According to the European Union’s agenda higher education’s (HE) role is not only to provide students with knowledge and skills to obtain gainful employment but also to respond to the challenges that communities, societies and the world are confronting (Farnell, 2020).

According to Maassen et al., (2019) HE institutions’ core objectives are:

- Educating HE students so that they may lead productive and socially engaged lives
- Serving as drivers of opportunity, equity and social mobility
- Creating new knowledge that is relevant for students, communities, and society
- Empowering students for the work world, hence advancing equality and social capital.

Higher education institutions, their students and faculty members and administrative staff play an integral role in the economic, cultural, and social life of the community, the region, the society in which they are embedded, and at the level of Europe and the world (Maassen, et al., 2019). Due to this role, they are compelled to develop a university ethos that stimulates students’ civic interest and participation in their social worlds (Farnell, 2020).

Community engagement in higher education entails forging partnerships, reciprocal relationships and joint activities between higher education institutions, civil society organizations, businesses, industry, public and cultural institutions (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021). Collaborative relationships are beneficial for both the higher education institutions and communities since they address the needs for research, innovation, and learning and economic, social, technological and environmental issues that impact people’s lives (Farnell, Veidemane, & Westerheijden, 2020). Relationships and partnerships with the community can be advantageous for higher education students. Students face a myriad of challenges including accessibility to higher education, academic performance difficulties, dropping out, financial problems, personal connection to the curriculum and relevance of their learning to employment options (Bethmaker, 2021; Guthrie, 2019; Nairz-Wirth, O'Shea, & Lessky 2021). Higher education institutions are mindful of impasses and challenges in the teaching-learning processes, such as the large classes that limit the instructor’s ability to provide personalized feedback and accommodate for the diverse backgrounds in knowledge and abilities (Lodge et al., 2018).

Higher education’s mission and students’ pedagogical needs have changed across the world. These developments highlight the need to embrace the teaching and learning challenges so that higher education institutions can best fulfil their purpose. HE students need to engage so that to feel motivated, involved, connected, encouraged, valued, and successful (Masika & Jones, 2016). In order to meet students’ needs and ameliorate challenges alternative models for teaching-learning have been
developed and applied to meet HE learners' unique needs. Such academic initiatives include programs, services, facilities, and learning communities that support the academic needs and goals of diverse students while also promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion on HE campuses.

Such programming fall under the rubric of **Civic Engagement** which entails working towards making a difference in higher education communities' civic life. This includes developing and implementing programming that bolsters knowledge, skills, values, and motivation that can lead to impacting both community and higher education students' lives positively (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009). Participatory education initiatives that involve students in community settings, thus promoting civic knowledge, interpersonal relationships and associations, and social action (Farnell, 2020). Such involvement is information-rich and helps students to become culturally and politically responsive as well as to develop and hone their reflective, critical, and strategic thinking.

Participating in civic engagement programming has been associated with positive outcomes for students, higher education institutions and society at large (Bennett et al., 2016; Ellerton et al., 2016). Community engagement encompasses collaboration between institutions of higher education and their wider communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership, reciprocity and co-creation (Farnell, Veidemane, & Westerheijden, 2020).

The purpose of community engagement is multifold and is comprised of different types of programming and praxis. It includes the exchange of knowledge and resources with community organizations and institutions aiming to enrich scholarship, research, innovation, and co-creation. Such collaborative efforts embellish the curriculum and the teaching and learning processes. In turn, this better prepares students academically and bolsters their engagement as citizens. Moreover, students’ democratic values, social responsibility, abilities to address critical societal issues and contribute to the public good are cultivated more fully (Aramburuzabala, McIlrath, & Opazo, 2019).

The three primary foci and objectives of civic engagement are to aggrandize students' civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic identities.

- **Civic knowledge** includes the ability to access, assess and use information effectively, to develop knowledge about the community and political and governmental institutions, and to understand laws and organizational processes.
- **Civic skills** involve communication and organizing abilities, critical thinking, and negation abilities that lead to collective decision-making.
- **Civic identity** entails perceiving one’s self as an active and contributing participant in one’s community. That is a citizen engages in praxis that requires involvement, participation and taking on responsibilities in his or her community (Aramburuzabala, et al., 2019).
Hence, engagement emphasizes connection, reflection on the consequences of one’s actions, empowerment by finding a common goal as a means to address common concerns and is an active learning strategy (Aramburuzabala et al., 2019). The approaches outlined below are examples of civic engagement initiatives.

Civic learning is a process through which young people develop the knowledge, skills, values, and commitments to interact effectively with fellow community members and so address shared problems (Barnhardt et al., 2019). Such programming includes initiatives such as ‘community learning’, where faculty members and students embrace and engage with community to student learning by combining academic work with community placements for all involved. The students’ community-based projects are locally relevant.

Service-learning is a reflective, relational pedagogy that combines community or public service with structured opportunities for learning. One particular form of this is the capstone courses, which require students to draw on the knowledge they have obtained throughout their coursework and combine it with relevant service work. The pedagogical aim is either to explore a new topic or for students to synthesize their understanding of their coursework in one course or throughout the curriculum. This type of experiential engagement empowers students to transition between theory and practice, make professional contacts and accumulate relevant experience (Gerholz, Liszt, & Klingsieck, 2017).

Global-learning focuses on developing HE students’ awareness of local, international, and worldwide challenges to humans’, animals’ and the environments’ welfare, security, and prosperity. It also involves learning about how challenges impact differently in diverse contexts (Oxley & Morris, 2013). Such awareness is built via collaboration, problem-solving and interrelatedness in common inquiry with different countries, cultures, and regions of the world. Global awareness cultivates an international understanding by aiding HE students from different contexts to comprehend how their perspectives relate to one another (Anderberg, Norden, & Hansson, 2009).

The aforementioned engagement perspectives transform the teaching-learning process and bring about changes in HE students’ academic engagement (Lodge et al., 2018), foster belonging (Masika & Jones, 2016), increase networking and interrelatedness (Aramburuzabala, et al., 2019), bolster social responsibility (Masika & Jones, 2016), stimulate civic participation beyond graduation (Whitehead, 2015), and engender diverse students flourishing (Asikainen, Kaipainen, & Katajavuori, 2019).
Learning by engaging with the wider community occurs naturally. HE students recognize the practical utility of knowledge they gain in the classroom and concomitantly in the community as well as the need to use it to reflect on, analyze and solve real-world problems. HE students find meaning in their studies and life and learn skills that they could use for the common good. By sharing ideas, communicating, working to resolve community challenges a sense of community and belonging prevail.

**Recommendations**

1. Create opportunities for partnerships in research and practice of students, faculty, and community.
2. Maintain a close and colleague relationship with the social service providers in your community to make sure that they are committed to involving students in engagement activities.
3. Help HE students develop an awareness of the communities of which they are a part by teaching about the pressing concerns in the community which can be a promising vehicle for making students into engaged, informed local, national, and global citizens.
4. Encourage and aid students to apply course materials such as lectures, readings, and discussions directly to support or enhance community needs.
5. Reflection on engagement and service learning activities is essential to activate HE students to think critically, develop a deeper and more personal understandings of what is happening in their communities and leads to more informed actions.

**For further information and support tap into the following resource:**

Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education

https://www.tefce.eu/ (toolbox for civic engagement)
References


