

U-Society Action Plan

Fostering Student Engagement
through AI-driven Qualitative
Quality Assurance Practices



Funded by
the European Union

Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality Assurance Practices

A project developed by:

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U-SOCIETY ACTION PLAN:

Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality Assurance Practices

1. Introduction

Social engagement allows higher education institutions (HEIs) to address critical societal challenges while enriching the learning experience of their students and strengthening the institutions (European Commission, 2022). Today, governments and societies expect HEIs to play a role in consolidating knowledge-based economies and cohesive societies by demonstrating their accountability, social responsibility, and relevance to their local contexts (Godonoga & Sporn, 2022). Hence, social engagement is a key component of the strategic planning of HEIs.

HEIs face the challenge of effectively implementing social engagement. With that purpose, HEIs have been moving the focus of their third mission, “from entrepreneurially focused knowledge transfer with industry to one encompassing more developmental and supportive roles to wider regional governance” (Fonseca & Nieth, 2021, p. 311). Its implementation is strategic due to the benefits it generates, as well as the role it plays in the development of policy agendas such as the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Farnell & Culum, 2021). This requires HEIs to understand the context and align with their regional needs and goals.

The exploitation of the benefits of social engagement for students, as the key stakeholders of higher education, is a major concern. The Qual-AI-ty Engagement Erasmus+ Project (Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality-Assurance Practices), developed from 2021 to 2023, developed strategies for embedding student engagement with society in higher education. For such a purpose, the project proposed the implementation of indicators in quality assurance to collect the evidence with an artificial intelligence (AI) powered tool. As a result, the project developed a series of open educational resources, case studies, and other tools.

This report aims at using the knowledge generated in the Qual-AI-ty Engagement Project to outline the guidelines for implementing student engagement with society via the quality assurance offices, the usage of AI and leveraging the use of qualitative data. This action plan presents the context of social engagement, the definition of student engagement with society, its benefits, barriers, quality assurance perspective, and the action plan to implement it in HEIs.

2. Student Engagement with Society

Student engagement with society, as defined by the Qual-AI-ty Engagement Project, is the active involvement of students in society-based learning experiences that promote the enhancement of their social capital, acquisition of skills through experiential learning, social responsibility, and civic engagement. This includes activities such as internships, leadership programmes, mentoring with external stakeholders, professors of practice, professional practices, service learning, student-led initiatives, and volunteering, among others.

Student engagement with society contributes to the resilience of societies (Mlcek & Rao, 2014). This orientation allows students to work with organisations and other stakeholders that contribute to the development of their regions while promoting social cohesion, community building and regional development.

By participating in community-based learning experiences, students can develop complex thinking, leadership mindsets, and socially relevant careers (Miller & Gunnels, 2020). It provides students with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world contexts, enhance their social and professional networks, learn how to position themselves and understand how to deal with complex social challenges (Steinberg et al., 2011; Zepke, 2015; Molosi-France & Dipholo, 2022), making their learning experience meaningful and engaging.

Student engagement with society also promotes transdisciplinarity learning. Society-based learning experiences require students to work in teams and collaborate with different disciplines and with stakeholders possessing diverse types of knowledge, promoting transdisciplinarity learning and collaboration. Transdisciplinarity and collaborative teaching and learning are essential for 21st-century higher education that seeks to build students' critical thinking, cultural competence, and global understanding (Neill et al., 2017).

Furthermore, HEIs enhance the quality of their teaching and learning mission by involving students in society-based learning experiences. Clear guidelines for student engagement with society, complemented by institutional support structures and accompanied by research-based definitions and strategies to support engagement more consistently, can inform a framework for teaching professionals to implement effective engagement pedagogies in the classroom (Pedler et al., 2020).

Therefore, student engagement with society is a valuable strategy for strengthening the teaching mission of HEIs. It directly enhances the quality of their teaching, learning, and third mission, helping the HEIs to consolidate as key players in regional development. It also, promotes active, experiential, and transdisciplinary learning, while consolidating socially responsible, civically engaged, and solutions-oriented profiles.

3. Benefits of Fostering Student Engagement with Society

Fostering student engagement with society in higher education is an increasingly important strategy for HEIs due to the multiple benefits it generates for students and the institution itself.

From the perspective of the HEIs, the key benefits of implementing student engagement with society are:

- **Enhanced quality of teaching and learning:** By involving students in social-based learning experiences, universities can promote active learning, experiential learning, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, and the achievement of learning outcomes related to enhancing work-related skills, the social capital of students, and soft skills development.
- **Enhanced regional network and local partnerships:** Collaborations with the government, industry/business and civil society allow HEIs to consolidate as strategic partners that provide specialised human resources that deal with a wide variety of challenges through internships, volunteering work, service learning, and community-based research, among other possible programmes.
- **Increased visibility and reputation of HEIs:** By evidencing the commitment to social engagement, HEIs can demonstrate their relevance and value in their contexts. This directly contributes to increasing their reputation for prospective students, industry partners, governmental initiatives, and civil society organisations that would see the HEIs as strategic partners (Hill, 2015).
- **Improved student recruitment and retention:** Engagement with society can help to improve student satisfaction and retention, as students are more likely to be engaged and motivated when they feel that their education has relevance and applicability to the real world, thus increasing the HEIs student attraction.

For students, the key benefits of fostering student engagement with society are:

- **Development of skills through experiential learning:** By collaborating with societal stakeholders, students can apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired in the classroom to real-world contexts, enhancing their learning experience while gaining valuable work experience and social capital.
- **Enhanced learning experience:** Student engagement with society provides students with meaningful and engaging learning experiences,

helping them to understand the relevance and applicability of their education while positioning themselves in their context.

- **Improved career prospects:** Engaging with society helps students build their resumes, develop their professional networks, and gain valuable work experience. Their career prospects and their employability after graduation can be thus improved.
- **Social responsibility and personal development:** Students can develop a sense of civic responsibility and become more actively engaged in their communities. This can help to promote social responsibility and civic engagement, which are important values for citizens and future leaders of the society.

Fostering student engagement with society is clearly beneficial for both students and institutions. For HEIs, it enhances the quality of teaching and learning, builds stronger networks, increases reputation, and improves student recruitment and retention. For students, it provides opportunities to develop skills, enhance the learning experience, improve career prospects, and promote social responsibility and personal development.

4. Institutional Barriers for Student Engagement with Society

Embedding student engagement with society in higher education is complex and requires significant institutional support. There are several institutional barriers that can prevent HEIs from fully integrating student engagement with society into their practices such as:

- **Lack of institutional culture and support mechanisms:** Some HEIs may have a culture that prioritises disciplinary knowledge over transdisciplinarity or in which social engagement is not a strategic priority. Educators may also face competing demands on their time and resources. This makes it challenging for educators and staff to prioritise student engagement with society and leads to a lack of institutional strategies.
- **Limited institutional capacity and resource constraints:** HEIs may not have the staff, expertise, infrastructure, and resources to support society-based learning initiatives and partnerships with organisations. Additionally, HEIs may lack the data collection and assessment tools needed to evaluate the impact of these initiatives. These resource constraints can make it challenging for institutions to provide students with the opportunities they need to engage with society.
- **Institutional policies and procedures:** Academic policies may not provide enough flexibility for academics to incorporate society-based

learning into their courses. Additionally, administrative policies may not support the development of partnerships with external organisations or may not provide the resources needed to sustain these partnerships over time. Institutional policies aligned with the strategic goals of the HEIs and procedures are essential for fostering student engagement development (Crabtree, 2023).

- **Lack of student interest:** This can be due to a lack of awareness or understanding of the benefits of these activities and the challenges faced in their local contexts. Some students might also feel overwhelmed by the complexity of society and might find it anxiety-provoking since learning in social settings does not always come gradually (Knight-McKenna et al., 2018). This is even more critical when students lack commitment to the community.

These obstacles can make it challenging for institutions to provide students with the opportunities they need to engage with society. Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach that involves academics, staff, students, and societal partners working together to create a culture of engagement that is supported by institutional policies and practices.

5. Quality Assurance and Student Engagement with Society

Internal quality assurance can play a critical role in fostering student engagement with society since it provides a framework for ensuring that HEIs meet their goals and objectives (OECD, 2019). Hence, developing the frameworks, indicators, and tools for collecting data in quality assurance is a strategic approach to implementing student engagement with society. Based on this, the Qual-AI-ty Engagement Project focused on developing the indicators, frameworks and tools for supporting the process of embedding student engagement with society in HEIs.

The first step towards developing an approach for embedding student engagement with society in higher education was the development of a Status Quo Report (Buitrago, 2022). This report collects the key performance indicators (Appendixes I and II) related to student engagement with society from diverse frameworks and tools for quality assurance such as Campus Compact Indicators for Engagement, the Self-Assessment Rubric for the Institutionalisation of Service-Learning in Higher Education, the EDGE tool of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), and the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, among others.

As a second step, those indicators were validated and ranked with representatives of the quality assurance offices of five European institutions

(Buitrago & Ejubovic, 2022). These co-creation workshops allowed the consortium to develop the project to build the model for assessing student engagement with society (Qual-AI-ty Assessment Model) (Riga Technical University, 2022). This model presents four dimensions (Quality of teaching and training, engaging and inclusive environment, leadership and governance, and compliance with institutional goals) that organise the indicators of the previous frameworks and enhance them with the key information required to evaluate those indicators.

In a third step, the project developed an interview assistant chatbot based on AI, able to interview large samples of population and provide reports on the qualitative data collected (MCAST, 2023). This cycle of identifying the indicators, developing the indicators, and collecting data provide the basis for evidence-based institutional policymaking. Hence, since quality assurance contributes to assessing institutional performance, promoting continuous improvement, ensuring accountability and providing the data for decision-making, it is a strategic unit to start working with for the enhancement of student engagement with society.

Nevertheless, the intervention in quality assurance must be aligned with the strategic planning of the HEIs. The inclusion of strategic goals related to social engagement, as well as the establishment of indicators in the diverse units, and the inclusion of incentives and support mechanisms are factors for a successful approach to student engagement with society in which quality assurance will play a role of monitoring and data provider.

6. U-Society Action Plan for Fostering Student Engagement

The following action plan aims at proposing a guide for implementing student engagement with society in HEIs at the institutional level. This plan is the result of the experience acquired through the development of the Qual-AI-ty Engagement Project. This is a simple tool that maps the path developed for the project and the lessons learnt during its application.

The action plan uses the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) framework (initiation, planning, execution, monitoring, and closing) to define stages. Nevertheless, this plan could be executed as an independent project or as part of a comprehensive institutional strategy. The following table presents the stages previously stated:

Stage	Specific Objectives	Action steps	Resources	Outputs
Stage 1: Initiating	SO1: To map the existing institutional capacities to foster student engagement with society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying key institutional drivers, resources and support mechanisms. Conducting an institutional self-assessment. Providing evidence on the existing practices. 	<p>TEFCE Toolbox (Farnell et al., 2020):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Framework with the dimensions of engagement. Rubric on the levels of engagement. Institutional community engagement heatmap. “Slipdot” analysis of engagement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scan on institutional engagement culture. Institutional heatmap report on engagement. Institutional resources map. External environmental scanning. Customized SWOT analysis.
Stage 2: Planning	SO2: To develop an institutional plan to foster student engagement with society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparing frameworks for engagement with society. Defining institutional indicators. Building an institutional plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qual-AI-ty Assessment Model (RTU, 2022). Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement and Leadership for Public Purpose (Carnegie Classifications, 2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report on suitable institutional indicators. Participative institutional dialogues on institutional engagement. Institutional plan for student engagement with society.
Stage 3: Executing	SO3: To build the capacities for implementing the plan to foster student engagement with society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defining the core team and key stakeholders. Setting an institutional training strategy. Defining the resources, tools, supports and incentives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources developed by the Quality Engagement Project (https://qual-ai-ty.eu). Systematization and exchange of good practices. Establishment of Partnerships management systems. Monitoring mechanisms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Databases of collaborations. Training programmes and strategies. Data flow architecture. Data reporting systems. Scorecards for key performance indicators.



Stage 4:
Monitoring

SO4: To monitor and collect data on the implementation of student engagement with society.

- Verifying the systems to collect data.
- Processing and analysing the raw data.
- Assessing and evaluating impacts on the ecosystem.
- Recognising, incentivising, and promoting achievements.
- QUALIA: interview assistance AI-powered tool (<https://qual-ai-ty.eu>).
- Community Impact dimensions and Indicators (Irungu & Liu, 2021).
- Tools for Assessment of Higher Education Community Engagement (Hurd, 2022).
- Evaluating student engagement activity (Thomas, 2017).
- Assessment of the data collection mechanisms.
- Reports with data with achievements and impacts of student engagement with society.
- Communication and dissemination of achievements.

Stage 5:
Closing

SO5: To evaluate results and continue the improvement cycle to foster student engagement with society.

- Contrasting evaluation results data with strategic goals.
- Develop strategic forecasting exercises to envision future developments.
- Setting institutional goals.
- TEFCE Toolbox (Farnell et al., 2020).
- Strategic foresight exercises (Sandal, 2020).
- Strategic planning guide (Hinton, 2012).
- Report on ex-ante and ex-post changes at the institutional level.
- Institutional foresight reports.
- Decision-making agreements.
- Institutional strategic plans.

7. Conclusions

Embedding student engagement with society in higher education is a critical component of preparing students to be active and engaged citizens. Creating institutional action plans for embedding student engagement with society is a complex process that requires time and joint effort. In this report, we provided guidance based on the results of the Erasmus+ funded project Qual-AI-ty Engagement for higher education leaders and managers interested in creating an institutional action plan for embedding student engagement with society at the institutional level.

The key recommendations of the presented discussion and action plan for embedding student engagement with society in HEIs are:

- Developing a shared vision and commitment to student engagement with society aligned with the HEIs strategic goals.
- Identifying and addressing institutional barriers. This includes assessing institutional policies, procedures, and resource constraints that may be limiting the ability of faculty, staff, and students to engage with society.
- Providing development opportunities, support and resources for leaders, academics and staff to integrate social engagement into their activities.
- Developing partnerships with regional organisations, sustaining these partnerships in time, and ensuring and ensuring they are mutually beneficial.
- Integrating student engagement with society into institutional policies and procedures. This includes developing policies, providing resources, and ensuring that it is integrated into assessment and evaluation processes.
- Fostering an institutional culture of social engagement throughout the institution. This includes creating opportunities for academics, staff, and students to share experiences and learning, recognising and rewarding excellence, and creating a sense of social and belonging.

The development of an institutional action plan for embedding student engagement with society in a HEI requires a comprehensive approach that involves engaging academics, staff, students, and external partners in a shared vision. The recommendations and action plan presented in this report provide higher education leaders and managers with a practical perspective on how to approach this task, which tools to use and how to articulate the process. By embedding student engagement with society at the institutional level, HEIs will create a transformative educational experience that prepares students to make a positive impact on their communities and the world.

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Consortium Partners

Riga Technical University

University of Twente

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