged about how institutions decide what to prioritise, where to invest attention and resources, and how to balance multiple ambitions simultaneously.

From Opportunities and Questions to Strategic Pressure Points

Taken together, the recurring opportunities and strategic questions identified through the foresight process reveal a broader picture of how community engagement is evolving across European higher education. Community engagement is becoming more diverse, visible, collaborative, and strategically important, while also raising new questions around coordination, participation, sustainability, governance, accountability, recognition, and institutional priorities.

The purpose of the foresight process was not simply to identify successful practices, emerging trends, or isolated challenges, but to understand the strategic choices that arise when universities pursue multiple ambitions while

responding to evolving societal expectations. The Strategic Pressure Points presented in this Guide are the result of this synthesis. They do not represent a catalogue of problems, but highlight areas where opportunities, expectations, and institutional ambitions intersect, creating tensions that universities may need to navigate in the future.

05

From case-based Scan Cards to Strategic Pressure Points



05

From case-based Scan Cards to Strategic Pressure Points

The Strategic Pressure Points presented in this Guide are the result of a multi-stage process that moved from individual examples of engagement to broader patterns, system dynamics, and strategic choices. They are based on findings from Horizon Scanning, Stakeholder Dialogues, Cross-Impact Workshops, and Cross-Phase Integration, which together form the final synthesis of the ACE foresight process in WP2.

Horizon Scanning: Exploring Emerging Developments Through Cases

The first stage of the process mapped a wide range of developments shaping community engagement. The findings were captured in the form of 49 preliminary case-based scan cards documenting concrete examples of community engagement and initiatives observed across different contexts. The cards highlighted emerging practices and signals of change relevant to the future of community engagement and served as an internal working resource for the Horizon Scanning phase. As such, they were not intended as a final project output and are therefore not included in any of the formal project reports or deliverables.

At this stage, the focus was on exploration rather than interpretation. The cards documented what happens or appeared to be changing across the community engagement landscape, without yet drawing broader conclusions about their strategic significance. Their value laid in revealing developments that might indicate broader changes taking place across higher education.

Stakeholder Dialogues: From Individual Cases to Recurring Patterns

The next stage involved stakeholder dialogues with representatives from the Quadruple Helix where the case-based scan cards were used as catalysts for discussion. Through these dialogues, stakeholders identified recurring constraints and shared challenges. They highlighted common questions about governance, participation, institutional capacity, sustainability, inclusion, trust, and responsibility. As a result, engagement examples gradually ceased to function as isolated cases and instead became signals of wider dynamics shaping community engagement.

This sensemaking process transformed the original case-based material into a more analytically robust set of 33 Scan Cards. Within this transition, individual cases were translated into recurring patterns, specific practices were reframed as broader structural conditions, and stakeholder experiences helped refine the interpretation of emerging issues.

Cross-Impact Analysis: Revealing System Interdependencies

The Cross-Impact Workshops introduced a further analytical step by examining how the identified trends, issues, patterns of change, and stakeholder concerns interact with one another. Rather than asking whether individual developments were important, the analysis explored how they reinforce, constrain, or amplify one another over time.

This process revealed system-level interdependencies, feedback loops, leverage points, and recurring traps. It showed that many developments did not operate independently but accumulated around broader areas of pressure. For example, questions concerning participation were closely connected to governance arrangements, while issues related to inclusion often interacted with institutional capacity, resources, and sustainability.

Cross-Phase Integration: From Patterns to Strategic Choices

The final stage brought together insights from Horizon Scanning, Stakeholder Dialogues, and Cross-Impact Analysis. The objective was no longer to understand what was changing, but to identify where those changes create growing pressure for strategic decision-making. At this stage, the project moved beyond individual examples, trends, and patterns to identify areas where multiple developments, expectations, and institutional ambitions converge. These areas became the foundation for the Strategic Pressure Points presented in this Guide.

Unlike Scan Cards, which describe individual trends, emerging issues, or patterns of change, Strategic Pressure Points identify areas where multiple dynamics interact and where universities frequently face choices about priorities,

governance, responsibility, capacity, participation, sustainability, and institutional direction. In this sense, Strategic Pressure Points represent the final synthesis of the foresight process.

What are Strategic Pressure Points

The Strategic Pressure Points presented in this Guide should not be interpreted as a synthesis of existing literature alone. Rather, they represent the outcome of a multi-stage foresight process undertaken within the ACE project, combining horizon scanning, stakeholder engagement, scan card analysis, and strategic foresight methods, all of which are described in detail in the preceding section of this Guide. Together, these activities explored emerging developments, stakeholder perspectives, systemic interactions, and future implications for community engagement in European higher education.

Academic literature, policy documents, and practice-based evidence were used to contextualise and validate findings. However, the Strategic Pressure Points themselves are mainly derived from the collective evidence and insights generated through the ACE foresight process.

The purpose of the Strategic Pressure Points is not to predict the future, identify risks in isolation, or prescribe specific actions. Instead, they highlight areas where multiple developments converge and where strategic choices become more difficult to avoid.

A Strategic Pressure Point can be understood as a foresight-based lens that helps universities recognise:

- where significant tensions are emerging,
- which ambitions or priorities may come into conflict,
- where governance and decision-making play a more prominent role,
- and what kinds of choices may shape the future direction of community engagement.

Strategic Pressure Points therefore focus on questions rather than answers. Their role is to support reflection, dialogue, and institutional learning rather than provide universal solutions.

Strategic Pressure Points as Strategic Tensions

Each Strategic Pressure Point is organised around a strategic tension. These tensions do not emerge because one side is right and the other is wrong. Rather, they arise because universities simultaneously pursue multiple legitimate goals. Examples include:

- inclusion and capacity,
- participation and decision-making authority,
- responsiveness and long-term resilience,
- flexibility and educational coherence,
- European cooperation and local relevance.

The purpose of the Strategic Pressure Points is to make these tensions visible and discussable. By doing so, they help institutions move from reactive responses toward more deliberate and transparent strategic choices.

Strategic Pressure Points are foresight-based strategic lenses that highlight where emerging developments, institutional ambitions, and societal expectations create tensions that shape the future of community engagement. They are designed to support reflection, dialogue, and strategic decision-making.

Strategic Pressure Points do not identify what universities are doing wrong. They highlight areas where opportunities, expectations, and institutional ambitions intersect, creating questions that require deliberate choices about priorities and strategic reflection.

How the Strategic Pressure Points Are Presented

Each Strategic Pressure Point in this Guide follows the same analytical structure (see Appendix 1 for the template). This common format keeps the Pressure Points consistent while allowing each one to focus on a different strategic tension identified through the foresight process.

Each Strategic Pressure Point:

- identifies a key tension, dilemma, or risk affecting community engagement,
- explains why it matters for the institution and its wider goals,
- shows where action, prioritisation, or restraint may be needed,
- highlights recurring system-level pitfalls that may weaken well-intended responses if left unaddressed.

The analytical structure used for each Strategic Pressure Point is designed to support reflection and discussion at institutional level. It combines foresight analysis with a focus on strategic choices:

- **Headline** introduces a strategic tension and points to where important institutional choices may be required.
- **Description** explains what is changing and why the pressure is becoming visible. It ends with a short forward-looking statement about how the pressure could develop over time.
- **Relevance** explains why the issue matters in relation to institutional purpose, public value, and longer-term consequences.
- **Need** shows where a lack of action has become important at institutional level, including who may need to respond and what kind of choice may be required.
- **Guiding Question** opens space for strategic discussion by framing reflective, decision-oriented questions.
- **Common Traps** provide early warnings about common responses that may seem reasonable but could make the pressure worse over time.

Taken together, this structure helps institutions use Strategic Pressure Points to recognise growing pressure, understand what is at stake, and discuss strategic choices around community engagement. It also provides a clear way to turn foresight insights into practical strategic reflection.

How to Read the Strategic Pressure Points

Not every Strategic Pressure Point will be equally relevant to every institution. Some may resonate strongly with current challenges, while others may reflect emerging or future pressures. This variation is intentional. The value of the Strategic Pressure Points lies not in their completeness, but in their ability to structure reflection and surface difficult questions that are often postponed or left implicit.

Interdependencies Between Strategic Pressure Points

Although each Strategic Pressure Point is presented separately, they should be understood as deeply interconnected. Pressures related to capacity, governance, participation, digitalisation, funding, and legitimacy rarely occur in isolation. Decisions taken in one area often amplify pressures in others. For example, expanding participation without clarifying decision-making authority can intensify governance strain, while short-term funding models can undermine inclusion ambitions and long-term trust. These interdependencies mean that addressing one Pressure Point in isolation may unintentionally increase pressure elsewhere.

06 Strategic Pressure Points for community engagement



06

Strategic Pressure Points for community engagement

The Strategic Pressure Points are organised into six thematic areas, reflecting broader families of pressure that affect community engagement in different but interconnected ways (e.g. capacity and limits, learning and skills, power and participation). This grouping supports non-linear reading and allows institutions to engage with areas most relevant to their current context.

This section briefly introduces each thematic area and explains the main issues it brings together. It is followed by the individual Strategic Pressure Points, which explore these issues in greater detail.

Universities face growing expectations related to inclusion, well-being, crisis response, and societal engagement. As responsibilities continue to expand, questions emerge about priorities, capacity, institutional boundaries, and long-term sustainability. The Pressure Points in this area highlight tensions that arise when engagement ambitions grow faster than available resources and organisational capacity.

Related Strategic Pressure Point(s): SP1. Growing Inclusion Expectations Challenge Existing Institutional Capacity, SP2. Growing Mental Health Needs Challenge Traditional University Roles, SP3. Multiple Crises Require Strategic Prioritisation and Institutional Resilience.

Changing learner expectations, lifelong learning, micro-credentials, and demographic change are reshaping higher education. These developments create opportunities but also raise questions about belonging, educational coherence, and civic purpose. This area brings together pressures closely connected to wider debates concerning lifelong learning, educational purpose, and the future role of universities in supporting learners across different stages of life.

Related Strategic Pressure Point(s): SP4. Flexible Learning Models Require New Approaches to Academic and Civic Belonging, SP5. The Expansion of Micro-Credentials Creates New Questions About Educational Coherence, SP6. Intergenerational Learning Becomes a Core Competence for Future Communities and Workplaces, SP7. Growing Demand for Job-Relevant Skills Challenges Broader Educational Purposes.

Universities operate in complex information environments where expectations regarding evidence, transparency, participation, and accountability continue to grow. This area focuses on pressures associated with trust, knowledge production, data governance, and demonstrating the value of engagement.

Related Strategic Pressure Point(s): SP8. Trustworthy Information Becomes a Strategic Requirement for Engagement, SP9. Citizen Science Requires New Approaches to Data Ownership and Shared Governance, SP10. Demonstrating Impact Creates New Questions About What Counts as Meaningful Change.

Participation and co-creation are becoming important elements of community engagement. At the same time, questions emerge about influence, accountability, representation, and decision-making authority. This area focuses on pressures that arise when expectations for participation expand within systems that remain institutionally accountable for decisions.

Related Strategic Pressure Point(s): SP11. Meaningful Participation Requires Clarity About Influence, Accountability and Decision-Making.

Universities are expected to engage with contested issues, support civic dialogue, and contribute to democratic participation. These developments create new questions about institutional responsibility, academic freedom, inclusion, neutrality, and the public role of higher education in polarised environments. The Strategic Pressure Points in this area focus on how institutions navigate complex public debates, where strategic choices may carry symbolic weight and influence how they are perceived by different communities and stakeholders.

Related Strategic Pressure Point(s): SP12. Student Activism Requires Balancing Civic Engagement and Institutional Responsibility, SP13. Universities Are Expected to Act as Trusted Civic Forums.

As community engagement becomes more established, increasing attention is being given to the conditions that make it sustainable over time. This area brings together tensions related to long-term partnerships, institutional support, recognition systems, and the people and relationships upon which community engagement depends.

Related Strategic Pressure Point(s): SP14. European University Alliances Require Balancing European and Local Engagement, SP15. Sustaining Long-Term Partnerships Beyond Project Funding, SP16. Sustainable Engagement Requires Recognising Invisible and Relational Work.

The six thematic areas at a glance



AREA I

Balancing Engagement Ambitions with Institutional Capacity

SP1 · SP2 · SP3

Universities face growing expectations related to inclusion, well-being, crisis response, and societal engagement. As responsibilities continue to expand, questions emerge about priorities, capacity, institutional boundaries, and long-term sustainability. The Pressure Points in this area highlight tensions that arise when engagement ambitions grow faster than available resources and organisational capacity.

IN THIS AREA

SP1	Growing Inclusion Expectations Challenge Existing Institutional Capacity
SP2	Growing Mental Health Needs Challenge Traditional University Roles
SP3	Multiple Crises Require Strategic Prioritisation and Institutional Resilience

SP1

AREA I - BALANCING ENGAGEMENT AMBITIONS WITH INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Growing Inclusion Expectations Challenge Existing Institutional Capacity

Related Scan Cards: SC24: Universities Support Refugee and Migrant Integration Beyond Education, SC27: Mental Health Support Expands Beyond Students into Communities, SC28: Universities Expand Efforts to Improve Inclusive Participation.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning identified growing expectations for universities to become more inclusive, accessible, and responsive to the needs of diverse learners and communities. Related Scan Cards highlighted increasing expectations about accessibility, migrant integration, community well-being, and institutional support (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues further reframed these developments as broader questions of institutional capacity, sustainability, organisational responsibility, and long-term commitment (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Collectively, these insights pointed to an emerging pressure around how universities can expand inclusion while maintaining sustainable institutional capacity and long-term engagement commitments (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Universities are frequently expected to create more inclusive learning environments and strengthen engagement with diverse communities. Accessibility measures, targeted outreach activities, inclusive pedagogies, and support services are becoming integral components of institutional strategies across higher education (UNESCO, 2020; European Commission, 2022b). These developments create opportunities to broaden participation, strengthen social inclusion, and enhance universities' contribution to equity and community well-being. At the same time, expectations for inclusion often expand faster than institutional capacity. Inclusion-related responsibilities are added to existing roles, projects, and engagement activities without corresponding adjustments to resources, workload models, or organisational priorities (Naylor & Mifsud, 2019). As universities respond to diverse needs and expectations, questions emerge about how inclusion efforts can be sustained, coordinated, and embedded across the institution (European Commission, 2020). The strategic pressure reflects the need to align inclusive ambitions with realistic capacity, resources, and organisational support. Without strategic prioritisation, inclusion efforts risk becoming fragmented or difficult to sustain over time.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>In the future, this pressure is likely to intensify as universities face growing expectations to contribute to equity, inclusion, and community well-being while operating within finite organisational and financial capacities (European Commission, 2021a; OECD, 2023a).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	Inclusion has become an important indicator of university legitimacy, responsiveness, and public value. The choices universities make about inclusion priorities, resource allocation, and organisational responsibilities may influence whether inclusive engagement becomes a sustainable and transformative practice or a fragmented set of activities that struggle to deliver meaningful impact.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need explicit institutional decisions regarding how inclusion priorities are defined, resourced, and distributed across the organisation. This includes aligning inclusion goals with workload models, funding arrangements, staff development opportunities,

accessibility planning, and evaluation processes. Inclusion cannot remain solely an individual responsibility carried by committed staff members.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
higher education institutions are expected to remove barriers to participation, widen access, support diverse learners, and contribute to more equitable and inclusive societies. Inclusive engagement can strengthen trust, expand opportunities, and better reflect the diversity of contemporary communities.	universities operate within resource, staffing, and organisational constraints. Expanding inclusion agendas often require sustained investment, specialised expertise, accessible infrastructure, staff development, and long-term institutional commitment. As expectations continue to grow, universities face difficult questions about how inclusion priorities should be defined and resourced.
The challenge is therefore not whether inclusion should be pursued, but how inclusive ambitions can be matched with sustainable institutional capacity and realistic implementation strategies.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? *How can universities pursue ambitious inclusion goals while ensuring that the resources, capacities, and organisational structures required to support them remain sustainable?*
- ? *Which inclusion priorities require institution-wide commitments, and which may be better addressed through targeted or phased approaches?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Treating inclusion as an unlimited obligation without clarifying priorities, or available resources.
- Assuming that increasing the number of initiatives automatically improves inclusion outcomes.
- Expanding inclusion commitments without adjusting workload models, staffing, or institutional support mechanisms.
- Relying on individual goodwill rather than embedding inclusion within organisational systems and governance.
- Treating inclusion solely as a moral aspiration rather than also as a strategic and organisational challenge.

SP2

AREA I · BALANCING ENGAGEMENT AMBITIONS WITH INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Growing Mental Health Needs Challenge Traditional University Roles

Related Scan Cards: SC4: Universities as Crisis Infrastructure for Communities, SC27: Mental Health Support Expands Beyond Students into Communities.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning highlighted increasing expectations for universities to support mental health and well-being among students and surrounding communities. Related Scan Cards documented the growing expansion of well-being support beyond traditional student services and the widening social role of universities during periods of uncertainty (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues connected these developments to broader concerns about institutional responsibility, professional expertise, organisational capacity, and sustainability (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Drawing on these findings, the Strategic Foresight Analysis identified mounting pressure around how universities can respond to growing mental health needs while maintaining clear institutional roles and boundaries (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Universities are frequently addressing mental health and well-being through counselling services, awareness programmes, peer-support initiatives, crisis responses, and partnerships with community organisations. These activities can strengthen student success, improve well-being, support inclusion, and reinforce universities' contribution to broader social resilience (WHO, 2022; European Commission, 2022a). At the same time, rising mental health needs are expanding expectations of what universities should provide. In many institutions, support functions have developed incrementally in response to emerging needs, without clear mandates, sustainable funding arrangements, or formal integration with public health systems. As universities take on growing responsibilities related to well-being and care, questions emerge about the limits of institutional responsibility and the relationship between educational missions and health-related functions (European Commission, 2023). The difficulty stems not from mental health support itself, but from the need to clarify how universities can contribute to well-being while maintaining sustainable capacity, professional accountability, and appropriate role boundaries.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>Expectations in this area are unlikely to diminish as mental health becomes a growing concern across education and society (WHO, 2022; European Commission, 2023).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	Mental health and well-being have become important dimensions of student success, inclusion, and community engagement. The choices universities make regarding mental health support may influence whether well-being initiatives strengthen institutional resilience and social responsiveness, or create expectations and responsibilities that exceed available expertise, resources, and organisational capacity.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need explicit institutional decisions defining the scope and limits of their role in mental health support. This includes developing partnerships with public health systems, establishing referral pathways, clarifying responsibilities, and ensuring that well-being services are supported by appropriate expertise and resources rather than relying mainly on individual goodwill or informal arrangements.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
higher education institutions are expected to support student well-being, promote mental health awareness, and contribute positively to the well-being of their wider communities. Mental health engagement can strengthen inclusion, improve learning outcomes, and enhance the university's social impact (European Commission, 2022a).	universities are educational institutions rather than healthcare providers. Effective mental health support often requires specialised expertise, clinical capacity, legal accountability, and long-term funding arrangements that extend beyond the traditional remit of higher education.
The challenge is therefore not whether universities should engage with mental health and well-being, but how they can do so in ways that are effective, responsible, and sustainable while maintaining clear institutional boundaries.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? *How can universities support mental well-being while maintaining clear organisational responsibilities and sustainable institutional capacity?*
- ? *Where should the university's responsibility for mental health support begin and end, and how can this boundary be communicated effectively?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Responding to mental health needs mainly through informal goodwill rather than institutional strategy and support structures.
- Blurring the distinction between well-being support, counselling, and clinical treatment.
- Assuming that universities can compensate for structural gaps in public health systems.
- Expanding well-being commitments without corresponding resources, expertise, or referral mechanisms.
- Treating mental health support solely as an individual service issue rather than part of a broader institutional and community well-being strategy.

SP3

AREA I · BALANCING ENGAGEMENT AMBITIONS WITH INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Multiple Crises Require Strategic Prioritisation and Institutional Resilience

Related Scan Cards: SC4: Universities as Crisis Infrastructure for Communities, SC24: Universities Support Refugee and Migrant Integration Beyond Education, SC25: Climate Neutrality Turns Universities into Local Sustainability Partners, SC27: Mental Health Support Expands Beyond Students into Communities.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning identified growing expectations for universities to play active roles in responding to societal disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-related emergencies, migration challenges, geopolitical crises, etc. Related Scan Cards highlighted the expanding role of universities as sources of expertise and support during periods of uncertainty, alongside expectations that higher education institutions contribute to a widening range of societal challenges (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues further reframed these developments as broader questions of institutional capacity, prioritisation, organisational resilience, and long-term sustainability (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Building on these findings, Strategic Foresight Analysis identified growing pressure around how universities can respond to multiple crises while maintaining strategic focus, clear priorities, and coherent institutional missions (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Universities are expected to contribute to a wide range of societal challenges, including climate adaptation, social inequality, public health emergencies, democratic resilience, etc. These expanding expectations reflect a broader vision of universities as institutions that contribute not only to education and research but also to societal well-being and resilience (European Commission, 2022a; UNESCO, 2021a). This creates opportunities to strengthen their public value, deepen relationships with communities, and contribute to collective problem-solving. Such activities are consistent with emerging European visions of universities as engaged institutions capable of supporting sustainable and democratic futures (EUA, 2021; European Commission, 2022a). At the same time, crises are experienced as interconnected and recurring rather than exceptional events. Universities may be expected to respond to multiple overlapping challenges, each requiring resources, expertise, and sustained engagement. As new responsibilities accumulate, institutions face growing questions about prioritisation, resource allocation, organisational capacity, and the limits of institutional responsibility (EUA, 2021). The tension reflects the need to balance responsiveness with strategic focus, realistic capacity, and long-term organisational resilience. Without clear processes for prioritisation and boundary-setting, universities risk expanding their commitments faster than they can sustain them.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>In the future, this pressure is likely to grow as societal challenges become more interconnected and stakeholders continue to expect universities to contribute actively to resilience, recovery, and social transformation (European Commission, 2022a; UNESCO, 2021a).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	This Pressure Point concerns how universities understand their societal role in complex and uncertain environments. Choices about crisis-related engagement may influence whether community engagement becomes a strategically integrated function or a collection of reactive responses to external demands. Institutions that successfully combine

	responsiveness with prioritisation may strengthen trust, long-term partnerships, and societal impact. Conversely, expanding commitments without clear priorities may lead to mission overload, fragmentation, and organisational strain.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need clear frameworks for deciding when and how to engage in crises. This includes setting priorities, clarifying institutional responsibilities, and making sure crisis-related activities fit the university's mission and capacity. It also means building resilience and regularly reviewing which commitments should continue or change. University leaders may need to make transparent choices about which societal challenges require long-term commitment, and which are better addressed through temporary action, partnerships, or support. These choices will shape how universities balance crisis responsiveness with long-term resilience and strategic focus.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
universities seek to contribute to urgent societal challenges. Crisis engagement can strengthen community relationships, reinforce public trust, demonstrate institutional relevance, and mobilise university knowledge and expertise to support societal resilience.	universities require strategic focus, sustainable resource allocation, and organisational stability. Responding to every emerging challenge may stretch capacity, dilute core priorities, and create expectations that exceed what universities can realistically sustain.
The challenge is therefore not whether universities should contribute during crises, but how they can remain responsive while maintaining realistic boundaries, and long-term institutional resilience.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? - Which forms of crisis-related engagement require long-term institutional commitment and which should remain temporary responses?
- ? - How should universities define the limits of their responsibility during periods of overlapping societal challenges?

COMMON TRAPS

- Treating every societal challenge as an immediate institutional obligation.
- Equating responsiveness with unlimited responsibility.
- Expanding engagement commitments without matching resources or governance mechanisms.
- Relying on continuous improvisation rather than strategic preparedness.
- Allowing short-term crisis responses to displace long-term engagement priorities.

AREA II

Learning, Skills and the Future of Higher Education

SP4 · SP5 · SP6 · SP7

Changing learner expectations, lifelong learning, micro-credentials, and demographic change are reshaping higher education. These developments create opportunities but also raise questions about belonging, educational coherence, and civic purpose. This area brings together pressures closely connected to wider debates concerning lifelong learning, educational purpose, and the future role of universities in supporting learners across different stages of life.

IN THIS AREA

SP4	Flexible Learning Models Require New Approaches to Academic and Civic Belonging
SP5	The Expansion of Micro-Credentials Creates New Questions About Educational Coherence
SP6	Intergenerational Learning Becomes a Core Competence for Future Communities and Workplaces
SP7	Growing Demand for Job-Relevant Skills Challenges Broader Educational Purposes

SP4

AREA II - LEARNING, SKILLS AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Flexible Learning Models Require New Approaches to Academic and Civic Belonging

Related Scan Cards: SC3: Community Engagement Becomes a Core Graduate Competence, SC11: Lifelong Learning Reshapes University-Community Relations, SC23: Intergenerational Learning Strengthens Community Engagement.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning revealed the growing adoption of flexible, hybrid, and modular learning models as significant developments reshaping how individuals engage with higher education. Related Scan Cards pointed to the expansion of lifelong learning, changing patterns of participation, growing recognition of community engagement as a graduate competence, and the emergence of more diverse learner pathways (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues further reframed these developments as broader questions of belonging, participation, learner identity, inclusion, and the changing role of universities as learning communities (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Collectively, these findings pointed to an accumulating pressure around how universities can expand learning flexibility while sustaining academic communities, civic engagement, and a sense of belonging (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Flexible, hybrid, and modular learning formats are expanding rapidly across higher education in response to learner diversity, digitalisation, changing work patterns, and growing demand for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2022a). These models create important opportunities. They can widen participation, improve accessibility, support lifelong learning, and offer greater flexibility for working professionals, mature learners, and other groups whose needs may not be well served by traditional study models (OECD, 2021a). At the same time, more flexible learning pathways are changing how learners experience higher education. As learning becomes more personalised and modular, questions emerge about how universities can continue to foster shared experiences, peer learning, academic identity, and civic engagement across increasingly diverse learner journeys (UNESCO, 2021a). The difficulty stems not from flexibility itself, but from the need to balance greater access and individualisation with opportunities for belonging, participation, and community building.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>Current trends suggest that this challenge is likely to grow as universities often serve learners who move between different modes of study, institutions, and stages of life (OECD, 2021a).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	This issue extends beyond curriculum design and learning delivery. It concerns how universities create communities of learning, foster engagement, and support the development of academic and civic identities. The choices universities make regarding flexible learning may influence whether higher education evolves toward more inclusive and connected learning ecosystems or individualised learning experiences with weaker forms of community participation.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need deliberate design decisions that embed belonging, interaction, and community engagement within flexible learning environments. This includes integrating collaborative learning, cohort-based experiences, peer interaction, community-based activities, and place-based engagement opportunities into flexible programmes rather than treating them as optional additions.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
higher education institutions seek to provide more flexible, accessible, and personalised learning opportunities. Flexible learning can widen participation, support lifelong learning, and enable learners to engage with higher education in ways that fit their circumstances and aspirations.	universities have traditionally played an important social and civic role, creating spaces where learners develop relationships, shared identities, community connections, and civic values. These experiences are often shaped through interaction, collaboration, and participation in university life (UNESCO, 2015; UNESCO, 2021a).
The challenge is therefore not whether flexibility should increase, but how flexible learning models can also sustain meaningful opportunities for belonging, collective learning, and civic engagement.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? *How can universities provide flexible learning while maintaining a strong sense of community and belonging?*
- ? *Which elements of university life and learning are essential for sustaining academic identity, civic engagement, and community, regardless of the mode of study?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Assuming that flexibility automatically creates engagement, sense of belonging, and community.
- Treating community-building as an optional extracurricular activity rather than part of the learning experience.
- Designing for convenience without considering opportunities for interaction and shared identity.
- Equating access to education with meaningful participation in university communities.

AREA II - LEARNING, SKILLS AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

SP5

The Expansion of Micro-Credentials Creates New Questions About Educational Coherence

DESCRIPTION*What is changing*

Horizon Scanning identified the rapid growth of lifelong learning, flexible learning models, and micro-credentials as significant developments reshaping higher education. Related Scan Cards⁹ highlighted the expansion of flexible learning and growing demand for skills-oriented opportunities, alongside questions about how shorter learning experiences connect to broader educational journeys (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues further reframed these developments as broader questions of educational coherence, institutional purpose, governance, and long-term educational responsibility (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Building on these findings, Strategic Foresight Analysis identified growing pressure around how universities can expand flexibility and lifelong learning while maintaining coherent educational pathways and the broader educational purposes (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026).

Micro-credentials and short learning units are expanding rapidly across higher education as flexible responses to technological change, evolving labour-market demands, and the growing need for lifelong learning. They are recognised within European higher education policy as important tools for supporting employability, upskilling and reskilling (Council of the European Union, 2022; OECD, 2021b). They create opportunities for universities to engage with working professionals, adult learners, employers, and communities seeking accessible learning. The European Union views micro-credentials as a mechanism for addressing skills shortages, supporting career transitions, strengthening links between higher education and labour markets, and promoting social inclusion (Beirne et al., 2020; Council of the European Union, 2022; OECD, 2021b).

At the same time, the modularisation of learning raises questions about how shorter learning experiences connect to broader educational pathways and the long-term value traditionally associated with degree programmes. The rapid expansion of micro-credentials also requires new approaches to recognition, quality assurance, stackability, and progression across learning pathways (Pouliou, 2024).

The strategic pressure arises from the need to balance flexibility, responsiveness, and lifelong learning opportunities with coherent educational pathways and the broader purposes traditionally associated with higher education.

LOOKING AHEAD*How it may develop*

Looking ahead, this pressure is likely to intensify as lifelong learning becomes a larger component of university missions and learners combine formal, non-formal, and workplace-based learning experiences (OECD, 2021b).

RELEVANCE*Why it matters*

This pressure extends beyond curriculum design and credential systems. It concerns how universities define their educational mission, how learning achievements are recognised, and how higher education balances employability, lifelong learning, citizenship, and public value. The choices universities make regarding micro-credentials may influence whether higher education evolves toward integrated learning ecosystems or fragmented learning provision organised around discrete skills and short-term demand signals.

NEED*What is required*

Universities need strategic decisions on how micro-credentials fit within coherent educational pathways rather than functioning solely as stand-alone offerings. This requires governance frameworks that clarify the relationship between micro-credentials, degree programmes, graduate attributes, civic learning outcomes, and institutional mission. It also requires decisions on recognition, stackability, progression routes, and quality assurance.

STRATEGIC TENSION**ON ONE HAND**

universities are expected to become more flexible, responsive, and accessible. Micro-credentials can widen participation, support lifelong learning, facilitate upskilling and reskilling, strengthen collaboration with employers, and make learning more adaptable to changing societal and labour-market needs. They can also recognise specific skills and competences, offering flexible options for working professionals and non-traditional learners.

ON THE OTHER HAND

universities are also expected to provide coherent educational journeys that go beyond immediate skills acquisition. Degree programmes traditionally combine disciplinary knowledge, critical thinking, civic development, and long-term learning trajectories. As learning becomes modular and demand-driven, questions emerge about how these broader educational purposes can be maintained and recognised.

The challenge is therefore not whether universities should adopt micro-credentials, but how to increase flexibility without weakening educational coherence, civic development, and the broader public value traditionally associated with higher education.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

? *How can universities expand flexible learning opportunities while maintaining coherent educational pathways and the broader public purposes of higher education?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Treating micro-credentials as standalone products rather than part of broader learning pathways.
- Assuming that labour-market relevance automatically creates societal or civic value.
- Expanding provision faster than recognition and quality assurance can adapt.
- Framing micro-credentials and degrees as alternatives rather than complementary forms of learning.
- Assuming that flexible learning automatically leads to more equitable access, while overlooking barriers that may disadvantage some learners.

SP6

AREA II · LEARNING, SKILLS AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Intergenerational Learning Becomes a Core Competence for Future Communities and Workplaces

Related Scan Cards: SC23: Intergenerational Learning Strengthens Community Engagement.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning brought attention to demographic change, lifelong learning, and changing patterns of participation as emerging forces shaping higher education. Related Scan Card illustrated the growing importance of intergenerational learning initiatives and increasing expectations that universities support learning and engagement beyond traditional student populations (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues linked these developments to wider questions of inclusion, social cohesion, lifelong learning, and the changing composition of university communities (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Synthesising these findings revealed growing pressure around how universities can support meaningful interaction across generations while continuing to operate within structures designed largely for traditional student populations (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Universities are engaging learners from diverse age groups through lifelong learning programmes, Universities of the Third Age, open courses, community learning initiatives, and intergenerational projects. These developments create opportunities for knowledge exchange between generations and expand participation beyond traditional student populations (European Commission, 2021b; UNESCO, 2021a). They also help learners develop competencies that are valuable beyond higher education. As workplaces and civic environments become more age-diverse, the ability to collaborate across generations is becoming an increasingly valuable competence (OECD, 2021a). Intergenerational learning can therefore contribute not only to social inclusion and community cohesion but also to preparing learners for age-diverse workplaces (European Commission, 2021b; UNESCO, 2021a). At the same time, universities remain largely organised around assumptions about age, learner identity, participation, and campus life that reflect the needs of younger full-time students. Intergenerational initiatives often remain peripheral rather than strategically integrated into engagement, teaching, and learning models. As demographic change continues, questions emerge about whose learning needs universities prioritise, how different generations participate in university life, and what an inclusive university community should look like. The core issue is not intergenerational learning itself, but the need to reconcile age-diverse participation with institutional models and learning environments designed largely for traditional student populations.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>Looking ahead, this pressure is likely to intensify as ageing populations, longer working lives, and lifelong learning demands increase expectations that universities support learning and engagement across generations (European Commission, 2021b; OECD, 2021a).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	This pressure extends beyond lifelong learning provision. It concerns how universities define their communities, who is included within learning ecosystems, and what social and professional competences learners need in increasingly age-diverse societies. The choices universities make about intergenerational engagement may influence whether higher education evolves toward more inclusive learning communities that connect different

	generations or continues to operate through more segmented models of participation and learning.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need strategic decisions regarding how intergenerational learning contributes to learning environments and community engagement strategies. This includes creating opportunities for meaningful interaction between generations, integrating intergenerational approaches into existing engagement activities, recognising the value of informal and non-formal learning, and considering how learners develop competencies related to collaboration, communication, and participation across age-diverse environments.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
universities seek to support lifelong learning, broaden participation, strengthen social inclusion, and create opportunities for engagement across different stages of life. Intergenerational learning can strengthen community cohesion, support active citizenship, and enable mutual learning between generations.	universities continue to rely on structures, curricula, learner pathways, and engagement models largely designed around traditional student cohorts and degree-oriented pathways. These models may not easily accommodate sustained interaction between different generations of learners, community members, and professionals.
The challenge is therefore not whether universities should engage across generations, but how to make intergenerational participation a more integrated part of university life, learning, and engagement.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

? *How can universities create learning and engagement environments that meaningfully connect different generations while preparing learners for age-diverse communities and workplaces?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Assuming that universities mainly serve traditional full-time student populations.
- Treating intergenerational learning as a specialised activity for older adults rather than a broader approach to community engagement and learning.
- Seeing ageing only as a challenge rather than a source of knowledge, participation, and social capital.
- Expanding lifelong learning opportunities without creating meaningful interaction between different generations.
- Assuming different age groups will automatically collaborate effectively without opportunities for shared learning and engagement.

- Overlooking how intergenerational engagement can prepare learners for age-diverse workplaces and communities.

SP7

AREA II - LEARNING, SKILLS AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Growing Demand for Job-Relevant Skills Challenges Broader Educational Purposes

Related Scan Cards: SC3: Community Engagement Becomes a Core Graduate Competence, SC11: Lifelong Learning Reshapes University-Community Relations, SC12: Micro-Credentials Challenge the Boundary Between Education and Training.

DESCRIPTION*What is changing*

Horizon Scanning identified rising demand for faster, more flexible, and targeted forms of learning. Related Scan Cards highlighted the expansion of alternative learning pathways responding to changing labour market and societal needs (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues further reframed these developments as broader questions about the future purpose of higher education, the relationship between employability and citizenship, and the role of universities in supporting learners throughout their lives (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Building on these findings, Strategic Foresight Analysis identified an accumulating pressure around how universities can expand opportunities for skills development while sustaining broader educational, civic, and societal objectives (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026).

Universities are expected to help learners navigate rapid technological, economic, and social change. Shorter learning formats and targeted skills initiatives can make learning more accessible and relevant, support workforce transitions and employability, and expand participation beyond traditional student populations (OECD, 2023b; European Commission, 2022). As lifelong learning becomes more central to higher education, universities are often positioned as learning hubs supporting individuals across multiple career transitions and life stages rather than only through traditional degree programmes (UNESCO UIL, 2023).

At the same time, growing demand for workforce-relevant skills raises questions about the balance between short-term responsiveness and broader educational purposes. Employers and learners expect universities to respond quickly to changing skill requirements, while universities continue to foster critical thinking, ethical reasoning, social responsibility, adaptability, and the capacity to navigate uncertainty and complexity. As learning pathways become more modular and personalised, questions emerge about how educational breadth, civic learning, and long-term personal development can be maintained alongside growing expectations for labour-market responsiveness.

The strategic pressure reflects the need to balance workforce responsiveness with universities' broader roles in lifelong learning, civic participation, personal development, and societal resilience.

LOOKING AHEAD*How it may develop*

Looking ahead, this tension is likely to grow as technological disruption, AI, demographic change, and economic transformation reshape labour markets and learning needs. Employers expect significant changes in workforce skill requirements over the coming decade, reinforcing the need for continuous learning and reskilling (World Economic Forum, 2025).

RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	The balance universities strike between skills responsiveness and broader educational goals may influence their contribution to communities, economies, and democratic societies. Institutions that successfully integrate employability, adaptability, and civic capabilities may be better positioned to prepare learners for uncertain futures. Conversely, approaches that focus exclusively on short-term skill demands may limit universities' capacity to contribute to wider social, civic, and developmental goals (UNESCO UIL, 2023).
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need clear strategies that show how skills development, employability, and wider educational goals fit together. This includes creating learning pathways that combine technical and professional skills with critical thinking, ethical reasoning, collaboration, adaptability, and engagement with societal challenges. Universities also need ways of responding quickly to changing needs while maintaining educational quality and long-term goals. Leadership and curriculum teams should look beyond immediate employment outcomes and also consider how education supports learner development and engagement with society.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
universities seek to provide learners with relevant and up-to-date skills that support employability, career mobility, innovation, and participation in rapidly changing economies. Flexible learning pathways can improve access to education and create more responsive connections between higher education and societal needs.	universities also aim to cultivate broader capabilities, including critical thinking, creativity, ethical judgement, civic responsibility, and the ability to address complex social challenges. These outcomes often require longer time horizons and may be less visible through conventional skills-based measures.
The challenge is therefore not whether universities should support accelerated skills development, but how they can ensure that responsiveness to emerging needs complements rather than replaces broader educational and civic purposes.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? - How can universities respond rapidly to changing skills demands while maintaining broader educational purposes?
- ? - Which capabilities will remain valuable across multiple future labour market transitions?

COMMON TRAPS

- Treating employability as the sole measure of educational value.
- Reducing learning to narrowly defined workforce competencies.

- Assuming that labour market relevance automatically generates societal impact.
- Measuring success primarily through short-term employment outcomes.
- Separating civic, ethical, and community-oriented learning from skills development.

AREA III

Building Trust Through Knowledge, Evidence and Engagement

SP8 SP9 SP10

Universities operate in complex information environments where expectations regarding evidence, transparency, participation, and accountability continue to grow. This area focuses on pressures associated with trust, knowledge production, data governance, and demonstrating the value of engagement.

IN THIS AREA

SP8	Trustworthy Information Becomes a Strategic Requirement for Engagement
SP9	Citizen Science Requires New Approaches to Data Ownership and Shared Governance
SP10	Demonstrating Impact Creates New Questions About What Counts as Meaningful Change

SP8

AREA III · BUILDING TRUST THROUGH KNOWLEDGE, EVIDENCE AND ENGAGEMENT

Trustworthy Information Becomes a Strategic Requirement for Engagement

DESCRIPTION*What is changing*

Horizon Scanning highlighted the growing reliance on digital platforms, data analytics, and AI-supported tools in community engagement. Related Scan Cards¹¹ drew attention to both the opportunities and risks associated with technology-mediated participation and decision-making (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues extended the discussion towards issues of trust, information quality, verification, and institutional responsibility (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Together, these findings revealed growing pressure around how universities can make informed engagement decisions in environments where the quality, credibility, and integrity of information are becoming difficult to assess (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026).

Universities use digital platforms, data analytics, and AI-supported tools to communicate with stakeholders, identify emerging needs, evaluate engagement activities, and support institutional decision-making. These technologies can improve efficiency, support responsiveness, and enable more evidence-informed approaches to engagement (European Commission, 2021c). Data-driven engagement can help institutions monitor participation, personalise engagement activities, allocate resources more effectively, and respond more quickly to changing stakeholder expectations. Digital tools may also enable engagement with larger and more diverse communities than would be possible through traditional approaches alone (European Commission, 2021c).

At the same time, the rapid growth of social media, generative AI, synthetic content, misinformation, disinformation, and other forms of information manipulation makes it harder to distinguish reliable information from misleading or fabricated content (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). As engagement becomes more dependent on digital information flows, questions arise about how the credibility, context, and quality of information are assessed.

The strategic pressure is driven by the need to balance technological capability with information integrity, human judgment, and institutional responsibility. As information environments become more contested and ambiguous, universities face expanding expectations to remain trusted knowledge institutions while making decisions that rely on complex and uncertain data sources (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

LOOKING AHEAD*How it may develop*

Looking ahead, this pressure is likely to intensify as data-driven and AI-supported systems become more deeply embedded in engagement, communication, and decision-making processes, while concerns about misinformation and trust continue to grow.

RELEVANCE*Why it matters*

This issue extends beyond technology adoption. It concerns the ability of universities to maintain trust, credibility, and legitimacy as knowledge institutions in contested information environments. The choices universities make about data governance, verification practices, transparency, and human oversight may influence whether data-driven engagement strengthens institutional responsiveness and trust, or contributes to uncertainty, misinformation, and declining confidence in institutional decision-making.

NEED*What is required*

Universities need explicit governance frameworks defining how data and AI-supported tools are used within community engagement and decision-making processes. This includes establishing standards for information verification, transparency, data quality, ethical oversight and human accountability. Human judgment should remain central, with technology supporting rather than replacing contextual assessment and critical interpretation.

STRATEGIC TENSION**ON ONE HAND**

institutions seek to use data, analytics, and AI-supported tools to improve responsiveness, identify emerging community needs, strengthen evidence-informed decision-making, and enhance the effectiveness of engagement activities. Digital technologies can provide valuable insights and support more timely and targeted forms of engagement.

ON THE OTHER HAND

meaningful community engagement depends on trust, credibility, contextual understanding, and informed human judgment. Information environments are often affected by misinformation, disinformation, manipulated narratives, and synthetic content, making it more difficult to assess which signals are reliable and which are misleading. Data may inform decisions, but it cannot replace critical interpretation, contextual verification, and ethical responsibility.

The challenge is therefore not whether universities should use data and AI, but how they can ensure that technological tools strengthen rather than weaken trust, information integrity, and informed judgment.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

? *How can universities maintain trust and informed decision-making in data-rich but contested information environments?*

? *What responsibilities should universities assume in verifying and interpreting information that informs community engagement decisions?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Treating data and metrics as neutral representations of reality.
- Assuming that large volumes of data automatically generate reliable insights.
- Allowing automated systems to define priorities without adequate human oversight and contextual interpretation.
- Relying on engagement data without considering the influence of misinformation, disinformation, or synthetic content.
- Equating visibility, popularity, or online activity with credibility and community trust.
- Prioritising efficiency over verification, transparency, and information integrity.

SP9

AREA III · BUILDING TRUST THROUGH KNOWLEDGE, EVIDENCE AND ENGAGEMENT

Citizen Science Requires New Approaches to Data Ownership and Shared Governance

Related Scan Cards: SC2: Communities Seek Greater Influence Over Research Data, SC22: Citizen Science Expands Engagement but Raises Questions of Labour and Ownership.

DESCRIPTION

What is changing

Horizon Scanning indicated growing interest in citizen science and participatory research as ways to strengthen collaboration between universities and communities. Related Scan Cards revealed increasing expectations for communities to contribute local knowledge, lived experience, and data to address societal challenges (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues reframed these developments as broader questions of ownership, governance, reciprocity, and benefit-sharing (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Collectively, these findings pointed to the challenge of expanding research participation while giving communities meaningful influence over the knowledge and data they help generate (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026).

Universities are using citizen science to involve communities in data collection, research, and knowledge creation. These approaches can strengthen public engagement, increase research relevance, incorporate local knowledge, and contribute to more collaborative forms of science (UNESCO, 2021b; ECSA, 2015). Citizen science also offers opportunities to democratise knowledge production, strengthen trust, and make research more responsive to local needs and societal challenges. Communities can contribute not only data, but also contextual knowledge and perspectives that improve research quality and relevance. Community-generated data may also support local problem-solving, while universities can help turn these contributions into knowledge and practical outcomes (ECSA, 2015; UNESCO, 2021b).

At the same time, participation does not automatically translate into shared control. In many citizen science initiatives, decisions about data ownership, access, interpretation, and benefit-sharing remain concentrated within academic institutions (Cooper et al., 2023; Rasmussen & Cooper, 2019). Meaningful shared governance can also be difficult because of legal and funding requirements, differences in capacity and expertise, and limited experience with collective decision-making. As a result, participation may expand faster than governance arrangements can evolve, even where there is a genuine commitment to collaboration and shared benefit.

The core issue is the need to align participation with shared governance, data stewardship, and benefit-sharing. Without appropriate governance arrangements, universities may expand participation faster than mechanisms for shared influence and benefit-sharing can develop, leaving existing power relationships largely unchanged (Cooper et al., 2023).

LOOKING AHEAD

How it may develop

Looking ahead, this pressure is likely to intensify as open science, citizen science, and community-based research become more widespread, and as communities expect a role not only in generating data but also in shaping how that data is governed, interpreted, and used (UNESCO, 2021b).

RELEVANCE

Why it matters

Citizen science is often promoted as a mechanism for democratising science and strengthening university–community relationships. However, trust and long-term collaboration depend not only on participation itself, but also on perceptions of fairness, reciprocity, and shared benefit. The choices universities make regarding data governance,

	stewardship, and benefit-sharing may influence whether citizen science strengthens trust and collaborative knowledge creation or reinforces existing inequalities under participatory labels (Cooper et al., 2023).
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need clear ways to govern data and make decisions with communities in citizen science initiatives. This includes involving communities not only in data collection, but also in setting research questions, interpreting findings, deciding how data is used, and determining how results are shared. Clear arrangements should cover data ownership, attribution, authorship, transparency, consent, data management, and community rights. There is also growing interest in more inclusive approaches to data stewardship that give stakeholders a greater role in decision-making.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
citizen science seeks to broaden participation in research, strengthen university-community collaboration, and democratise knowledge production. Participatory approaches can improve research quality, increase transparency, and create opportunities for mutual learning and engagement.	participation alone does not guarantee equitable influence over data, knowledge production, or research outcomes. Communities may contribute substantially to research processes while having limited influence over decisions regarding data use, ownership, stewardship, and benefit-sharing (Cooper et al., 2023; Ada Lovelace Institute, 2024).
The core issue is therefore not whether communities should participate in research, but how participation can be accompanied by meaningful influence over data, governance, and outcomes.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? - How can citizen science give communities meaningful influence over data, knowledge, and research outcomes?
- ? - What forms of shared governance are needed to ensure equity, reciprocity, and community benefit?
- ? - Who should decide how community-generated data is used and shared?

COMMON TRAPS

- Framing participation as inclusion without addressing ownership or decision-making.
- Assuming that open data automatically results in shared benefits.
- Treating communities mainly as data providers rather than knowledge partners.
- Expanding participation without mechanisms for shared stewardship or influence.
- Focusing on data collection while neglecting issues of attribution and benefit-sharing.

SP10

AREA III - BUILDING TRUST THROUGH KNOWLEDGE, EVIDENCE AND ENGAGEMENT

Demonstrating Impact Creates New Questions About What Counts as Meaningful Change

Related Scan Cards: SC8: Datafication of Community Engagement.

DESCRIPTION

What is changing

Horizon Scanning identified evolving expectations for universities to demonstrate the impact of their community engagement activities. Related Scan Card captured increasing demands for measurable evidence of engagement outcomes, growing tensions between short-term reporting requirements and long-term social change, and emerging questions about how meaningful impact can be understood, evaluated, and communicated (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues further reframed these developments as broader questions of accountability, legitimacy, public value, institutional learning, and the role of evaluation in shaping engagement priorities (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Drawing on these findings, Strategic Foresight Analysis identified an accumulating pressure around how universities can demonstrate the value of community engagement while recognising the complexity, uncertainty, and long-term nature of social change (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026).

Universities face expanding expectations to provide evidence that community engagement delivers tangible benefits for learners, communities, institutions, and society. Evaluation frameworks, reporting requirements, ranking systems, funding programmes, and broader discussions concerning universities' societal contributions place growing emphasis on measurable outcomes and demonstrable impact (European Commission, 2022a; EUA, 2021). These expectations create important opportunities. Impact evaluation can strengthen accountability, support institutional learning, improve resource allocation, and increase the visibility of community engagement. It can also help universities articulate their public value and demonstrate contributions to societal challenges and democratic resilience (EUA, 2021; OECD, 2022).

At the same time, many outcomes of community engagement emerge gradually and are difficult to capture through conventional performance metrics. Trust, relationship-building, empowerment, social cohesion, mutual learning, and changes in community capacity often develop over long periods and are shaped by complex social contexts. As a result, institutions may rely on indicators that measure what is visible and easily counted rather than what is meaningful and transformative (NCCPE, 2018).

The tension arises from the need to balance demands for measurable evidence with the complex and often intangible nature of social change. Without evaluation approaches that recognise relational and community-centred outcomes, universities may prioritise what is easy to measure rather than what creates meaningful impact.

LOOKING AHEAD

How it may develop

Current trends suggest that this challenge is likely to intensify as demands for accountability continue to grow, increasing the risk that engagement activities are shaped by measurement frameworks that privilege short-term visibility over long-term change.

RELEVANCE

Why it matters

This pressure extends beyond evaluation methods and reporting requirements. It concerns how universities define success, what kinds of engagement activities are valued, and which outcomes are recognised as meaningful. The choices universities make regarding impact evaluation may influence whether community engagement develops as a learning-oriented

	and relationship-based practice or becomes shaped by short-term indicators, visibility requirements, and performance pressures.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need strategic decisions regarding how community engagement impact is defined, assessed, and communicated. This requires evaluation approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative evidence, involve communities in defining meaningful outcomes, and recognise relational, long-term, and context-specific forms of change. It also requires decisions about how learning, failure, and unintended consequences are valued within engagement systems.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
universities are expected to demonstrate results, provide evidence of effectiveness, and justify investments in engagement activities. Transparent evaluation can strengthen accountability, support strategic decision-making, and help secure resources for future engagement.	many of the most important outcomes of community engagement are relational, context-dependent, and difficult to quantify. Universities also need space to recognise learning, complexity, experimentation, and unintended outcomes, even when these cannot be easily translated into conventional performance indicators.
The challenge is therefore not whether community engagement should be evaluated, but how accountability can be balanced with realistic understandings of how meaningful social change occurs.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

? How can universities demonstrate the value of community engagement without reducing complex social change to narrow performance indicators?

COMMON TRAPS

- Assuming that community engagement is valuable only when its impact can be easily quantified.
- Equating visibility with impact and activity with change.
- Prioritising short-term evidence over long-term relationship building.
- Measuring what is easiest to count while overlooking what communities themselves value most.
- Treating uncertainty, failure, and unintended outcomes as weaknesses rather than important sources of learning.

AREA IV

From Participation to Meaningful Influence

SP11

Participation and co-creation are becoming important elements of community engagement. At the same time, questions emerge about influence, accountability, representation, and decision-making authority. This area focuses on pressures that arise when expectations for participation expand within systems that remain institutionally accountable for decisions.

IN THIS AREA**SP11**

Meaningful Participation Requires Clarity About Influence, Accountability and Decision-Making

AREA IV - FROM PARTICIPATION TO MEANINGFUL INFLUENCE

SP11

Meaningful Participation Requires Clarity About Influence, Accountability and Decision-Making

Related Scan Cards: SC21: Participatory Governance Expands in Higher Education, SC32: Universities Face Growing Pressure to Represent "the Community".

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning identified growing interest in participatory governance, co-creation, and shared ownership within community engagement. Related Scan Cards illustrated rising expectations for stakeholder involvement in shaping institutional priorities and decisions (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues broadened this discussion by raising questions about accountability, influence, legitimacy, and representation (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Building on these findings, Strategic Foresight Analysis identified an accumulating pressure around how universities can expand participation and shared ownership while operating within governance systems that remain formally accountable for decisions, resources, and institutional priorities (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Universities are adopting and experimenting with participatory approaches such as co-creation, stakeholder councils, participatory budgeting, citizen panels, advisory groups, and collaborative decision-making processes. These approaches create opportunities to strengthen trust, legitimacy, transparency, and shared ownership within university-community relationships. They can also help universities draw on diverse forms of knowledge, experience, and community expertise (Bovaird, 2007; EUA, 2021). At the same time, evolving expectations regarding participation raise questions about the relationship between influence and accountability. Communities expect meaningful opportunities to shape decisions that affect them, while universities remain responsible for institutional strategy, legal obligations, resource allocation, and public accountability. Many governance systems were designed around clear institutional authority and may not easily accommodate more distributed forms of influence and shared decision-making (Arnstein, 1969). As participation becomes more embedded within community engagement, questions emerge regarding how influence is distributed, who participates, whose voices are represented, and how universities communicate the scope and limits of stakeholder involvement. The tension emerges not from participation itself, but from the need to balance broader participation with clear and realistic decision-making boundaries.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>Looking towards the future, this pressure is likely to grow as expectations about co-creation, participation, stakeholder voice, and shared ownership continue to intensify across higher education and wider society (Raza et al., 2025).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	This pressure extends beyond individual participation mechanisms. It concerns how universities understand governance, legitimacy, representation, and the distribution of influence within community engagement. The choices universities make about participation may influence whether engagement develops as a genuinely collaborative practice characterised by shared ownership and mutual accountability or remains limited to consultation and symbolic involvement. Similar debates have emerged in discussions on co-creation, citizen participation, and the civic role of universities (EUA, 2021).

NEED*What is required*

Universities need strategic decisions regarding how participation, influence, and accountability are balanced within community engagement processes. This requires governance approaches that clarify the relationship between stakeholder input, shared ownership, and institutional decision-making. It also requires transparent communication regarding the purpose of participation, the scope of stakeholder influence, and where responsibility ultimately remains.

STRATEGIC TENSION**ON ONE HAND**

universities seek to involve communities, students, and external stakeholders in shaping engagement priorities, projects, and decisions. Co-creation and shared governance approaches are often seen as ways of strengthening university-community relationships and enhancing public value (Bovaird, 2007; EUA, 2021). They may also help universities better understand and respond to the needs, priorities, and experiences of the communities they serve, ensuring that engagement activities remain relevant, responsive, and socially meaningful.

ON THE OTHER HAND

universities operate within governance systems that require accountability, legal compliance, financial oversight, and strategic coordination. Not all decisions can be fully opened to participatory processes. As stakeholder involvement expands, universities face difficult questions about which decisions can be genuinely shared, which remain institutional responsibilities, and how these boundaries should be communicated.

The core issue is therefore not whether participation should expand, but how universities can share influence and ownership while maintaining accountability, legitimacy, and strategic coherence.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

? *How can universities share influence with communities and stakeholders while remaining accountable for institutional decisions and responsibilities?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Confusing participation with real influence over decision-making.
- Assuming that participation itself is evidence of successful engagement.
- Expanding participation without clarifying how decisions are ultimately made.
- Equating consultation with shared ownership or co-creation.
- Assuming that all stakeholders have equal capacity to participate and influence outcomes.
- ##

AREA V

Navigating Values, Dialogue and Civic Responsibility

SP12 SP13

Universities are expected to engage with contested issues, support civic dialogue, and contribute to democratic participation. These developments create new questions about institutional responsibility, academic freedom, inclusion, neutrality, and the public role of higher education in polarised environments. The Strategic Pressure Points in this area focus on how institutions navigate complex public debates, where strategic choices may carry symbolic weight and influence how they are perceived by different communities and stakeholders.

IN THIS AREA

SP12	Student Activism Requires Balancing Civic Engagement and Institutional Responsibility
SP13	Universities Are Expected to Act as Trusted Civic Forums

SP12

AREA V - NAVIGATING VALUES, DIALOGUE AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Student Activism Requires Balancing Civic Engagement and Institutional Responsibility

Related Scan Cards: SC5: Student-Led Civic and Social Enterprises Redefine Engagement, SC9: Universities Balance Neutrality and Activism, SC26: Universities Navigate Free Speech and Inclusion in Community Engagement.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning highlighted student activism as a visible and influential force shaping university-community relationships. Related Scan Cards documented growing expectations that universities respond to societal challenges, align institutional practices with publicly stated values and contribute actively to democratic futures (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues situated these developments within broader debates about civic participation, academic freedom, public trust, and institutional responsibility (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Together, these insights revealed increasing pressure around how universities can respond to increasing demands for institutional action while maintaining coherence and long-term governance stability (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Student activism has become a visible feature of university life, extending beyond individual issues to encompass climate action, social justice, sustainability, geopolitical conflicts, and broader questions of institutional responsibility. Students expect universities to align their teaching, research, partnerships, investments, and operations with publicly stated values and societal challenges. These developments reflect wider patterns of civic participation and growing interest in influencing public and institutional decisions (European Commission, 2022a; UNESCO, 2021a; European Parliament, 2023). Student activism also creates important opportunities for universities. It can strengthen democratic participation, promote civic engagement, and encourage reflection on the social responsibilities of higher education. Activism can also give students a role in shaping institutional priorities and advancing the civic mission of universities (UNESCO, 2021a; Council of Europe, 2015; European Commission, 2022a). At the same time, activism raises complex governance questions. Protests, campaigns, and public demands for institutional action may pressure universities to take positions on contested issues. This raises questions about the boundaries between academic freedom, institutional values, civic engagement, political neutrality, and organisational responsibility. The core issue is not student activism itself, but the need to balance universities' civic and social responsibilities with their obligations to maintain legitimacy, inclusion, academic freedom, and governance stability.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>In the future, this tension is likely to grow as societal challenges become more complex and interconnected, and students expect universities to play a more visible role in addressing social, environmental, and political issues (UNESCO, 2021a; European Commission, 2022a).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	Student activism influences how universities are perceived by students, staff, communities, policymakers, and wider publics. The relationship between institutional commitments and visible actions may affect trust and public credibility. Where students perceive a disconnect between stated values and institutional practice, tensions may emerge. Reactive responses to activism may also undermine confidence in governance and institutional consistency (OECD, 2022). Choices about dialogue, participation, transparency, and institutional

	positioning may shape whether activism supports constructive engagement or leads to recurring conflict and polarisation.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need clear frameworks for addressing student activism within institutional governance. This includes transparent dialogue channels, clear decision-making responsibilities, and clarity around institutional values, academic freedom, political neutrality, and operational responsibilities. Leadership and governance bodies should determine which issues fall within institutional mandates, what forms of engagement are appropriate, and how competing expectations can be managed consistently and transparently. Participation mechanisms should support meaningful dialogue rather than reactive responses to individual events.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
universities seek to support civic engagement, democratic participation, active citizenship, and student agency. Student activism can strengthen public debate, contribute to institutional learning, and reinforce the role of higher education as a space for critical inquiry and societal engagement.	universities must maintain institutional coherence, protect academic freedom, respect diverse viewpoints, and operate within their legal and governance responsibilities. Not all activist demands can be incorporated into institutional strategy, and responding to some may create tensions with other stakeholders, values, or institutional obligations.
The challenge is not whether universities should engage with student activism, but how they can do so in credible, participatory, transparent, and sustainable ways.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

? - How can universities engage with student activism in ways that are credible, participatory, and institutionally sustainable?

? - What responsibilities should universities assume when students call for institutional action on contested issues?

COMMON TRAPS

- Treating student activism solely as a reputational risk rather than a form of civic engagement.
- Responding reactively to individual events without a longer-term governance approach.
- Assuming that institutional neutrality eliminates the need for engagement or dialogue.
- Making commitments that exceed institutional mandates, capacity, or resources.
- Confusing support for student participation with endorsement of specific positions.

SP13

AREA V - NAVIGATING VALUES, DIALOGUE AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Universities Are Expected to Act as Trusted Civic Forums

Related Scan Cards: SC1: Universities as Trust Brokers in Polarised Communities, SC9: Universities Balance Neutrality and Activism, SC18: Universities Act as Conveners in Multi-Stakeholder Ecosystems, SC26: Universities Navigate Free Speech and Inclusion in Community Engagement.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning identified growing tensions around free speech, academic freedom, inclusion, public trust, and the role of universities in polarised societies. Related Scan Cards pointed to conflicts between open expression and inclusion, alongside growing expectations that universities support civic dialogue, democratic participation, and social cohesion (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues reframed these developments as broader questions of institutional legitimacy, neutrality, governance, and the public role of universities (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Integrating these perspectives highlighted mounting pressure around how universities can facilitate constructive dialogue while maintaining inclusion and trust in contested environments (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Universities host public debates, community dialogues, and other engagement activities that bring together diverse perspectives and contested issues. These create opportunities for critical inquiry, democratic participation, civic learning, and dialogue across differences, while reinforcing universities' role as trusted institutions that support social cohesion, democratic resilience, and informed public discussion (UNESCO, 2021a; OECD, 2022; EUA, 2021). At the same time, engagement takes place within highly polarised social and information environments. Universities face competing expectations to defend free expression, promote inclusion, support academic freedom, facilitate dialogue, and respond to controversial events. As they are often expected to convene or mediate contested debates, decisions about speakers, events, framing, and public positioning may themselves be perceived as biased or partisan. This raises questions about the boundaries between free expression, inclusion, academic freedom, institutional neutrality, and civic responsibility (EUA, 2023). The tension stems not from free speech, dialogue, or civic engagement themselves, but from the need to balance open inquiry, inclusive participation, civic responsibility, and institutional legitimacy. Without clear governance, universities risk losing trust while being expected to act as inclusive communities, trusted knowledge institutions, and civic forums.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>In the future, this pressure is likely to intensify as societal polarisation, declining trust, political contestation, public scrutiny, and demands for meaningful participation continue to grow (OECD, 2022).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	The way universities navigate contested issues may shape perceptions of legitimacy, neutrality, public trust, and societal relevance. How they balance open inquiry, inclusion, civic responsibility, and academic freedom may determine whether they are seen as trusted spaces for dialogue or as partisan actors in wider conflicts. These choices may therefore affect stakeholder trust, community relationships, and the credibility of higher education.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need clear guidance on how free speech, academic freedom, democratic dialogue, and institutional responsibilities should work together. This includes clear decision-making principles, defined responsibilities, effective communication, and ways to handle foreseeable conflicts. Universities also need to distinguish between facilitating dialogue, speaking as an institution, and remaining neutral or intervening publicly. Staff

involved in engagement, mediation, or controversial public discussions may need support in dialogue, conflict management, public communication, and ethical decision-making.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
universities seek to protect free expression, academic freedom, open inquiry, and public debate. They also aim to support democratic participation, civic learning, and constructive dialogue. As trusted knowledge institutions, they may be well placed to bring people together for difficult conversations.	universities seek to create environments that are inclusive, respectful, and accessible to diverse communities. They must maintain institutional legitimacy, protect academic independence, respond to concerns about harm and exclusion, and preserve public trust. Efforts to facilitate dialogue may themselves become contested, exposing universities to accusations of bias, partisanship, or overreach.
The challenge is not whether universities should support free expression, inclusion, and civic dialogue, but how to balance these aims in ways that remain credible, transparent, and trusted.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? - *How can universities support open debate while ensuring that all members of the community feel included and respected?*
- ? - *What role should universities play when social or political issues become highly contested and polarising?*
- ? - *Where should universities draw the line between academic freedom, civic responsibility, and institutional neutrality?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Treating controversies as isolated incidents rather than recurring governance challenges.
- Assuming that institutional neutrality automatically guarantees fairness or legitimacy.
- Equating facilitation of dialogue with endorsement of particular viewpoints.
- Entering polarised debates without clear objectives or governance safeguards.
- Leaving difficult decisions primarily to individual staff members or event organisers.
- Responding reactively to public controversies without clear principles or decision-making processes.

AREA VI

Building Sustainable Engagement Ecosystems

SP14 SP15 SP16

As community engagement becomes more established, increasing attention is being given to the conditions that make it sustainable over time. This area brings together tensions related to long-term partnerships, institutional support, recognition systems, and the people and relationships upon which community engagement depends.

IN THIS AREA

SP14	European University Alliances Require Balancing European and Local Engagement
SP15	Sustaining Long-Term Partnerships Beyond Project Funding
SP16	Sustainable Engagement Requires Recognising Invisible and Relational Work

SP14

AREA VI - BUILDING SUSTAINABLE ENGAGEMENT ECOSYSTEMS

European University Alliances Require Balancing European and Local Engagement

Related Scan Cards: SC14: European University Alliances Reconfigure Local Engagement, SC16: Place-Based Engagement Gains Importance in a Globalised University System.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning identified the growing influence of European University Alliances in reshaping how higher education institutions collaborate, mobilise resources, and engage with society. Related Scan Cards pointed to growing transnational cooperation, shared strategies and programmes, and expectations that universities address societal challenges through European-level collaboration while maintaining local and regional connections (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues reframed these developments as broader questions of multi-level governance, institutional identity, local relevance, and the relationship between European integration and place-based engagement (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Strategic Foresight Analysis highlighted the challenge of benefiting from European integration while maintaining meaningful connections to the communities and regions universities serve (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). European University Alliances create opportunities for universities to work together across borders, combine expertise, share resources, and address societal challenges at a larger scale. Through joint programmes, collaborative initiatives, mobility schemes, and shared governance structures, alliances are strengthening cooperation across the European Higher Education Area (European Commission, 2025a; EUA, 2024). These developments also connect universities with public authorities, civil society organisations, businesses, and regional stakeholders across countries, creating opportunities to exchange practices, co-create solutions, and address challenges beyond national and regional boundaries (European Commission, 2025a). At the same time, deeper European cooperation introduces new layers of coordination and decision-making. As alliance-level priorities and programmes become more influential, questions emerge about how local needs, regional partnerships, and place-based priorities are represented within broader European frameworks. Universities therefore need to balance alliance-wide objectives with responsibilities to local communities and regional ecosystems. The strategic pressure arises not from European cooperation itself, but from the need to ensure that transnational collaboration strengthens rather than weakens universities' connections to the places in which they are embedded.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>Over time, this pressure is likely to intensify as European University Alliances become more established, governance structures mature, and expectations grow for universities to contribute to European integration, regional development, and local societal impact (European Commission, 2025b; LERU, 2024).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	European University Alliances have the potential to change how engagement is organised across higher education. Connecting European collaboration with local engagement can create new opportunities for societal impact, mutual learning, and knowledge exchange, while bringing local experiences into wider European conversations. Maintaining place-based relevance remains critical for sustaining trust and long-term community relationships.

	As alliances evolve, connecting different levels of engagement may become important for institutional effectiveness and legitimacy.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities need ways to connect engagement priorities at European, national, regional, and local levels. This means ensuring that local and regional perspectives inform alliance strategies while allowing institutions to benefit from European cooperation. University leaders may need to clarify responsibilities, decision-making, and resource allocation across these levels. Alliance strategies should also leave room for local initiatives alongside shared European priorities. Clear governance can help maintain local relevance while making use of the resources, networks, and learning opportunities that alliances provide.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
universities seek to benefit from deeper European collaboration through shared programmes, pooled expertise, coordinated initiatives, and stronger transnational networks. Alliances can expand opportunities for innovation, mobility, learning, research, and societal engagement across borders.	universities also seek to remain responsive to the needs of their local communities, regional priorities, and place-based partnerships. These relationships often depend on proximity, continuity, trust, and understanding of local contexts.
The key issue is therefore not whether universities should pursue stronger European cooperation, but how they can integrate alliance-level ambitions with meaningful local and regional engagement.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? - *How can universities ensure that European cooperation strengthens local and regional engagement?*
- ? - *What governance arrangements best connect alliance-level and place-based priorities?*
- ? - *What opportunities for societal impact emerge through alliance-based collaboration?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Assuming that European coordination automatically generates local relevance.
- Treating local engagement as secondary to alliance-wide priorities.
- Centralising engagement decisions without mechanisms for local participation and feedback.
- Measuring alliance success mainly through internal integration rather than societal impact.
- Overlooking regional differences in alliance-wide engagement strategies.
- Treating European and local engagement as competing rather than complementary.

SP15

AREA VI - BUILDING SUSTAINABLE ENGAGEMENT ECOSYSTEMS

Sustaining Long-Term Partnerships Beyond Project Funding

Related Scan Cards: SC6: Communities Expect More Coordinated Engagement Partnerships, SC 16: Place-Based Engagement Gains Importance in a Globalised University System, SC33: Project-Based Funding Continues to Shape Community Engagement.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning highlighted the growing importance of long-term partnerships within community engagement. Related Scan Cards documented tensions between ambitions for sustained collaboration and the realities of project-based funding (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues reframed these developments through discussions about continuity, reciprocity, sustainability, and institutional commitment (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Building on these findings, Strategic Foresight Analysis identified an accumulating pressure around how universities can sustain long-term engagement while operating within funding environments that prioritise short-term projects and deliverables (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Short-term funding programmes create important opportunities for universities and community partners. They enable experimentation, innovation, piloting of new approaches, and the development of partnerships that might not otherwise emerge. Project-based funding can act as a catalyst for collaboration and support universities in responding quickly to emerging societal challenges. At the same time, many of the social, environmental, and economic challenges addressed through community engagement require long-term commitment and relationship-building. Trust, reciprocity, and shared ownership develop over time and can be difficult to sustain when partnerships depend on short-term funding. Community organisations may become frustrated when engagement follows funding cycles rather than shared priorities. Sustainable engagement therefore depends not only on successful projects, but also on continuity and institutional support beyond individual funding cycles. As expectations for co-creation, place-based collaboration, and civic engagement grow, universities are challenged to move beyond project-based engagement towards more durable partnerships and institutional approaches (Meerman & Davey, 2025). The strategic pressure reflects the need to balance the benefits of short-term innovation funding with the long-term relationship-building required for meaningful community engagement.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>Looking ahead, this tension is likely to intensify as universities are expected to address complex societal challenges through collaborative partnerships, while funding systems continue to favour time-limited projects and measurable short-term outcomes.</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	The ability to sustain engagement beyond individual projects may shape universities' credibility, legitimacy, and effectiveness as community partners. Universities that successfully create continuity across funding cycles may be better positioned to build trust, support co-creation, and generate lasting social impact. In contrast, repeated cycles of starting and ending partnerships can undermine trust, reduce participation, and limit the potential of engagement.
NEED <i>What is required</i>	Universities and funders need to treat engagement as a long-term part of university work rather than a series of separate projects. This means linking project funding to wider university strategies, maintaining key partnerships between funding cycles, and supporting relationships beyond individual projects. Leaders also need to decide which partnerships are

worth sustaining, how university resources can complement external funding, and who is responsible for maintaining relationships with communities. Evaluation and funding frameworks should also give more weight to relationship-building and long-term commitment, alongside traditional project outputs and performance measures.

STRATEGIC TENSION

ON ONE HAND	ON THE OTHER HAND
project-based funding enables universities to experiment, innovate, respond rapidly to emerging challenges, and initiate new forms of collaboration. Flexible funding can support creativity, risk-taking, and the development of novel engagement approaches.	meaningful community engagement relies on continuity, trust, reciprocity, and long-term commitment. Lasting partnerships often require stable relationships that extend beyond individual grants, projects, and funding cycles.
The challenge is therefore not whether universities should pursue project-based funding, but how they can ensure that short-term initiatives contribute to long-term partnership development and sustained community impact.	

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? - *How can universities create continuity in engagement when funding systems remain predominantly project-based?*
- ? - *Which partnerships require long-term institutional commitment beyond individual grants?*
- ? - *How can project-based innovation contribute to durable engagement ecosystems?*
- ? - *What funding and governance models best support sustained university-community relationships?*

COMMON TRAPS

- Assuming that successful partnerships will continue without dedicated resources.
- Allowing community relationships to depend entirely on external funding cycles.
- Measuring success mainly through short-term outputs and deliverables.
- Prioritising project completion over long-term trust-building and reciprocity.
- Viewing engagement as a collection of projects rather than an institutional capability.

SP16

AREA VI - BUILDING SUSTAINABLE ENGAGEMENT ECOSYSTEMS

Sustainable Engagement Requires Recognising Invisible and Relational Work

Related Scan Cards: SC10: Recognition of Community Engagement Gains Attention in Academic Careers, SC15: Emergence of Community Engagement Leadership Roles, SC19: Civic Skills Become Critical for Academic and Professional Staff, SC20: Professionalisation of Community Engagement, SC31: Recognition of Relational Labour in Community Engagement.

DESCRIPTION <i>What is changing</i>	Horizon Scanning brought attention to the often-overlooked relational work required to sustain community engagement. Related Scan Cards highlighted growing concerns about recognition of engagement activities in academic careers, workload distribution, and dependence on individual commitment (ACE Trends and Emerging Issues Analysis Report, 2026). Stakeholder Dialogues expanded these observations into broader questions about incentives, organisational culture, career progression, and institutional sustainability (ACE Stakeholders Insights Report, 2026). Drawing these insights together revealed the need for universities to better recognise, support, and share responsibility for the relational work that underpins meaningful community engagement (ACE Strategic Foresight Report, 2026). Community engagement forms part of university missions, societal engagement strategies, and expectations regarding public value. Building and sustaining partnerships requires relationship-building, trust, coordination, community dialogue, and ongoing collaboration. These activities create the conditions that make meaningful community engagement possible, while also contributing to long-term institutional and societal impact (EUA, 2025; OECD, 2024). At the same time, much of this relational and coordination work remains only partially visible within institutional systems. Academic career structures, workload models, promotion criteria, and performance indicators often continue to prioritise publications, grants, and teaching performance. Engagement therefore frequently depends on a small number of highly committed individuals whose contributions receive limited recognition. As engagement ambitions continue to expand, questions emerge regarding how relational work can be recognised, supported, and shared more sustainably. Without corresponding changes to recognition systems and organisational support structures, universities risk workload imbalances, dependence on individual commitment, burnout, and long-term sustainability challenges. The tension arises not from community engagement itself, but from the need to align growing engagement ambitions with recognition systems, workload structures, and support mechanisms that can sustain the relational work on which engagement depends.
LOOKING AHEAD <i>How it may develop</i>	<i>As expectations for community engagement continue to expand, questions about recognition and incentives are likely to become harder to ignore. Recent evidence shows growing attention to academic career reform, but recognition systems continue to evolve unevenly across institutions and national contexts (OECD, 2024).</i>
RELEVANCE <i>Why it matters</i>	This pressure extends beyond workload and career development to how universities define value, recognise contributions, and sustain engagement. Choices about recognition and support may influence whether engagement becomes a shared institutional responsibility or remains dependent on a few committed individuals, affecting the quality and continuity of university-community relationships. Recent European discussions on sustainable academic careers highlight recognition of diverse academic contributions as a vital condition for institutional resilience and societal engagement.

NEED*What is required*

Universities need strategic decisions regarding how engagement work is recognised, supported, and distributed across institutional roles. This requires recognising relational and partnership-building activities within workload frameworks, promotion systems, staff development strategies, and leadership structures. It also requires decisions regarding how responsibilities for engagement are shared across academic and professional staff rather than concentrated among a small number of individuals.

STRATEGIC TENSION**ON ONE HAND**

universities seek to strengthen engagement, develop long-term partnerships, contribute to societal challenges, and foster meaningful collaboration with communities. These aspirations depend on trust, reciprocity, relationship-building, and sustained engagement.

ON THE OTHER HAND

institutional incentive systems, workload frameworks, promotion criteria, and resource allocation mechanisms often continue to prioritise activities that are more visible, measurable, and traditionally recognised within academic career structures.

The core issue is therefore not whether community engagement should expand, but how universities can align recognition, incentives, and support with the relational work that engagement requires.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

? How can universities expand community engagement ambitions while ensuring that the relational work required to sustain engagement is recognised, supported, and fairly distributed?

COMMON TRAPS

- Assuming that meaningful engagement can be sustained mainly through individual motivation and goodwill.
- Treating relationship-building and partnership maintenance as informal activities rather than core engagement activities.
- Expanding engagement expectations without adapting recognition systems, or institutional incentives.
- Assuming that engagement work is equally distributed while overlooking concentrations of invisible labour.
- Rewarding visible outputs while underestimating the time and coordination behind them.
- Viewing engagement as an additional responsibility rather than an institutional function requiring dedicated capacity and support.

07

How universities can use the Strategic Pressure Points



07 How universities can use the Strategic Pressure Points

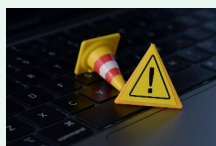
This Guide makes several deliberate choices about what it does not provide. It does not offer ready-made solutions or best practices to be copied. It does not rank or benchmark institutions, nor does it propose a one-size-fits-all model of community engagement. Crucially, it also does not assume that more engagement is always better.

Instead, the Guide is designed as a sensemaking and decision-support tool for universities operating in complex environments. It encourages strategic reflection on where engagement tensions are accumulating, why they persist, and what kinds of institutional choices are required to address them responsibly.

The Strategic Pressure Points should function as strategic working tools that help institutions recognise where pressure is building and why certain questions about priorities, scope, responsibility, or limits can no longer be postponed. Used in practice, they support a shift from reactive responses toward more deliberate, governed decision-making in community engagement.

Below, the Guide outlines several practical ways in which Strategic Pressure Points can be used, illustrating how they can support anticipation, strategic decision-making, leadership dialogue, boundary-setting, institutional learning, and more transparent engagement with external partners.

Strategic Pressure Points as an Early-Warning Tool



Strategic Pressure Points help universities detect where tension is accumulating before it escalates into crisis.

Used regularly by leadership teams, faculties, or central units, they support reflective questions such as: *Is pressure already building in this area, or is it still manageable?*

This shifts attention away from responding only once pressure becomes visible through conflict, staff overload, public protest, or deteriorating partnerships.

→ **the institution becomes less reactive and more anticipatory.**

Strategic Pressure Points as a Framework for Strategic Decision-Making



Strategic Pressure Points do not prescribe what universities should do. Instead, they help clarify the consequences of action, inaction, or delayed decisions.

When considering initiatives such as launching new engagement activities, entering partnerships, expanding inclusion efforts, or responding to student activism, universities can ask: *Which Strategic Pressure Point does this decision reinforce, and which does it relieve?*

This reframes decision-making from evaluating isolated initiatives to understanding their structural implications.

→ **decisions become strategically informed, not only programmatic.**

Strategic Pressure Points as a Shared Language for Governance and Leadership



Strategic Pressure Points provide a non-personalised language for discussing engagement challenges at governance and leadership level.

They can be used as:

- reference points in senate and council discussions,
- input for leadership retreats and strategic planning sessions,
- a common frame for dialogue between central management and faculties.

Because they focus on systemic pressures rather than individual actions, they support constructive strategic dialogue without defensiveness or blame.

→ **leadership discussions shift from fault-finding to system design.**

Strategic Pressure Points as a Tool for Setting Boundaries and Priorities



Strategic Pressure Points make it legitimate to define limits.

In areas such as mental health support, crisis response, participation, or inclusion, universities can move beyond vague explanations about lack of resources. Instead, they can explicitly recognise when an area is experiencing *mission overload* or *inclusion fatigue* and requires decisions about scope, prioritisation, or responsibility.

→ **responsibility is not confused with unlimited expansion of institutional roles.**

Strategic Pressure Points as a Framework for Dialogue with External Stakeholders



Strategic Pressure Points support more honest and sustainable conversations with external partners, including cities, civil society organisations, public institutions, and European partners.

Rather than promising ever-increasing engagement, universities can use the Pressure Points to explain:

- where pressure has already accumulated,
- which trade-offs are unavoidable,
- which expectations require shared responsibility rather than unilateral institutional action.

→ **partnerships become more transparent and resilient.**

Strategic Pressure Points as a Tool for Institutional Learning and Reflection



Strategic Pressure Points are well suited for use in:

- leadership development and staff training,
- strategy workshops,
- evaluations of engagement programmes,
- reflection spaces for academic managers.

They are not meant to be applied as checklists, but as reflective prompts, for example:
Where is engagement still organised as a project, while pressure is already systemic?

Where has participation become symbolic rather than meaningful?

→ **organisational learning focuses on structural conditions, not only individual initiatives.**

Strategic Pressure Points as a Bridge Between Analysis and Action



Strategic Pressure Points serve as a bridge between foresight analysis and strategic action.

They are not solutions and do not replace institutional strategy. Instead, they mark the transition:

- from analysis to reflection,
- from reaction to choice,
- from expansion to prioritisation.

→ **institutions shift from reactive engagement to conscious strategic choice.**

08

Practical Workshop Formats



08 Practical workshop formats

Strategic Pressure Points can be practical tools supporting institutional reflection, dialogue, and decision-making. Their value emerges most clearly when they are actively used in structured settings that bring together different perspectives within the institution. To support this, the Guide proposes two complementary workshop formats:

- a short, focused workshop (60–90 minutes) designed to support immediate reflection and decision clarification,
- and an extended workshop format, aimed at deeper systemic analysis, interdependency mapping, and strategic prioritisation.

These formats can be used in governance and leadership settings such as senates, dean's councils, engagement steering groups, or strategy workshops.

Focused Workshop Format: Strategic Reflection

To support practical and time-efficient use of Strategic Pressure Points, this shorter workshop format enables structured reflection on selected pressures within governance and leadership settings (e.g. senate, dean's council, engagement steering group). It focuses on clarifying priorities, identifying immediate implications, and supporting targeted decision-making without requiring a full-system analysis.

The workshop objective: to move from recognising individual pressures to clarifying their relevance, implications, and immediate governance consequences, supporting timely and focused strategic reflection at leadership level.

STEP 1 10–15 minutes	Selection of Strategic Pressure Points Participants select 2–3 Strategic Pressure Points that are most relevant to the current institutional context. These may: <table><tr><td>include areas where pressure is already visible,</td><td>reflect emerging concerns,</td><td>relate to ongoing institutional discussions.</td></tr></table> If the existing Strategic Pressure Points do not fully capture a specific institutional challenge, participants may define their own Strategic Pressure Point using the template provided in Appendix 1.	include areas where pressure is already visible,	reflect emerging concerns,	relate to ongoing institutional discussions.
include areas where pressure is already visible,	reflect emerging concerns,	relate to ongoing institutional discussions.		
STEP 2	Assessing signal strength For each selected Strategic Pressure Point, participants assess whether the signal is			

10–15 minutes	<table><tr><td>weak (the issue is only beginning to emerge and is not yet widely recognised),</td><td>medium (the issue is visible and discussed, but its implications remain uncertain),</td><td>strong (the issue is already affecting institutional decisions, priorities, or stakeholder relationships)</td></tr></table> in their institution and briefly justify their assessment using: recent events, evidence or data, partner feedback, or observed workload patterns. <i>This step supports a shared understanding of urgency and visibility.</i>	weak (the issue is only beginning to emerge and is not yet widely recognised),	medium (the issue is visible and discussed, but its implications remain uncertain),	strong (the issue is already affecting institutional decisions, priorities, or stakeholder relationships)
weak (the issue is only beginning to emerge and is not yet widely recognised),	medium (the issue is visible and discussed, but its implications remain uncertain),	strong (the issue is already affecting institutional decisions, priorities, or stakeholder relationships)		
STEP 3 10–15 minutes	Identifying visible common traps Using the “Common Traps” section as a diagnostic lens, participants reflect on current practice and answer the question(s): QUESTION(S) <i>Which patterns are already visible? Which current responses appear effective in the short term but may reinforce pressure over time?</i> Examples: reactive responses, symbolic or limited participation, reliance on individual initiative rather than structures, etc. <i>This step shifts the discussion from intentions to actual system behaviour.</i>			
STEP 4 10–15 minutes	Clarifying the boundary question Participants agree on one key boundary-related question that requires leadership attention. This may relate to scope of engagement, institutional responsibility, decision rights, limits or escalation criteria. The question should be formulated as a decision to be made, or a principle or rule to be clarified. EXAMPLES <i>Which forms of community engagement should be considered core institutional priorities, and which should remain optional or project-based?</i> <i>Who should have the authority to make decisions when community expectations conflict with institutional priorities or available resources?</i> <i>Under what conditions should the university expand, reduce, or discontinue engagement activities?</i> <i>The purpose of this step is not to find immediate solutions, but to identify questions that require strategic clarification and leadership attention.</i>			
STEP 5 10–15 minutes	Defining one governance clarification Participants identify one concrete follow-up at governance level to be pursued after the session. This may include <i>who decides, who is accountable, what information is needed, which unit convenes the next step.</i>			

	<i>The outcome should be a concrete governance action, clarification, or next step rather than a complete solution. It is a move toward reducing ambiguity.</i>
STEP 6 5–10 minutes	Naming a relational quality indicator Participants identify one simple indicator reflecting the quality of engagement (not only outputs), such as continuity of partnerships, trust and feedback mechanisms, reciprocity, clarity of decision pathways. <i>This step helps shift attention from activity to relationship quality.</i>
STEP 7 5–10 minutes	Planning feedback to external partners Participants agree on how the institution will communicate limits, trade-offs, and next steps to relevant external partners. This supports transparency, trust, and realistic expectations.
STEP 8 5–10 minutes	Reflecting on interdependencies Before closing, participants reflect on potential ripple effects: QUESTION <i>If we act on this Pressure Point, which other pressures might intensify?</i> At least one likely interdependency or side effect should be noted. Examples: expanding participation may increase demands on institutional capacity; strengthening inclusion may require additional resources; increasing flexibility may create challenges for coherence and coordination.

Extended Workshop Format: Strategic Pressure Mapping

To deepen institutional reflection, Strategic Pressure Points can also be used in an extended half-day session workshop format focused on mapping interdependencies and identifying priority areas for strategic action.

The workshop objective: to move from identifying individual pressures to understanding how pressures interact, reinforce one another, and accumulate within the institution, supporting strategic prioritisation at leadership level.

STEP 1	Initial selection Participants select 4 - 6 Strategic Pressure Points that are most relevant to their current context. These may include:
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30 minutes	<table><tr><td>areas where pressure is already visible,</td><td>emerging risks,</td><td>or areas where decisions have been repeatedly postponed.</td></tr></table> If the existing Strategic Pressure Points do not fully capture a specific institutional challenge, participants may define their own Strategic Pressure Point using the template provided in Appendix 1.	areas where pressure is already visible,	emerging risks,	or areas where decisions have been repeatedly postponed.
areas where pressure is already visible,	emerging risks,	or areas where decisions have been repeatedly postponed.		
STEP 2 45 minutes	Pressure mapping Using a simple visual map (e.g. whiteboard or digital board), participants: - place selected Pressure Points on a shared canvas, - draw connections between them. QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DISCUSSION <i>Which pressures reinforce each other?</i> <i>Where do decisions in one area increase pressure in another?</i> <i>Are some pressures symptoms of deeper structural issues?</i> <i>The aim is to reveal interdependencies and accumulation of pressure, rather than analyse each point in isolation.</i>			
STEP 3 30 minutes	Identifying pressure clusters Participants group interconnected Pressure Points into clusters. Each cluster should answer: What kind of structural tension does this represent? (e.g. “expansion vs. capacity”, “participation vs. decision power”) <i>This step shifts the discussion from individual issues to systemic patterns.</i>			
STEP 4 30 minutes	Strategic prioritisation Participants identify 1–2 clusters where strategic decisions are most urgent. GUIDING QUESTIONS <i>Where is pressure already affecting institutional credibility or sustainability?</i> <i>Where is lack of decision creating the greatest risk?</i> <i>Which pressure cluster is likely to have the greatest impact if left unaddressed over the next 3–5 years?</i> <i>Which pressure cluster influences the largest number of other Strategic Pressure Points?</i> <i>Where could a relatively small governance intervention have the greatest positive effect across the engagement ecosystem?</i> <i>This step explicitly connects foresight to priority-setting.</i>			
STEP	Boundary definition			

5 30 minutes	For each priority cluster, participants define: • one boundary question (e.g. limits, scope, responsibility), • one decision that cannot be postponed. EXAMPLE <i>What forms of engagement are we no longer able to sustain?</i> <i>Who has the authority to decide on engagement priorities?</i>
STEP 6 15–20 minutes	Governance implications Participants identify what needs to change at governance level: decision rights, coordination structures, accountability. Examples may include clarifying decision-making authority, establishing coordination mechanisms, defining responsibilities, revising governance procedures, or introducing new structures for engagement oversight. <i>This ensures the workshop leads to institutional follow-up, not only reflection.</i>

09

Conclusion



09

Conclusion — strategic engagement requires choices, not just commitment

Community engagement is often framed as a matter of values, goodwill, and commitment. While these elements remain essential, they are no longer sufficient. As engagement expands across teaching, research, and institutional strategy, universities face growing risks of overload, fragmentation, and loss of focus.

The Strategic Pressure Points presented in this Guide highlight a central message: there is no engagement without choice. Universities must decide what kind of engagement they can sustain, where their responsibilities begin and end, and which forms of engagement align with their mission and capacity. Avoiding these decisions may appear inclusive or responsive in the short term, but in practice it often leads to fatigue, symbolic participation, and weakened trust.

Strategic engagement does not mean doing less. It means being clearer about priorities, responsibilities, and limits. It requires leadership at multiple levels, transparent governance, and a willingness to acknowledge trade-offs rather than masking them behind ambitious language.

The Strategic Pressure Points should therefore not be understood as a fixed framework or a definitive list of future challenges. They represent a set of foresight-informed lenses that help universities identify where tensions are emerging, where expectations may become difficult to reconcile, and where governance choices are required. As community engagement continues to evolve, new pressures may emerge while existing ones may take different forms. The value of the framework lies in supporting ongoing reflection rather than providing final answers.

This Guide invites universities to move from reactive engagement to intentional design. By engaging with the questions, needs, and traps outlined in the Strategic Pressure Points, institutions can develop engagement strategies that are not only visible, but also credible, resilient, and meaningful over time. The challenge is not whether universities engage, but how consciously and coherently they choose to do so. In this sense, strategic community engagement is not a destination but an ongoing process of balancing ambitions, responsibilities, capacities, and public value in a changing societal environment.

There is no engagement without choice.

10

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10

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A1

Appendix 1 — template for describing Strategic Pressure Points

Use this template to define an additional Strategic Pressure Point that reflects a challenge specific to your institution.

HEADLINE	A short title that captures a key strategic tension, dilemma, or pressure point emerging within community engagement. → <i>Its purpose is to draw attention to a strategic choice or tension that may require reflection and decision-making.</i>
DESCRIPTION	Explains how the Pressure Point emerged through the ACE foresight and sensemaking process. It describes the underlying trends, stakeholder concerns, patterns, and systemic dynamics that contribute to the issue and clarifies why it is becoming strategically significant. → <i>It answers the question: What is changing and why is this becoming strategically important?</i> → <i>It is descriptive rather than evaluative and does not propose solutions.</i> → <i>Where relevant, a short forward-looking sentence may indicate how the pressure could evolve over time.</i>
RELEVANCE	Explains why the issue matters at a strategic level for universities and their community engagement role. It highlights the potential implications for institutional missions, societal engagement, partnerships, governance, or long-term sustainability. → <i>This section bridges observation and strategic decision-making.</i>
NEED	Describes the strategic need for reflection, governance, prioritisation, or institutional response. It may indicate what remains unresolved, who may need to respond, what strategic capabilities or processes may be required, and how some institutions are beginning to address the issue. → <i>This section highlights where lack of coordination or absence of strategic choices may become consequential at institutional level.</i>
GUIDING QUESTION(S)	One or two reflective, decision-oriented questions. → <i>These are intended to stimulate dialogue, sensemaking, and strategic discussion.</i>
COMMON TRAPS	Descriptions of typical responses or assumptions that may appear reasonable in the short term but can unintentionally reinforce pressure over time. → <i>These function as foresight-based early warnings, helping institutions recognise patterns that may limit long-term effectiveness, sustainability, or strategic coherence.</i>

A2

Notes

1. All the reports are available on the project website: <https://acecommunity.eu> and will be available on Erasmus+ Project Results Platform <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2024-1-PL01-KA220-HED-000253263>
2. ACE Strategic Foresight Design is available on the project website: <https://acecommunity.eu> and will be available on Erasmus+ Project Results Platform <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2024-1-PL01-KA220-HED-000253263>
3. The Quadruple Helix model describes innovation and societal development as a collaborative process involving four interconnected spheres: higher education institutions, industry, government, and civil society. By bringing together academic knowledge, public policy, economic actors, and community perspectives, the model supports more inclusive, participatory, and socially responsive approaches to addressing societal challenges (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009).
8. Micro-credentials are certified records of learning that recognise the achievement of specific knowledge, skills, and competences acquired through short and focused learning experiences. Typically, smaller in scope than traditional qualifications, they are designed to support flexible, lifelong learning, upskilling, and reskilling (Council of the European Union, 2022). They can be earned through higher education institutions, professional training providers, online courses, or workplace learning and are used to support upskilling and reskilling in response to changing labour market needs (OECD, 2021b).