

# STUDENTS

AS DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGERS

GUIDE TO DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

(101)



April 2021



# INTRODUCTION TO THIS GUIDE

Active students form the backbone of democratic universities, active citizenship and contribute to an inclusive society (Adler & Goggin 2005). Student engagement activities in higher education institutions (HEIs), either as an optional activity (e.g. volunteering in a student union) or as part of study programmes (e.g. engaging in service-learning), foster students' civic responsibility and equip them with the necessary competences for facing societal challenges (Boland 2014; Watkins et al. 2015).

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are strong arguments in favour of awarding civic engagement a larger role, especially in a digital arena. Digital tools not only widen opportunities for civic engagement and effect solving real-world needs. They are also transformative and empower students in their civic engagement through digital services. However, despite enormous changes in the digital arena, there is little research on how to link students' civic engagement and digital technologies in higher education teaching and learning.

The *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* draws on extensive research on students' digital civic engagement from six partner organisations in Europe and the U.K. The guide focuses on the conceptualisation of digital civic engagement in theoretical and empirical research and explores how digital civic engagement can be integrated on different levels of higher education (policy, teaching, and learning). The **main question** of this Guide is: What is digital civic engagement (DCE) and how can it be integrated on different levels of higher education (policy, teaching, and learning)?



The objective of the *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* is to build a compelling case for introducing DCE into HEIs work with students. It is a research-based resource for HEIs' educators and managers who plan to implement DCE education into their organisation. The guide comprises a profound knowledge base on DCE and the learning opportunities it offers. Moreover, it gives practical guidance for HEI educators on how to integrate DCE into their teaching.

► **The Guide to Digital Civic Engagement (DCE) consists of the following topics:**

- (1) In the first chapter, the guide lays the foundation by providing a theoretical understanding on what DCE is.
- (2) The second chapter presents an overview of the current state on research on student DCE. Also, DCE is related to DigComp 2.1, which is the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizen for improving citizens' digital competences.
- (3) In the third chapter, a policy analysis shows how DCE is represented in national and institutional policy documents in the project partner countries.
- (4) The fourth chapter focuses on case studies about student DCE activities and provides empirical findings about participants' perspectives by drawing on interview data.
- (5) The last chapter encompasses innovative pedagogic strategies that facilitate the teaching of DCE at HEIs.



Tab. 1. Conceptual overview

## ► Availability of this Guide

This *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* targets at teachers, trainers, and researchers in higher education (HE), who are engaged in activities of civic engagement and interested in digital innovation in this field. The *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* is available as an online source and open source in English, German, Portuguese, and Estonian.

Find the *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* online:

<https://www.researchgate.net/project/Students-as-Digital-Civic-Engagers>

## ► The SDCE project as a framework for developing this guide

The project “Students as Digital Civic Engagers” (SDCE), co-funded by the ERASMUS+ Programme of the European Union, examines how digital tools can enhance students’ civic engagement. It uses the term *digital civic engagement* to highlight the relationship between civic engagement and digital technology.

The project takes place with six partner organisations in Europe and the U.K. (Canice Consulting Limited in the U.K., European Universities Continuing Education Network in Belgium, Momentum Marketing Services Limited in Ireland, University of Minho in Portugal, University of Tartu in Estonia, and University of Vienna in Austria).

### ► Further outputs of the project:

**I02:** DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT (2021). The Toolkit will provide practical guidance and tools for HEI educators wishing to incorporate digital civic engagement activities into their curricula or teaching strategies, with a particular focus on increasing their confidence in using digital tools.

**I03:** DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SYLLABUS & OERs (2022). Including a syllabus, learning objectives, lesson plans, assessment guides, and access to a variety of original teaching content & pedagogies, these resources will provide academic staff with a complete guide for introducing civic theory, engaging students in real-life examples that are relevant to their topic of study.

**I04:** DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MOOC (2022). Based on the OERs, this open online learning course provides students & staff with an additional space in which to develop their digital civic engagement skills in a user-friendly format.

The project will contribute to the development of digital civic engagement competences as new types of competences so that students are better equipped to prosper in uncertain times and in the digital era in HE.

# 1 DEFINITION OF DIGITAL CIVIC

## ENGAGEMENT



Students' digital civic engagement as a concept for teaching and learning is not yet well known among HE educators and students. Since the term is very young and not well established in the literature, changes can be assumed since the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an accelerated shift in the digitalisation of HE and the theoretical understanding of student engagement activities in a digital arena.

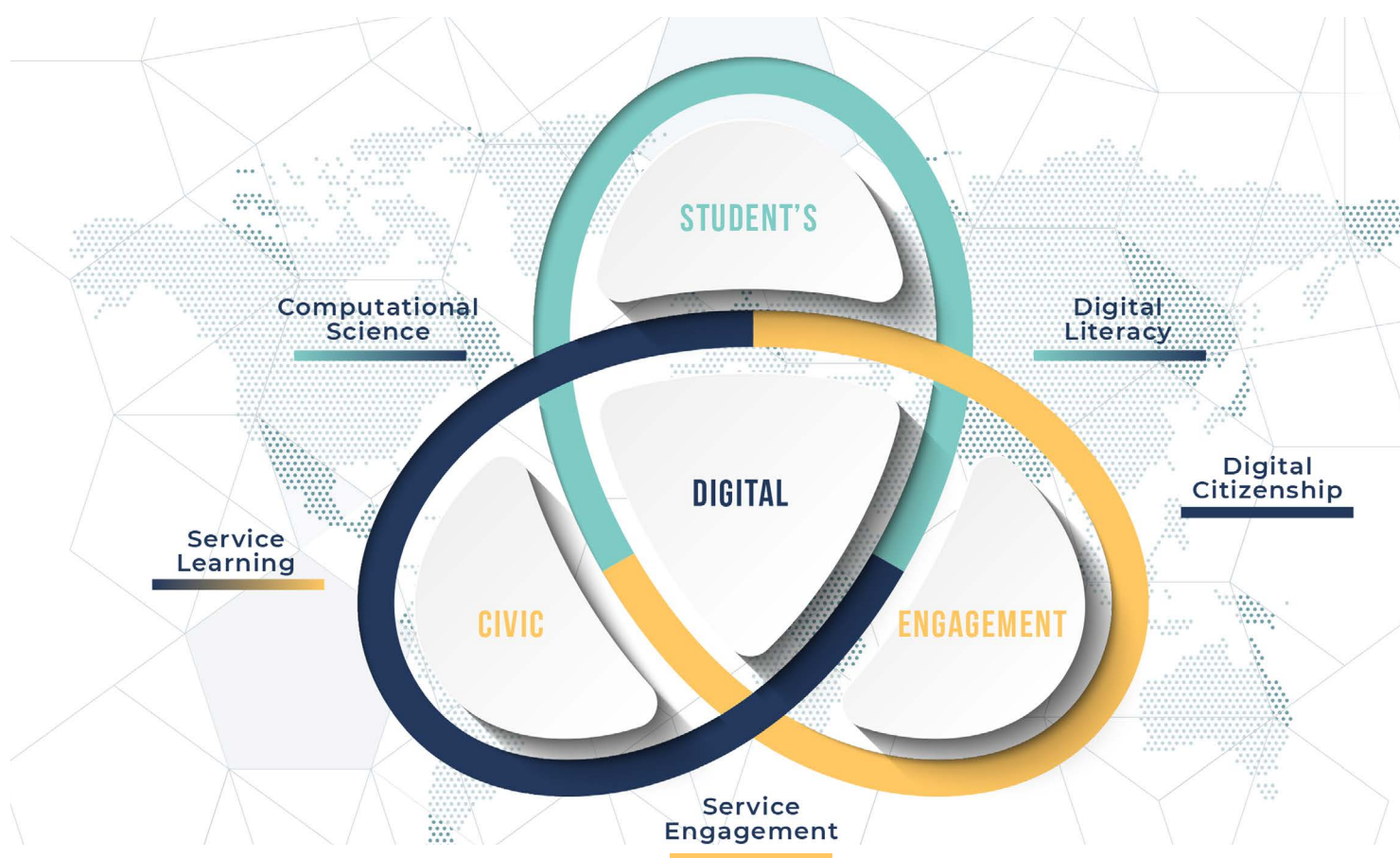
Students' digital civic engagement encompasses a broad field that crosses different terms.

**Civic engagement** can be seen as the umbrella term and forms a basic understanding of what kind of an activity by an individual or a group can be counted as civic action – whether it takes place online or offline. It alludes to concepts such as active citizenship, civil society or civic skills.

**Digital civic engagement** refers to civic engagement activities in relation to digital tools. It relates to digital literacy, digital citizenship or computational participation.

**Students' civic engagement** refers to students' civic activities that are integrated into HEIs. These activities can be optional, e.g. volunteering in a student union, engaging as a mentor, or can be part of study programmes, e.g. as a service-learning coursework.

**Student's digital civic engagement** comprises both: It refers to civic engagement activities carrying out by students as they use digital tools to convey and perform their civic action.



Tab. 2. Overview of key terms

## ▶ 1.1 Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is a form of engagement that focuses on participation in either political activities, community activities or both (e.g. voting, attending community meetings, contacting public officials, participating in protests, signing petitions, or writing articles about one's community). Civic engagement is to be committed for the best interest of the community. It focuses on better quality of life in a 'just' and democratic way. As Adler and Goggin (2005, p. 241) state: "Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future."

Taking part in political practices and organizational activities, active citizens promote democracy by expanding citizen participation in problem solving and broadening access to social and political capital (Mandarano et al., 2010). Participation in these activities can be on voluntarily or paid basis (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

Civic engagement in HE is associated with broader concepts such as education as a public good, corporate social responsibility and universities as sites for democratic citizenship. It encompasses a diversity of goals, strategies and activities and includes a particular approach to teaching and learning applying an explicit civic focus which is community-based or service-learning (Boland, 2014).

The focus of the SDCE project is civic engagement by students, emphasising its crucial role in education. By exposing students to civic issues, HEIs play a leading role in enhance future engagement of civic actors (Evans et al., 2021). Moreover, a sense of socio-political empowerment is supporting young people's self-esteem and well-being (Metzger et al., 2019; Middaugh et al., 2017).

## ▶ 1.2 Digital Civic Engagement

Digital Civic Engagement is one of the most common ways of engagement among the youth. It includes more conventional hallmarks of civic engagement, such as reading and circulating news, writing emails to an elected representative or community organisation, and more innovative actions, such as belonging to a community group online (Cho et al., 2020). It encompasses digitally mediated forms of interaction and involves social network tools such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, to WhatsApp, blogs, civic tech platforms and other. The shift from offline civic participation towards digitalization was not a matter of evicting traditional forms of participation, but was rather about being open to innovation that allows participation to be easily accessible and inclusive and to harness the potential of digital technologies to mobilise civic action at local, national, and international levels (Dubow et al., 2017). Digital civic engagement is also related to supporting social movements and activism demanding civil rights such as *Arab Spring*, *Occupy Wallstreet*, or *Black Lives Matter* (Bennett, 2008). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift from offline to online interaction, digital civic engagement has increased through active participation in volunteer activities supported by digital means (e.g. helping the elderly with food by using a platform).

The focus of the SDCE project is on digital civic engagement within HEIs, researching the approaches and tools that best empower students towards becoming active digital civic engagers in their local communities and in a globally connected world.

## 2 CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

AND RELATION TO DIGITAL

COMPETENCES OF STUDENT

DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT





## 2.1 Current State of Research on Student Digital Civic Engagement

In the aim to summarise the current state of research on student DCE, the overall take away is that research and discussion around the general topic of *Civic Engagement* is reasonably well advanced and there is a good understanding of the topic. Relating to *Digital Civic Engagement* and *Students' Digital Civic Engagement*, these areas are less advanced given the slow rise and adoption of HEIs to adapt digital practices. That was of course until the COVID-19 situation caused an accelerated shift in the digitisation of education.

### Research on civic engagement is well advanced.

Based on a comprehensive literature review, Farnell (2020) argues that universities play a crucial role in responding to societal needs, and are encouraged to further enhance their societal impact at local, national and international levels through community engagement. The term engagement has become prominent over the past decade and is now “a buzzword in many university circles” (Bruning et al., 2006, p. 128). In particular, in the UK engagement is an ongoing discourse and the images and imperatives around the so-called *Engaged University* are omnipresent (McLennan, 2008). There are two general strands of discussion, one directing service/engagement in the form of the entrepreneurial innovative university, the other focusing on service/engagement with the community and society. Both strands are framed by the enterprising third mission and the social third mission (Montesinos et al., 2008, p. 262). They are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they point to two dimensions of how institutions make themselves relevant and purposeful.

Civic engagement can be conceptualised as the social third mission, comprising students' activities that complement HE teaching and learning. Placing civic engagement as part of the third mission brings it up front in institutional documentation and thus gives it a more prominent profile. However, it is not enough for university leaders simply to declare that engagement matters (Benneworth et al., 2013). Instead, universities need to integrate students' civic engagement into its full portfolio of activities. When students complete a community engagement project to graduate, staff members can accept that engagement matters by applying specific recognition processes (Resch et al., 2021), rather than valuing engagement without recognition.

Civic engagement has shown to be a reliable pedagogical and epistemological strategy for developing students' knowledge and skills while fostering individual and organizational collaborations to address pressing social, environmental, educational, and economic issues (Cress, 2012). Despite an abundance of quantitative and qualitative data, critics have questioned the efficiency and effectiveness of civic engagement as a legitimate educational endeavour. While HEIs' mission statements emphasis a commitment to mutual community partnerships (Sandy & Holland, 2006), deans and department chairs often remain sceptical of community service activities, claiming that they dilute curricular content and distract academics from scholarly productivity. Academics admit that integrating civic engagement into the curriculum takes more time and effort than traditional forms of teaching (Boland, 2014; Cress & Donahue, 2011).

Research shows that purposefully designed civic engagement activities yield greater learning opportunities and increase graduation rates. Students who participate in civic engagement activities learn more academic content (Gallini & Moely, 2003). Through civic engagement activities in HE teaching and learning, students shift from “being knowledge receivers to idea creators” (Cress, 2012, p. 2). They learn higher-order skills, which include critical thinking, writing, communication, mathematics, and technology, at more advanced levels (Cress, 2004). Students who are actively engaged with local communities tend to remain on strong academic paths and fulfil educational pursuits. They more frequently pursue higher levels of postsecondary education, and often become future community volunteers (Kraft & Wheeler, 2003). Moreover, civic engagement increases students' emotional intelligence and motivates them toward conscientious community action (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008). Thus, civic engagement is a powerful

fulcrum for leveraging multiple degrees of achievement across groups of people and different places. In sum, the research reveals a simple conclusion: “academic learning + civic engagement = student and community success” (Cress, 2012, p. 4).

Some students, faculty, and community members confuse a civic engagement-assignment with volunteering. Hellwege (2019) argues that teaching civic engagement in classrooms must go beyond volunteering for two reasons: First, volunteering does not encompass all goals of civic engagement, and secondly, volunteering does not allow students to relate the activity to the course material and course goals. Service-learning addresses this second point in allowing HE educators to teach important course concepts and course goals through the activity, but it also allows students to utilize their academic training and course material to enact positive change (McCartney et al., 2013).

## ► Research on digital civic engagement is less advanced.

This is quite astonishing as young people around the world have redefined civil engagement to be much more inclusive of digitally mediated forms of interaction (Cho et al., 2020). The increasing use of digital technologies has transformed the ways in which young people interact, relate to others, and access and consume information. Not only do digital technologies provide a way to connect with others across the globe. Innovation in this space also offers newly enhanced and expanded opportunities for citizens to directly participate in civil society action and in democratic processes more broadly. It is media tools such as blogs, petition platforms, crowdfunding sites, e-voting and other online forums that offer new means for individuals to contribute to shaping political debate and drive ‘real world’ change (Dubow et al., 2017). Digital civic engagement by youth can include digital instances of more conventional hallmarks of civic engagement, such as reading and circulating news, writing emails to an elected representative or community organization, or belonging to a campus or community group online. Exposure to civic issues and civic education helps to create future engaged civic actors, while socio political empowerment is associated with young people’s self-esteem and well-being (Cho et al., 2020).

Dubow et al. (2017) highlight the benefits of digital technologies helping citizen to enact their engagement activities. These are:

- **Sharing and interpreting data:** Digital technologies can facilitate the generation and communication of data, helping to build knowledge and inform decision making and action both by citizens, community partners and policymakers. Digital technologies have a crucial role to play in helping to synthesise large volumes or multiple sources of data, in order to provide stakeholders with relevant and useful information.
- **Strengthening citizen voices:** Digital technologies have brought new ways for individuals to get their voices heard in the public sphere. Online communications are both horizontal and vertical; while social media and other platforms allow Internet users to share their views and connect with others across the globe, digital platforms also allow citizens to communicate directly with politicians and state institutions.
- **Facilitating social cohesion and support:** Citizen-to-citizen online communications and connections, enabled by digital technology, can help to mobilise existing communities, as well as build new ones – unconstrained by size or geographic location. Networked communities can be more supportive, resilient and civically active than communities in the ‘offline’ world. Digital technologies can empower individuals to more easily and immediately respond to issues and to the needs of others, whether they choose to do this online or offline.
- **Supporting direct citizen participation in democratic processes:** Digital tools can empower citizens to take a more active role in shaping political processes, policymaking and public services. Specific digital tools can expand and enhance mechanisms for citizen involvement in democratic processes. Such tools include, for example, platforms that involve citizens that seek citizen views and inputs into policy formulation.

Dubow et al. (2017) conclude that the potential of digital technologies for “citizen-powered democracy” (p. 9) can be summarised into two different types of opportunity:

- **Lowering barriers:** Digital technologies have the potential to lower the barriers for civic engagement and action. For example, by making the exchange and provision of information easier and more effective, by strengthening the voice of citizens in the public sphere, and by facilitating community support and cohesion.
- **Transformative disruption:** Digital technologies have the potential to transform democratic processes through the introduction of new mechanisms and practices, for example, by enabling more direct participation in democratic decision making and by mobilising greater participation from people whose political engagement has traditionally been lower.

However, despite the ability of digital technologies to mobilise greater civic engagement, Dubow et al. (2017, p. 10) identified further risks of applying digital tools for civic engagement:

- **Less inclusivity in democratic life:** Discrepancies in the use of digital technologies by different demographic groups could result in some groups being over- or underrepresented in public forums.
- **Radicalisation of public discourse and political opinion:** The algorithmic organisation of online content (sometimes termed the ‘filter bubble’ or ‘echo-chamber’ effects), together with the rapid spread of misinformation online, could contribute to isolating Internet users from alternative or divergent perspectives, reinforcing existing ideas or prejudices, inflaming and polarising public discourse, and undermining societal cohesion. These factors could also lead to misinformed decision making and, in some cases, acts of violent extremism.
- **Inappropriate use of digital technologies:** A lack of transparency and public understanding of the way in which digital technologies are developed and used, or could be used, has led to concerns relating to the potential misuse and abuse of digital technologies by different stakeholders (for example, with the exploitation of personal data, the use of social networks to influence election campaigns and the use of collaborative information sharing sites for propaganda).
- **Low levels of trust in digitalised political processes:** Security concerns, as well as cynicism among citizens that their participation in online political processes will not influence policy outcomes, may undermine the uptake of digital services and democratic tools, thus limiting their potential impacts.

Dubow et al. (2017) suggest how these challenges might be addressed:

- 01 Building digital skills
- 02 Building skills for citizenship
- 03 Developing effective narratives to counter the pull of violent and extremist ideologies
- 04 Online community norms
- 05 Technological and regulatory solutions

However, other studies reveal different perspectives on young people’s civic engagement in the digital age. The ways in which different groups use digital technologies varies significantly, with many more young people accessing social media sites and online news compared to those aged over 65 years old (Stewart et al., 2016). Moreover, research shows that it is also not clear that digital technologies are mobilising engagement among members of society who are otherwise politically disengaged. Any strengthening of political engagement that digital platforms facilitate may be limited to those who are already engaged, and therefore may not reach those groups in society where the impact would be greatest (Bennett, 2008).

In Europe, the gap between online activism and offline engagement has been described as a ‘European democracy paradox’: expanded opportunities to participate in the political process, including through digital platforms, have not always been accompanied by increased participation in formal democratic processes in recent years, especially among younger generations (Graf, 2014).

Blaj-Ward and Winter (2019) state that equipping students with digital technology skills and familiarising them with netiquette and online safety rules are important but not sufficient to enable them to participate fully and appropriately in the broad range of social and professional digital communities available to them. They point to the need that digital citizenship in HE should be explored through the perspective of students themselves and their lived experience of digital technologies in HE, rather than being solely the outcome of armchair theorising.

Moreover, they depict that students are sometimes not making the most of digital learning opportunities on geographically bound campuses not because of lack of knowledge and / or skills but because of the way digital technologies are integrated into the official or hidden university curriculum. As well, while online, students may become “cyber-magpies” (Blaj-Ward & Winter, 2019, p. 881), anonymous observers who consume information without making their presence felt through an output that has a bearing beyond a grade that determines whether a student has successfully engaged with the course. Where social media are involved, participation may be passive, solitary and sporadic, rather than active and sustained.

## 2.2 Student Digital Civic Engagement and Digital Competence Development

DCE activities support the development of digital competences, which are set up in DigComp 2.1. *DigComp* 2.1 is the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens as approved and used by the EU Commission. Students that partake in DCE activities will gain the opportunity to develop and upskill on a wide range of digital competences.

The following table selects the most relevant competences of DigComp 2.1 to which student DCE can contribute. Students enhance their digital competences by applying DCE activities. The left column includes the competence descriptions displayed in the DigComp 2.1. The right column shows how SDCE projects contribute to the development of the specific competence area. The table clearly demonstrates that SDCE contributes to a wide range of digital competences. Thus, SDCE projects are of high relevance not only for improving a student’s civic skills, but also for developing their digital competences at the same time.

Tab. 3. Connecting SDCE to European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens

Competence description	Relevance to student DCE
<p><b>Browsing, searching and filtering data, information and digital content</b>  <i>To articulate information needs, to search for data, information and content in digital environments, to access and navigate between them. To create and update personal search strategies.</i></p>	<p>Civic engagement activities often require participants (e.g. students, HEI staff and community organisations) to undertake research in the field which they are responding to. SDCE will enable students to develop their ability to effectively browse and search for data that is most appropriate for their needs.</p>
<p><b>Interacting through digital technologies</b>  <i>To interact through a variety of digital technologies and to understand appropriate digital communication means for a given context.</i></p>	<p>The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for digital communication across all sectors, carrying out SDCE projects will enable students to be prepared to utilise digital tools that are most appropriate for their communication needs with peers, partners and participants within civic engagement projects.</p>
<p><b>Sharing through digital technologies</b>  <i>To share data, information and digital content with others through appropriate digital technologies. To act as an intermediary, to know about referencing and attribution practices.</i></p>	<p>SDCE will enable students to collaborate effectively and efficiently with peers and staff by selecting the digital tools that support remote collaboration and will allow others to share work, knowledge and ideas on the activities and research being planned, thus ensuring progress of activities.</p>
<p><b>Engaging in citizenship through digital technologies</b>  <i>To participate in society through the use of public and private digital services. To seek opportunities for self-empowerment and for participatory citizenship through appropriate digital technologies</i></p>	<p>Students will be supported by skills and strategies that enable the representation and understanding of ideas using a range of modalities enabled by digital tools. SDCE therefore facilitates students to build upon their civic competence, by being able to utilise digital services and technology that will facilitate their ability to participate in society and voice opinions on important public matters that are of concern to them.</p>
<p><b>Developing content</b>  <i>To create and edit digital content in different formats, to express oneself through digital means.</i></p>	<p>Selecting and utilising appropriate digital tools that will enable students to creatively develop civic content that expresses their ideas, opinions or helps to facilitate the delivery of a civic project is an integral competence SDCE will develop.</p>

Competence description	Relevance to student DCE
<p><b>Integrating and re-elaborating digital content</b>  <i>To modify, refine, improve and integrate information and content into an existing body of knowledge to create new, original and relevant content and knowledge.</i></p>	<p>SDCE will develop this skill as students should be able to select existing content on civic issues (e.g., videos, images) and to edit and integrate this media to improve their own work.</p>
<p><b>Protecting the environment</b>  <i>To be aware of the environmental impact of digital technologies and their use.</i></p>	<p>As a matter of civic responsibility, it is important for students to discuss and share an awareness of the impact of using digital technology with others and to educate themselves on methods to sustainability use technology and minimise the effects on the environment, this goes to the heart of SDCE.</p>
<p><b>Identifying needs and technological responses</b>  <i>To assess needs and to identify, evaluate, select and use digital tools and possible technological responses and to solve them. To adjust and customise digital environments to personal needs (e.g. accessibility).</i></p>	<p>A large aspect of student's DCE activities is the ability of students to select digital tools that will help facilitate solving issues or problems within the community, it is therefore vital that students are able to firstly assess the needs (of the community/project), and then select digital tools or a technological response that would help solve those needs.</p>
<p><b>Creatively using digital technology</b>  <i>To use digital tools and technologies to create knowledge and to innovate processes and products. To engage individually and collectively in cognitive processing to understand and resolve conceptual problems and problem situations in digital environments.</i></p>	<p>Digital tools and technology offer students the opportunity to create processes, products or services that can effectively meet the needs of civic issues they are concerned with, SDCE will develop student's ability to apply and use the digital tools that will facilitate this.</p>

# 3 POLICIES ON STUDENT DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



In the SDCE project, we examined how student's DCE is represented in policy papers on international, EU and national level. The aim is to show whether and which policies include student DCE, how they relate to student DCE and where is the need to further develop student DCE in policy documents.







Policy papers are viewed as a political instrument that regulates and governs areas of social life in contemporary society (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). While policy papers on international and EU level broaden up the perspective on education and training systems in a global and European way, policy papers on national level focus either on national policies contributed by the government (i.e. strategic policies and laws) or on institutional policies provided by educational institutions, community organizations or non-profit organizations.

The policy analysis shows that student's DCE is not explicitly mentioned in policy papers. There are only a few that bring student's civic engagement and digitalisation together. Therefore, we looked for related concepts (e.g. student engagement, civic engagement, service-learning) and areas (e.g. digital technologies in teaching) to stress the potentials on how to link student's civic engagement and digitalisation on policy level. We could only identify four policy papers (two on European level, one on national strategic level, one on institutional level) that address the digitalisation of the teaching and learning environment in HEIs to support student's DCE.

The analysis encompasses policy papers at international and EU level as well as national and institutional policy papers. The analysis is not representative as not all policy papers at international and national level has been researched, rather it highlights the most key documents. The main selection criteria were the importance of the policy for strategic decisions and the size and reputation of the HEI in the respective partner country where a particular policy paper has been launched.

In total, 33 policy papers were found. Three of them did not meet the selection criteria and thus could not be identified as policy documents (they were either project descriptions about student's DCE activities or research papers.). The following number of policy papers were identified.

Tab. 4. Policy overview

Country	Total	International	European	National / Strategic	National / Law	Institutional	Not classifiable as policy
<b>International</b>	1	1					
	5		5				
	4			3			1
	4			1		2	1
	7			2		4	1
	5			1	2	2	
	7			3	1	3	
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3</b>



The policy analysis follows a descriptive approach focusing on how student's DCE is or is not captured in the documents and what related concepts (e.g. civic engagement, digitalisation) the policy documents refer to. The results of the analysis of each policy category are reported in the following order.

Tab. 5. Allocation of policy papers to different levels



## ▶ 3.1 International Policy on Student Digital Civic Engagement

*The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for all* is identified as one policy paper at international level. It covers civic engagement as part of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and Education to Sustainable Development (ESD). It does not explicitly mention students' civic engagement but refers to all learners who are the target group of GCE and ESD. The focus of the Declaration is on promoting of GCE and ESD on all levels of education (formal, non-formal, informal). Civic engagement is only one element of the Declaration at a very general level. It is mostly referred to the recommendation for the delivery of participatory programmes for learners and teachers to engage in their communities. Beyond that, digitalisation is not an issue of the Declaration.

## ▶ 3.2 European Policies on Student Digital Civic Engagement

European policies on education and training either cover one aspect of student's DCE (civic engagement or digitalisation) or link both on a more broad or narrow basis. Above all, it is important to consider which terms the policy papers identify as relevant to civic engagement and digitalisation (e.g. active citizenship, digital literacy) and whether they concentrate on the higher education sector.

On the one hand, the *Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education 2010* and the *AEGEE-Europe Policy Paper on Civic Education 2016* both refer only to the subject of civic engagement mainly in the context of civic education. While the *AEGEE-Europe Policy Paper* addresses student civic engagement directly in terms of volunteering or curriculum development, the *Charter* refers to civic education in terms of democratic citizenship and human rights for all learners. Both do not include digitalisation in their civic education efforts.

On the other hand, the *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027* only refers to digitalisation in education and training, without relating the recommended measures to civic engagement. It also does not mention students as an explicit target group. The objectives of the Plan are on how the education and training can be made fit for the digital age and which measures are necessary to improve the digital competences of learners and teachers to equip them for virtual networking in a globalised and digitalised world.

Only two of the European policy papers establish a connection between civic engagement and digitalisation. The *European Youth Forum on Citizenship Education 2013* puts mainly the focus on civic engagement in the sense of citizenship education and advocates for young citizens to actively engage in society through, e.g. political debates and volunteering. The use of the internet and computers is added as an important way to participate as a citizen today. In contrast, the *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* makes a direct link between civic engagement and digitalisation in terms of digital literacy and civic competence. Both are seen as intertwined: while digital competences support active civic engagement through the use of digital tools for new forms of collaboration, civic competence supports digital action through the use of communication tools for civic purposes.

### ▶ 3.3 National Strategic Policies on Student Digital Civic Engagement

National strategic policies refer to student DCE in various ways. In most of them, civic engagement is part of an overarching national strategy to build a democratic society, and the term 'civic engagement' is used in a very broad sense as part of civic education or active citizenship. In the *Active Citizens Fund 2018-2024 (PT)*, civic engagement is linked to active citizenship, democratic participation and human rights, and is embedded in the promotion of young people's engagement in civil society. The *National Digital Competences Initiative 2030 (PT)*, while placing its main focus on digital skills development among professionals in different sectors of society, emphasises the promotion of digital skills among citizens with the aim of facilitating their active citizenship. The *Civil Society Strategy 2018 (UK)* generally promotes the building of a civil society in relation to its various societal sectors. The *Youth Field Strategy 2021-2035 (EE)* focuses broadly on the development of young people, which also includes their civic engagement as active participants in the community.

Although the primary aim of some policies is to build a civic society, there are some that address, in part, the role of HEIs and the civic engagement of students. The *Government Response to the Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement 2018 (UK)* focuses mainly on citizenship and civic engagement of individuals, groups and organizations in the UK, but also mentions teaching and learning in HEIs in fostering student's civic values. The *Study on Volunteering in the European Union 2001 (AT)* refers to volunteering in Austria across all age groups, but points to students volunteering as one of the most active volunteers. The *Civil Society Programme 2021-2024 (EE)* situates civic engagement in the broader context of civic education, but still refers to the role of HEIs in the provision of civic education. The same holds for the *Education Strategy 2021-2035 (EE)* which addresses student participation in civil society, although the overarching subject is the development of the education system in Estonia.

Two national strategic policies were identified that have an explicit focus on student civic engagement. The *Initiative Transform Portugal 2021 (PT)* advocates for student civic engagement at institutional (e.g. curricula) and individual level (e.g. student volunteering). Similarly, the *National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 (IE)* considers the promotion of student civic engagement as one of the three core tasks of HEIs in Ireland, implemented at institutional (e.g. appropriate courses) and societal levels (e.g. contribution of community to HEIs).

Regarding the digital component of student DCE, the analysis reveals that most policies do not address digitalisation at all. These are the *Active Citizens Fund 2018-2024 (PT)*, the *National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 (IE)*, the *Study on Volunteering in the European Union 2001 (AT)* and the *Civil Society Programme 2021-2024 (EE)*.

However, two policies were identified that address digitalisation, albeit very broadly. The *Youth Field Strategy 2021-2035 (EE)* refers to digitalisation in a general way, without being specific about what it means to support young people in becoming digital citizens. The same is true for the *Civil Society Strategy 2018 (UK)*, in which digitalisation is used vaguely.

Moreover, two policies were identified in which digitalisation is used in a more tool-oriented way, referring to digital tools to manage service and communication. In the *Initiative Transform Portugal 2021 (PT)*, digitalisation is used as a tool to identify specific societal needs and the availability of students for volunteering in this area. In the *Government Response to the Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement 2018 (UK)*, digitalisation is related to communication between local authorities and their communities and is seen as an effective way to get informed about the communities' needs.

Two policies were found in which digitalisation is an explicit issue. In the *National Digital Competence Initiative 2030 (PT)*, the focus is on supporting the development of digital skills of professionals in different sectors of society. In the *Education Strategy (EE)*, digitalisation is related to teaching with digital technologies.

### ▶ 3.4 National Laws on Student Digital Civic Engagement

National laws on student DCE only mention student civic engagement in a very general way. The *Higher Education Act 2002 (AT)* refers to student civic engagement only in terms of student volunteering. The *Volunteering Act 2012 (AT)*, which explicitly addresses volunteering, does not identify students as a specific group of volunteers, nor does it refer to HEIs as “voluntary” or “civic organizations”. The *Standard of Higher Education 2019 (EE)* only refers to students as active citizens without specifically addressing their active engagement with society.

Moreover, digitalisation can be considered as not being addressed in national legislations, which applies both to the *Higher Education Act 2002 (AT)* and *Volunteering Act 2012 (AT)*. The *Standard of Higher Education 2019 (EE)* only refers to digitalisation as a matter of student skill development.

### ▶ 3.5 Institutional Policies on Student Digital Civic Engagement

For the analysis of institutional policies on student DCE, a total of eleven policies were identified. Three policies were identified in which the promotion of student civic engagement is one of their core themes. The *Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement by Irish Universities Association 2014 (IE)* anchors the promotion of civic engagement at different levels of HEIs, i.e. teaching and learning, research and innovation, student volunteering and evaluation, and places a strong focus on the role of HE teachers in fostering student civic engagement. The same applies for the *NUIG Community Knowledge Initiative 2020 (IE)*, which also includes the promotion of civic engagement at all levels of the university and has a strong focus on service-learning to support student engagement. Equally, the *Newcastle University Engagement Strategy 2012 (UK)* embeds civic engagement as an integral part of the university’s mission.

Three further institutional policies were found in which civic engagement plays a part. The *University of Edinburgh Community Engagement Strategy 2017 (UK)* sets out civic and community engagement as a part of different areas of the university’s overall engagement activities. Student civic engagement in particular takes place through various activities, mostly with activities in schools. The *Development Plan of the Danube University Krems 2022-2027 (AT)* includes student civic engagement as part of the university’s societal objectives and emphasises service-learning and community-based research courses as part of university’s teaching and curricula to enhance student engagement. The *Development Plan of the University of Vienna 2028 (AT)* refers to civic engagement as part of the university’s societal impact and links academic learning with student civic engagement as part of study programmes, in particular through service-learning.

Some policies were identified that approach civic engagement in a broad way. The *Report of the University Partnerships Programme (UUP) Foundation Civic University Commission 2020 (UK)* and the *Report on Civic Connections 2020 (UK)* frame civic engagement in the overall picture of civic issues and assess UK’s government initiatives to see if they are supporting them. They also highlight the role of UK’s HEIs in compensating for the lack of civic activities that the government misses to implement. Similarly, the Estonian policy documents, such as the policy on *Good Practice of Teaching 2016*, the *Tallinn University Development Plan 2020-2022*, and the *University of Tartu Strategic Plan 2021-2025*, address civic engagement very broadly in terms of universities teaching objectives, framing it, for example, as promoting active student participation, active student attitudes and engaged citizenship.

With regard to digitalisation as another component of student DCE, four policies could be found that do not mention the topic of digitalisation at all. These are the *Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement by Irish Universities Association 2014 (IE)*, the *NUIG Community Knowledge Initiative 2020 (IE)*, the *Report on Civic Connections 2020 (UK)*, and the policy on *Good Practice of Teaching 2016 (EE)*.

Most of the institutional policy documents, six in total, incorporate digitalisation as an issue for HEIs but do not relate it to student DCE. Four of them have a strong focus on improving digital services at different levels of the university. The *Report of the University Partnerships Programme (UUP) Foundation Civic University Commission 2020 (UK)* mainly refers to digitalisation in terms of digital services for communication purposes or for conducting research that explores topics such as digital connectivity or digital poverty. Similarly, the *Development Plan of the Danube University Krems 2022-2027 (AT)* refers to digital services by expanding online services for staff, teachers and students at the university, and improving academic teaching and learning through the enhancement of online and blended learning formats. In the *Development Plan of the University of Vienna 2028 (AT)* digitalisation is seen as key for improving services in the different areas of the university (research, teaching, knowledge transfer, and services for staff), and for establishing new forms of teaching and learning through online support. The *Newcastle University Engagement Strategy 2012 (UK)* also points to digitalisation in terms of enhancing services for knowledge transfer to different sectors in society (e.g. business) and communities. In contrast, the *Tallinn University Development Plan 2020-2022 (EE)* and the *University of Tartu Strategic Plan 2021-2025 (EE)* focus on digitalisation in promoting students' digital competences, especially for a purposeful and critical use of new forms of media. However, they do not relate this to student civic engagement.

Only one institutional policy has been identified that directly links student civic engagement to digitalisation. It is the *University of Edinburgh Community Engagement Strategy 2017 (UK)* that focuses on strategies that connect student engagement with the community (mostly schools) through virtual and digital means. The Strategy also promotes initiatives with an explicit digital topic, e.g. in which students volunteer to teach digital skills to elderly people.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Overall, the analysis shows that there is still much to be done to put more emphasis on student DCE at policy level. As the policy documents either focus on student civic engagement or on digitalisation, the link between the two is largely missing. While national laws do not make this link at all and digitalisation is rarely mentioned, only very few policies provide this connection in the other categories. On a *European level*, the *European Youth Forum on Citizenship Education 2013* and the *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* directly relate civic engagement and digitalisation as digital tools support civic engagement activities and foster civic competence. The *National Digital Competence Initiative 2030 (PT)* was identified as the only strategic policy paper on national level that promotes the development of digital skills in the terms of exercising active citizenship. On an institutional level, there is only the *University of Edinburgh Community Engagement Strategy 2017 (UK)* which emphasises the value of digital tools for student engagement within communities. These policies can be seen as guiding models to strengthen student DCE in policy documents, especially on national and institutional level.

# 4 CASE STUDIES ON STUDENT

# DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



As there are only few reports on activities related to student DCE, the following case studies provide insights into how student DCE is implemented in HE teaching and learning, research, management, and HE services. With this research, the project aims to explore how student engagement activities in HEIs have been carried out in a digital environment and aim to gain first-hand experiences of students and educators within this new educational setting. The main aim of the case study elaboration was to answer the question: *Which practices of digital student engagement activities can be found in each of the individual partner countries?*

## ▶ 4.1 Methodology and Empirical Base

A case study encompasses a practical project embedded in HEIs that not only consists of a single endeavour but pursues long-term goals of fostering students' social responsibility and civic engagement.

For the selection of case studies, three inclusion criteria were applied:

- 1) *Cases target student engagement activities* (in which students volunteer for an activity within a course or outside the curriculum).
- 2) *These activities can be integrated in the institutional structure of universities* (at least with an institutional anchor, e.g. a person, resources from the university) but can also be independent of HEIs such as self-organised student initiatives.
- 3) *Digital technologies were applied and used for civic purposes* (e.g. community service).

The project partners first collected information through an online research, in which they looked for best practice projects in connection with student DCE at universities. After the selection of the case studies following the three inclusion criteria, suitable participants were contacted for interviews (either students or people responsible for the activity, such as teachers, lecturers, or service providers). All partners carried out two case studies in their respective countries. In total n=21 semi-structures interviews were conducted. The interviews had an average duration of 37 minutes. They were transcribed verbatim, and summaries including quotes by the interview partners were made (see annex for interview guide and overview of interview partners). The summaries of each case study were used for the analysis by using the TEFCE framework.

## ▶ 4.2 Case Study Classification According to the TEFCE Framework

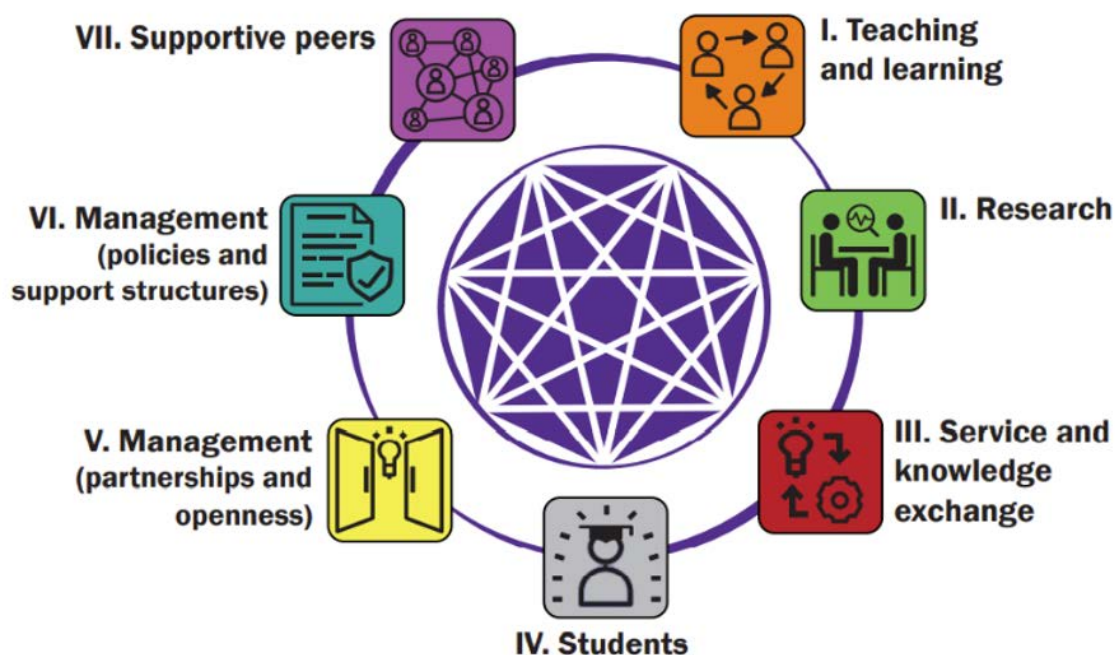
The toolbox of the project "Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education" (TEFCE) project<sup>1</sup> was developed to investigate innovative and feasible policy tools at the university and European level for supporting, monitoring and assessing the community engagement of HEIs (Farnell et al., 2020). For the SDCE project this toolbox was used as an analysis framework of the n=21 qualitative interviews.

The TEFCE toolbox consists of seven thematic dimensions of community engagement in HE, to which the interviews were assigned to highlight the dimensions of the case studies (Farnell et al., 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tefce.eu/>

Tab. 6. TEFCE dimensions according to Farnell et al., 2020



### 4.3 Brief Description of the TEFCE Dimensions

The following table shows the main dimensions of the TEFCE framework.

Tab. 7. TEFCE dimensions

Dimensions	Brief description & Subdimensions
<p><b>I. Teaching and learning</b></p>	<p>Extent to which study programmes reflect societal needs, include community-based learning and involve external communities in teaching and learning.</p> <p><i>I.1. The university has study programmes or courses to respond to societal needs that are specific to the university's context and its external communities.</i></p> <p><i>I.2. The university has study programmes or courses that include a community-based learning component for students.</i></p> <p><i>I.3. The university facilitates the participation of community representatives in the teaching and learning process (in a curricular or extra-curricular context).</i></p> <p><i>I.4. The university has study programmes or courses that are created, reviewed or evaluated in consultation/cooperation with the university's external communities.</i></p>



Dimensions	Brief description & Subdimensions
<p align="center"><b>II. Research</b></p>	<p>Extent to which research is carried out about and with external communities.</p> <p><i>II.1. The university carries out research focusing on the societal needs of the university's external communities.</i></p> <p><i>II.2. The university carries out collaborative/participatory research in cooperation with the university's external communities.</i></p>
<p align="center"><b>III. Service and knowledge exchange</b></p>	<p>Extent to which academic staff is involved in joint initiatives supporting external communities' development and empowerment.</p> <p><i>III.1. University staff contribute to debates and initiatives that address societal needs of the university's external communities.</i></p> <p><i>III.2. University staff provide their knowledge to support and/or build the capacity of the university's external communities.</i></p> <p><i>III.3. University staff community-engagement activities have demonstrable benefits for the university's external communities.</i></p>
<p align="center"><b>IV. Students</b></p>	<p>Extent to which students lead their own projects and initiatives with external communities (outside the framework of their study programmes).</p> <p><i>IV.1. Students deliver community-engagement activities independently through student organisations or initiatives.</i></p> <p><i>V.2. The university facilitates and supports partnerships between students and external communities.</i></p>
<p align="center"><b>V. Management (partnerships and openness)</b></p>	<p>Extent to which the university establishes mutually beneficially partnerships with external communities and provides them with access to facilities and resources.</p> <p><i>V.1. The university has a track record of mutually beneficial partnerships with its external communities.</i></p> <p><i>V.2. The university makes learning and research resources accessible to its external communities.</i></p> <p><i>V.3. The university has facilities and services that are jointly managed and/or accessible to its external communities.</i></p>

Dimensions	Brief description & Subdimensions
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>VI. Management (policies and support structures)</b></p>	<p>Extent to which the university management reflects its commitment to community engagement in policies and institutional support structures.</p> <p><i>VI.1. The university provides support and/or incentives for community engagement achievements by its staff, students and external communities.</i></p> <p><i>VI.2. The university has a support structure (e.g. committee, office or staff) for embedding and coordinating community-engagement activities at the university level.</i></p> <p><i>VI.3. The university has staff-development policies (e.g. recruitment, tenure, promotion) that include community engagement as a criterion.</i></p> <p><i>VI.4. The university has a mission, strategy, leadership and (funding) instruments that specifically promote community engagement.</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>VII. Supportive peers</b></p>	<p>Extent to which the academic and administrative/professional staff actively support community engagement</p> <p><i>VII.1. The university has prominent academic staff members that have a strong track-record of community engagement and that advocate for its further advancement.</i></p> <p><i>VII.2. The university's academic staff are acceptive of the idea of university community engagement and of the value and rigour of community-engaged teaching and research.</i></p>

**Note:** The TEFCE project uses the term ‘university’ to refer to all forms of tertiary education institutions, including research intensive universities and universities of applied science.

## ▶ 4.4 Case Studies of Student Digital Civic Engagement

The categorization of the 12 case studies for the *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* led to the following classification with some case studies being double assigned: 4 case studies were classified as *Teaching and Learning*, 1 as *Research*, another 4 case studies as *Service and Knowledge Exchange*, and 5 case studies were classified in the category *Students*. Only one case study was categorized as *Management*. Some case studies were coded as hybrid case studies and were allocated to two categories whose numbers allocated are highlighted in bold below (e.g. Case study 5 is assigned to *Research* and *Service and Knowledge Exchange*). The last two categories of the TEFCE framework do not apply.

Tab. 8. TEFCE dimensions applied to case studies on students' digital civic engagement

Dimensions	No.	Case study classification
<b>I. Teaching and learning</b>	1	University of Klagenfurt Student Volunteer Projects for Caritas (Austria)
	2	Civic and Intercultural Adult Education Course at University of Belgrade (Serbia)
	3	Virtual Student Service-Learning Programme at UNED (Spain)
	4	The Starter Program at the University of Tartu (Estonia)
<b>II. Research</b>	5	Queens University Belfast's Dementia Awareness Game (Northern Ireland, UK)
<b>III. Service and knowledge exchange</b>	4	The Starter Program at the University of Tartu (Estonia)
	5	Queens University Belfast's Dementia Awareness Game (Northern Ireland, UK)
	6	AIT – FLAC Society (Ireland)
	7	GMIT – Student Digital Civic Engagement Project (Ireland)
<b>IV. Students</b>	6	AIT – FLAC Society (Ireland)
	8	VOLUNTARIUM: UMSumário by the UMinho's Students' Union (Portugal)
	9	Digital Ambassadors at the University of Edinburgh (Scotland)
	10	Intercultural Mentoring for Schools Project (Austria)
	11	Tartu Welcome Centre (Estonia)
<b>V. Management (partnerships and openness)</b>	12	P5 Medicine Center (Portugal)

According to this classification using the dimensions of community engagement in HE from the TEFCE toolbox, the case studies are described in detail below.

# TEFCE DIMENSION OF ENGAGEMENT:

## TEACHING AND LEARNING



### ► 1 University of Klagenfurt Student Volunteer Projects for Caritas

#### ► TEACHING AND LEARNING I.2.

*The university has study programmes or courses that include a community-based learning component for students.*

As part of the *Project Management Today* course at the University of Klagenfurt in Austria, student groups were given a task to find a social problem that they would like to deal with from a project management perspective. The aim of the project was that students learn how project management works in practice and what challenges they are confronted with in future from planning to completion. An important aspect of the course was that the student groups have to steer the projects by themselves. It was through a contact with the student committee that the connection to the Caritas Carinthia Volunteer Engagement Service Centre was made. This connection resulted in a number of student led volunteer projects being developed in the context of the Caritas vision which is to serve the poor and to promote charity and justice throughout the world. The projects were very diverse, for example one of the student led projects collected hygiene items for the local homeless day-care centre and another project put upcycling ideas from discarded books into practice. The original project ideas had little digitalisation or technology involved.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalisation became more important in the course when students found out that it was impossible for them to meet in person. For the lecturer of the course, the transformation into the digital world has to be seen critically because personal relationships can be difficult to build. *"Developing personal relationships via digital communication is something that doesn't function good. That's the basic problem with digitalisation."* [1] He further described: *"If they [the people] have a feeling for each other, then they can communicate in a digital mode."* [1] Although many technical issues had been fixed and digital tools had gotten better over time, the lecturer felt that digital communication enables a different kind of personal relationship.

The student who was participating in the course said that she does not know whether

volunteering or civic engagement activities is somewhere in public advertised at the university. She pointed to the need to enhance communication between different actors in the HEIs context in fostering digital civic engagement activities.

Improving the quality of digital communication at the university, the student held that policy makers need to provide better equipment and more tools to enable better digital teaching as well as learning. She hoped that what was learned through the COVID-19 pandemic would be of benefit for all, so that the use of digital instruments will no longer be a challenge in the future, but rather a win for everyone: *“In the first lockdown, even the government realised that most of the young people didn’t even have an own computer. They have to share it with their parents and families who are not well equipped or who don’t have enough money or are socially not, well, don’t have their social status and can’t afford this equipment, there should be more help for them (...) That’s what the government should invest. They have to invest in education.”* [2]

## 2 Civic and Intercultural Adult Education Course at University of Belgrade

### TEACHING AND LEARNING I.1.

*The university has study programmes or courses to respond to societal needs that are specific to the university’s context and its external communities.*

This case study comprised an optional course called *Methods of Civic and Intercultural Adult Education* offered at the Department for Pedagogy and Andragogy at the University of Belgrade. The course was offered to 2<sup>nd</sup> year Bachelor students in Andragogy. The main idea was to use the principles of process orientated art to create a framework, build relationships and create space for exploration of the topic of civic and intercultural education. The original hypothesis was that adult education students would develop confidence and self-initiative if they participate in the design of the curriculum. In addition to this, if students had to decide themselves what kind of exam activity would support their learning, and consider it as a project, this would empower students to take responsibility and act as community organisers. The course was planned to hold entirely in a face-to-face format: Students were supposed to attend classes at the university and exercise various forms of interventions and actions in the city. The idea was to engage with the community by mapping social issues and becoming familiar with the existing educational initiatives.

However, the usual course format was entirely challenged by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the professors proposed to postpone the course to the following semester, students were eager to continue with the programme. They decided to resume the course which meant to reshape part of the activities into a hybrid format and make use of technological tools. Therefore the professor of the course proposed to the students to *“use the city as their classroom”* [3] and to integrate offline activities with online ones. They agreed to meet online every two weeks to discuss and share their work done. They worked, for example, on the issue of women safety in the city where they walked around the city and took photos of places where they felt safe, and places where they did not feel safe and created a digital map of the city through the tool *Milanote*. The advantage of working digitally became immediately clear: All impressions could be easily collected and represented with the help of digital devices, and later shared and discussed with student colleagues and teachers.

The interviewed professor believed that they will continue using digital tools in future activities of the course programme. *“The use of online digital tools is key to build up the pool of resources and materials, and to see how the project grows and develops”* [3].

One of the students who was interviewed thought that in future, even if Covid19-related restrictions are removed, she would like the course to maintain a blended format of offline and online activities, since this format gave them space to work together, collect material and ensure a longer permanence and visibility to the work done. In the same way, the professor

thought that *“the best is to combine online and offline activities: online activities should not entirely replace offline activities, but rather complement and support them.”* [3] Moreover, she further stressed the need for political engagement at the level of universities and faculties and that teachers needed to be trained in this matter. She mentioned *“it would be very interesting to have an online platform (...) where students and professors can engage together to tackle some civic issues, raise awareness, in a transparent way”* [3].

Reflections on the course of both students having attended the course, they agreed that digitalisation had become so important nowadays that it was hard to imagine activities implemented without the support and integration of digital tools.

## ▶ 3 Virtual Student Service Learning Programme at UNED

### ▶ TEACHING AND LEARNING I.3.

*The university facilitates the participation of community representatives in the teaching and learning process (in a curricular or extracurricular context).*

The UNED Virtual Student Service Learning Programme was designed as a Service-Learning project based on virtual exchange. It involved Spanish students from the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) Faculty of Education enrolled in fourth-year Social Education Degree and African students from the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) of Porto Novo in Benin enrolled in second- and third-year teacher-training courses for Spanish-language teachers. The project aimed to strengthen the oral proficiency of the Spanish-language students from Benin, since they did not have options (scholarships and grants) to travel to Spanish speaking countries. At the same time, the programme aimed to allow Spanish students to gain a deeper understanding of other educational cultures and learn first-hand about their educational reality, pedagogical styles, and methodologies. The interaction was meant to benefit both academic communities, providing each with significant elements that supported their specific learning. The programme referred to activities in which the activation of students and their participation in the activity serving the community was technologically mediated. This technological mediation accompanied both learning and provision of the support service. The programme supported the possibility of promoting civic engagement virtually, using 2.0 technologies to meet the needs of social groups located in other regions of the world. The programme represented an innovative pedagogical Service-Learning and civic engagement activity, which is supported by virtual learning environments. The initiative had been launched by a group of professors, most of whom were affiliated with the UNED.

According to the coordinator of the programme, the partners had already experience with Service-Learning, but the idea of combining civic engagement and digitalisation came afterwards. For him *“the question was how to foster the development of ethical and civic competencies meaning the development of global citizenship and intercultural dialogue in an online context.”* [5]

The students from UNED prepared a series of talks to implement with the students from Benin, by which the former would improve their civic skills and the latter would improve their communication skills. According to the coordinator *“[t]he whole project was conceived, from the beginning, as a reciprocal exchange which should benefit both parts.”* [5]

From his point of view, the participating students from both Spain and Benin had shown great satisfaction with the project. Based on their positive experience, the project was extended involving other African universities and adapted to other subjects and disciplines. The coordinator highlighted the importance of good organisation and coordination: *“[C]ivic engagement is not improvised”* [5]. If no proper follow-up would be provided to students, the commitment declined. It was important that the student received a quick feedback because in the virtual environment sometimes it has been easy to get lost.

One of the most important learning was about the need of being technologically close. The technological gap between different regions appeared to be the most difficult. Some of the rooms in which the African students lived, did not have internet. This helped students from UNED to experiment directly this technological gap. *“The project demonstrated how the virtual space is as valid a space as the face-to-face to develop this type of civic content, taking advantage of the added value that technology offers by turning to the virtual one they have been able to universalize the concepts of responsibility and global solidarity.”* [5]

To further support their students, the UNED provided a logbook to report on the work done and reflect on it. The logbook was meant to help the students to describe how their participation had developed before, during and at the end of the Virtual Service-Learning project. *“The use of the logbook was very useful for producing reflections on the process and to plan the following steps”* [6], the student who was interviewed commented.

The coordinator believed that the students were normally very familiarised with technologies. Thus, it was not difficult to involve them on the technological level. What could be more difficult is to activate them on a moral level. He thought that young people are becoming more and more engaged with civic issues, but the key has been how to valorise this in the most effective way. In the same way, the student proposed that *“civic issues and engagement in the university should be integral part of all university activities and disciplines, in a transversal way”* [6]. If these activities would be more integrated in the university life, in a transversal way, they could work better.

## ▶ 4 The Starter Program at the University of Tartu

### ▶ TEACHING AND LEARNING I.1.

*The university has study programmes or courses to respond to societal needs that are specific to the university's context and its external communities.*

### ▶ SERVICE AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE III.3

*University staff community engagement activities bring demonstrable benefits to the university's external communities.*

The Starter Program at the University of Tartu was an extracurricular activity for students which seeks to develop an entrepreneurial mind-set and spirit in students. Financed by EU Social Fund, it was a three-month long idea-development program which involves a kick-off event, several training sessions and workshops, a networking event, mentoring sessions and a demo day. The programme seek to attract students who want to experience the process of coming up with an idea to launch a product or service. During this process the students explored the problems in community and tried to develop solutions. The participants from different subject areas formulated their business ideas to solve problems in society. Some were robots for picking strawberries (due to the COVID-19 pandemic migrant workers could not enter the country to help farmers), software for connecting elderly people at care homes with volunteers and their loved ones (since it was not allowed to visit care homes due to the pandemic), or an application for understanding how to sort waste. Their ideas and collaborations were facilitated via an *Idea Hackathon*.

In the Starter Program, the student teams worked independently on their ideas to solve or find a solution for certain problems using different digital communication channels. Quite often they ended up with new digital tools or solution and took care of the implementation to a specific community need. The student engagement was not only limited by inventing a digital solution for a community problem but in many cases they served the community with it. For the leader of the programme, she saw civic engagement and digitalisation are what she did every day at work by supervising students to help them turn their ideas into reality. She noted that the student solutions to everyday problems usually tend to be digital.

The student interviewed was involved in the start-up project called **SORTER**. The project idea was to create an easy-to-use mobile application for environmentally friendly behaviour for sorting waste. What was most difficult was to meet with the student team online, making a timetable for online events, or decide which platforms were best. The student was convinced that this kind of hands on activity should be mandatory for all students.

For the student, communication and marketing is most important for promoting students' digital civic engagement. During the programme, different digital tools were used for promotional purposes such as video clips, direct e-mails, and interviews with the participants. According to the student, further promotion is needed to implement student digital engagement activities at university level. *"It is essential to show that university can help community and society as well as it is beneficial if universities, public sector and companies work together for solving problems. Important is to show what are the skills and competences the graduates have upon the graduation and vice versa, what competences and skills should graduates have on point of view of companies."* [8]

Similarly, the student thought that it is important that policy makers recognise that practical studies are beneficial and develop many different skills even if it might be more expensive and difficult to organise. Moreover, project-based courses support networking, student mobility, and interaction between students. Policy makers should lift those educators who organise such activities and show their appreciation. *"At university level, more lobby is needed to introduce this kind of practical approach courses not only as extra-curriculum courses, but project-based courses should be more widely used in university studies and it can be used in every field."* [7]





# TEFCE DIMENSION OF ENGAGEMENT: RESEARCH



## ► 5 Queens University Belfast's Dementia Awareness Game

### ► RESEARCH II.2

*The university carries out collaborative/participatory research in cooperation with the university's external communities.*

### ► SERVICE AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE III.2.

*University staff provide their knowledge to support and/or build the capacity of the university's external communities.*

People living with dementia and researchers from Queen's University Belfast have worked together to develop a free digital dementia awareness game which aims to promote awareness about dementia and challenge the myths associated with the condition. The Dementia Awareness Game was freely accessible via computer, tablet or smartphone. It took only a few minutes to play. The development of the game involved working with people living with dementia and nursing students to devise a digital game that will challenge the way people think about dementia. The overall aim was to enable students and young people to have a better understanding and awareness of dementia, and supported people living with dementia more effectively out in the community. Research conducted by Queen's University Belfast on its impact showed that after playing the game, a person's knowledge and attitudes to people living with dementia improve. People with dementia were partners in the project. Their first-hand experience enabled the team to design a game that fully represents those with dementia. The School of Nursing & Midwifery at Queen's University had been offering students the opportunity to work alongside academic staff on several co-design projects. With the digital dementia game, six student nurses were involved in the co-development of the project with their work being recognised with an award by Queen's University. The nursing students involved learned about the project topic and methods, worked with service users and academic staff to design and develop the intervention, helped with evaluation and supported with disseminating knowledge by writing articles and blogs.

Lecturers who were contacted through e-mail wrote that due to the success of the game “it is important to continue to think where else could we apply what we have learned from this project. I feel we could make many other games surrounding other illnesses. For example, similar to the FAST stroke awareness campaign, perhaps we could make a game surrounding the dangers of strokes.” One of the lecturers also suggested the feeling of giving back to the community was reason enough to partake in a similar project: “Being involved in this project was such an incredible experience. As a student, being offered to help create something that might encourage a patient or family member to make a life changing decision to get medical treatment. I think in the future if we could create more projects like this with students, the feel-good factor alone is worth it.”

## TEFCE DIMENSION OF ENGAGEMENT: SERVICE AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE



### ▶ 6 AIT - FLAC Society

#### ▶ SERVICE AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE III.3.

*University staff community-engagement activities have demonstrable benefits for the university's external communities.*

#### ▶ STUDENTS IV.1

*Students deliver community-engagement activities independently through student organisations or initiatives*

The main purpose of student FLAC societies was to operate information clinics where the student population can come and receive once-off legal information from qualified practitioners who supervise law students. For students who want to get involved in using their growing legal skills to help others, it was a suitable way to become more socially active. Athlone Institute

of technology (AIT) had hosted a FLAC Society since 2018, and it was designed to offer local residents and students support with any legal issues with the aid of a real solicitor or barrister. Since the pandemic, AIT's FLAC Society had adopted digital technologies into its service by providing the same service, but through video meetings and online calls. A user needed to email their contact first, and then they would be contacted for an online meeting.

AIT FLAC Society has evolved as part of the second year Law and Business course. While students who study Business and Law must take part in the FLAC Society as a mandatory part of their course, respondents suggested that there were several reasons to take part in the society even after the module had finished. The interview partner commented it was a valuable experience working in a legal setting whilst still studying especially when one was not sure if to take up a legal career. Similarly, the lecturer interviewed said it is a worthwhile opportunity to be able to give back something to the community especially for people who were not able to pay for regular legal aid.

Moreover, he suggested that more could be done to adapt digital technologies into the service further. He believed that *“perhaps we could add a digital tool to our portfolio that would enable us to use an instant messaging service. I think of the service ‘Better Help’ for an example. If we could move the AIT FLAC Society to be fully online, it would free up a lot of organisational time for our volunteers”* [9].

## 7 GMIT – Student Digital Civic Engagement Project

### SERVICE AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE III.2

*University staff [and students] provide their knowledge to support and/or build the capacity of the university's external communities*

Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) had developed a module for their marketing orientated courses. This is called **Digital Content and Marketing Technology**. The aim of the module was to equip Marketing and Design students with the skills necessary that help to develop a volunteer or community project. The module was initially developed by a mixture of students and lecturers. The idea of the module was to expose students to real life experience working with digital technologies in a marketing situation. During the module, students provided their skills and expertise and offer it to a community. The module addressed the need for digitising community-based programmes, especially in times of digital networks.

The student who partakes in this module suggested that while it was a mandatory module for their course, he enjoyed taking part for several other reasons. He was involved in the civic engagement side of the module because he wanted to give something back to the community. Moreover, he also recognised that there was a large amount of experience to be gained that would aid his professional development. The module supported students to learn, engage and work with communities and voluntary organisations first-hand, assisting them with their digital ideas, skills, and application of learning to a real-life scenario while supporting local initiatives. He also stated that the increase of required digital skills in the current pandemic highlighted how important it was to local communities to have digital competencies, which can be taught by students partaking in this module.

The lecturer highlighted that an increase in digital engagement was *“particularly beneficial to help rural communities in Ireland, to help connect people and to allow them to grow”* [12]. She also suggested that the knowledge-transfer between students and communities was a great way to showcase learning and build experience whilst empowering local community groups. This was also emphasised by the student: *“Having this opportunity to give such support to communities is such an amazing feeling. I feel that I've been in several situations where the community group would have collapsed if it hadn't have been for our expertise, especially in the current environment, increasing digital skills in communities has been such a wholesome thing”* [11]. The lecturer said that she helps students to create brands and awareness campaigns for community projects. Students could offer community groups a service that normally would have cost a lot and they help projects to take off with their digital skills.

# TEFCE DIMENSION OF ENGAGEMENT:

## STUDENTS



### ▶ 8 VOLUNTARIUM: UMSumário by the UMinho's Students' Union

#### ▶ STUDENTS IV.1

*Students deliver community-engagement activities independently through student organisations or initiatives*

VOLUNTARIUM is a digital platform where students could register for a wide range of voluntary activities. A large set of volunteering opportunities could be seen on the website with descriptions of the actions to be performed by each volunteer. Other information on the website highlights skills that would be developed, objectives of the actions, the intervals of the activity, information about the contacts of the competent entity for the action and the means of registration.

The student union of the University of Minho created the VOLUNTARIUM Platform to involve students in different volunteering projects, like the Erasmus European solidarity corps, or local projects for contributing to the region, e.g. taking place in solidarity associations such as social feeding units, support for the elderly, children, and animals.

UMSumário is one part of the VOLUNTARIUM project that supported kids with difficulties in their learning. Once or twice a week volunteers met the kids and helped them to study and to learn the topics at school. The project involved around 80 university students and 80 kids from different parts of Portugal and different nationalities (e.g. Syria or Angola). The students involved in the project support on a one-to-one basis as it was a personalised activity. The kids' parents were an important part of the project too. The volunteers had online groups with the parents to constantly evaluate the volunteer's performance and tell about what have been going on in the project. As support measure for the volunteers, the volunteers received an initial training concerning pedagogical skills, motivation, and child's psychology by the Institute of Education at their University. *"So, we try to capacitate our volunteers also. It's a big project that we are proud of"* [13], one of the interviewed student said, who the coordinator of the programme was. She believed that people in her age are strongly digitally engaged because the online world is significant today and an area that enriches people. One of the reasons why she decided to study at this university was because she felt that students' community was readily connected to reality

in civic society. She felt that people studying here were not just focused on academic goals but also on one's growth as a person. She thinks that more needs to be done to engage students in civic engagement: *"I believe that one of the great problems that we have, especially in terms of social activities and volunteering, is always how we can reach our colleagues. Because we have a lot of information and it's a real trouble. So, we need to invest more in the way we reach people and that could be great for improving and making a large community of volunteers. And university is such an important institution and can have a great impact in trying to reach these students."* [13]

The other student stated that using technologies can be helpful to engage more students in volunteering activities. He thought that in some cases technologies cannot substitute the human contact, but in others they can be very helpful. In the case of UMSumário, if he was at the same table with his student face-to-face, he thinks that it would improve their sessions.

## 9 Digital Ambassadors at the University of Edinburgh

### STUDENTS IV.2

*The university facilitates and supports partnerships between students and external communities*

The objective of the Digital Ambassadors Programme was to enable students from the University of Edinburgh to work with older adults within the local community to gain vital digital skills which they can implement in their daily lives in order to stay active and partake in society. Older adults benefitted with increased skills and confidence in the digital world, while students were able to put their existing digital skills into practice and gain vital interpersonal and social skills. The students of the University of Edinburgh Student Digital Ambassadors Programme were trained to support older people to use computers and touchscreens when they encountered them in their daily lives (e.g. at doctors' surgeries and supermarket checkouts). The students put their training into practice by working at a Community Centre, to support eight participants (aged between 70 and 87) to develop basic digital skills. The evaluation of the pilot found that self-efficacy increased across all basic digital skills for all participants, with users feeling most confident using Google, email, and online tutorials (e.g. MOOCs).

The Digital Ambassadors' project started with older people as learners who needed to get online and build their digital skills and confidence, so as digital natives the students were able to help develop the necessary digital skills. Staff and students from the university designed a course that would aim to improve the digital skills of older people. The course was delivered by one of the university staff members and facilitated by some of the students and lasted six to eight weeks. Another activity during the project was that students work one-to-one directly with the learners who had brought their own equipment in front of them that they could work with or have a specific problem that they were wanting to deal with.

The Digital Ambassadors' Programme aimed to help bridge the digital divide by giving lower skilled adults the opportunity to gain vital digital skills, confidence, and knowledge to actively participate online. In this regard, the programme coordinator who was interviewed stated: *"With this digital ambassador's project, it is as a result of identifying a need to bridge the digital divide about four or five years ago, and then doing something about it."* [15] He further saw digitising community engagement activities as a new concept. Currently the programme only aimed to teach digital skills, not to use digital tools to deliver the programme: *"Possibly this example is a good practice, but for the example to be deemed 'best practice' it could do so by implementing the programme via digital tools online."* [15] The coordinator hoped that the programme can use digital tools as the vehicle to deliver civic engagement activities soon, so that students are not tied to a physical setting and makes volunteering more accessible. He thought that a good possibility would be to promote activities using digital tools that have collaborative and communicative capacities as student engagement in communities largely steps from a social aspect. Students were more inclined to partake in activities if there was an

opportunity to meet and network with new people, and when they could have a connection with those in the community they are trying to help. He emphasised the role of HEIs for students' civic engagement: *"To a great extent we have done community engagement well so far, especially in regards of calling out the whole university and putting in place plans that are university-wide. In that way we can call them to action and hold the university accountable."* [15]

## 10 Intercultural Mentoring for Schools Project

### STUDENTS IV.1.

*Students deliver community engagement activities independently through student organisations or initiatives.*

The Intercultural Mentoring for Schools project from an Austrian university was administered by faculty staff and the Universities Alumni association. The project engaged university students with a migration background or personal experience of taking refuge in becoming intercultural mentors. In their roles as intercultural mentors, the students visited elementary or middle schools to support children who had a history or background of migration themselves. Often the mentors worked with children from schools with a high proportion of migrants. The project was initiated by a department lecturer and the chairperson of the Alumni Association together with a student of Turkish origin as a direct response to need for greater migration support and engagement in schools. The intercultural mentors served as role models, caregivers and contact persons for the school children, teachers and parents and took part in the lessons in accordance with the class teacher. The intercultural mentors interacted with the pupils, who live in difficult situations and contexts, supported them in their learning and help them to perform better in school. They provided an 'empathetic ear' and understanding as many of the mentors have overcome difficulties in having to learn the German language. These shared experiences means that young pupils could relate and look up to their mentors. The intercultural mentors also had an important role in working and communicating with the parents as they serve as a translator for preparing appointments or parent conference days. Mentors were seen as positive role models and of positive examples of multilingualism and inclusion. They were seen as very beneficial, especially for children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, digital tools were rarely used for mentoring mostly depending on the technical equipment at the schools. One of the two student mentors who were interviewed therefore stated: *"Before that [the COVID-19 pandemic], it wasn't the case [using digital tools] that I had a lot to do with mentoring because there just wasn't the need, to be honest. Of course, I used digitization to find ideas, to motivate the children, what can you do, projects, such small jobs, games, of course I used the internet."* [17]

After the outbreak of the pandemic, the student mentors were unable to visit schools and could only interact with their mentee pupils digitally. Both interviewees thought the transition to using digital tools to deliver the project would be easy but obstacles quickly appeared. One of them explained that the digital communication was very limited. She reported that she only had one video call for 10-15 minutes where she just talked to the schoolteacher but not to her mentee. When reflecting on the situation she realised that it is difficult for children to sit in front of the computer for long periods of time. *"It's very, very difficult, because the kids can't really stand sitting in front of the laptop and doing it online, because they just need to be close to the person they are communicating with and there really is, I noticed, that it's very, very difficult to do online with the kids."* [17] The other student mentor experienced similar problems. At the beginning, she thought that teachers could include the intercultural mentors in digital classes, but it didn't work at all: *"It's easier than ever, but also like also harder than ever. Altogether I think, to think about digitalisation is important to understand that as it can be inclusive and helpful, it can also be exclusive very fast because like it's not a real place."* [16] She pointed that digitalisation can lead to exclusion because there is no real, physical space for connecting to each other on a personal level.

One of the students thought that it would be helpful to implement digital lectures or seminars on digital education and on how teaching and learning is changing in the digital age at universities, as that was not something they were trained in. The other student assumed that there are different ways and ideas how to use digital tools, for example, tools that help her translate and simplify things or presents information in a different way. She resumed: *“Understanding how to do it effectively digitally and how to use digital tools to help you rather than to make it harder for you, could be quite powerful”* [16].

## II Tartu Welcome Centre

### STUDENTS IV.2

*The university facilitates and supports partnerships between students and external communities.*

The Tartu Welcome Centre was a non-profit association operating in the public interest. Their goal was to help new immigrants arriving in Tartu and Southern Estonia to adapt smoothly and settle into Estonian society. The centre was established in cooperation with Tartu Town Council, University of Tartu, and the University of Life Science. The Welcome Centre provided the services for newcomers in Tartu and South-Estonia area which were free consultations, registry services, cultural and networking events, and useful information.

The students could apply to the programme on voluntary bases. Within the programme, the students were fully responsible for preparation, organisation and delivering different events under the supervision of staff members. The events were organised with the aim to help foreign community members to get familiar with Estonian culture and habits as well as give tips on how to cope with different everyday situations and bureaucracy. Although this was a voluntary programme, it carried academic credits. At the end of semester, the students could apply for 6 ECTS for the apprenticeship subject.

The students' role was to prepare and organise cultural and networking events. At the beginning, students used digital instruments for promotion different events (e.g., designing flyers, creating FB events, posting information) and communicated with different tools (messengers, mailing lists, etc.) to other students or immigrants who were interested in participation in the events. The events took place face-to-face at the Welcome Centre. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all meetings and events were organised virtually.

According to the programme leader, digital channels had supported their work, but after the outbreak of the pandemic digital tools became the central means of the work of the NGO. All supporting activities and sharing information started to go through digital channels and become one of the everyday task of the programme leader. As the pandemic continues, they decided to launch a digital internship programme called *Welcome Centre Web-Based Seminars* together with the University of Tartu to welcome newcomers in the Estonian society. The project was about to create online seminars with students and the help of NGO members. It was up to the students what topics they want to cover and how they want to promote and organise the seminars. The activities were mainly targeted to international students. The objective was to offer support for newcomers who come to Tartu during the COVID-19 pandemic and needed to stay in self-isolation for two weeks. The idea was to avoid loneliness and provide a feeling that newcomers belong somewhere and are supported.

The programme leader thought that the seminars were a good example on how students' community and growing civic engagement could be connected. They plan to include topics of volunteering work in Tartu to the programme. If different kinds of voluntary work were presented and the students could decide where to participate, they may become interested: *“So, it can be one option to open students' mind and show that they can always do something because they value it, they get good emotions or help somebody without getting any financial or some kind of credit benefits.”* [18]

# TEFCE DIMENSION OF ENGAGEMENT: MANAGEMENT



## ▶ 12 P5 Medicine Center

### ▶ MANAGEMENT V.2

*The university makes learning and research resources accessible to its external communities.*

The P5 Medicine Centre was a digital healthcare unit and research centre, with a focus on the use of digital technology in health and its impact on healthcare provision. It was a non-profit organization that results from a partnership by the University of Minho with the School of Medicine. The P5 Medicine Center used digital communication, and digital platforms to contact patients and was composed by a specialized multidisciplinary team of doctors, nurses, psychologists, and nutritionists to benefit the health of communities. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 followed by months of intensive work, the center took senior medical students as volunteers. Over these months, 200 students worked at the center, delivered and supported P5 projects to combat and minimize the impact of the pandemic. By opening the doors to student volunteers, P5 created the opportunity for students to get involved and to learn how technologies were used to enhance population health. One student who was interviewed became the CEO of the center and motivated other students to volunteer: *“My experience with civic engagement and digitalisation began with the involvement in P5 volunteering in March 2020. Being a 6th year medicine student and a delegate, I was also contacting other colleagues to engage in the platform and to respond to pandemic as volunteers.”* [21]

He believed that as part of the University they are obliged to engage students all around the campus on digital technologies and to teach students about how to use digital technologies effectively. Moreover, he pointed out that it is important to inform students about the importance of civic engagement and the different programmes at the University connected to it. In his opinion, teachers play a key role for engaging students in civic activities and in using digital tools. However, the university needs to teach teachers on methodologies about how to use digital tools for teaching and learning. He also thought that some units of the curriculum could be dedicated to the topic of civic engagement.

The other student who works already as a doctor and teaches at the School of Medicine of the



University of Minho uses video tools to give his classes. However, he believed that face-to-face classes are very important to create social relations and that using digital technologies only is not enough to get in contact with students and to relate with each other in a social manner. He thought that human contact is still very important for students' learning.

## 4.5 Conclusion

The case studies show a wide range of student DCE activities and provide valuable insights how these activities are applied and elaborated in practice. They encompass two different forms of student DCE activities: One of them can be conceptualized as **purposeful digitalisation** and comprises cases in which civic engagement activities rely on a digital environment and use digital tools from the very beginning to offer or carry out activities (e.g. the Virtual Student Service-Learning Programme at UNED or Queens University Belfast's Dementia Awareness Game). The other form of student DCE activities had to shift their settings towards an **emergency digitalization** after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. These activities had to get reorganised and needed to adapt to a digital sphere which was not previously intended (e.g. the University of Klagenfurt Student Volunteer Projects for Caritas or the AIT – FLAC Society project).

The analysis of the case studies reveals that some activities could adapt to the “new normal” in a fruitful way (e.g. the Civic and Intercultural Adult Education Course at University of Belgrade), while other activities faced obstacles that kept the engagement activities from continuing (e.g. the Intercultural Mentoring for Schools Project). Based on this range of practical examples on student DCE, the analysis demonstrates what has worked and what has not worked in practice.

In most case studies, a key aspect for successfully developing student DCE activities is **building and maintaining personal relationships**. Most of the interview partners agreed that face-to-face contacts are still very important, and that technologically mediated communication cannot substitute them. Digital networking is therefore not enough for support social relationships, in particular when the civic engagement activity focus on building personal relationships and fostering social learning (as it is the case in the project UMSumário by the student union of the University of Minho, where student volunteers work with young children). Conversely, once direct face-to-face contacts are established, they can enhance communication throughout a digitally mediated civic activity. However, the analysis shows that it is difficult to move communication from an analogue to a digital setting and maintain relationships if a digital environment is not already established and used before (as the Intercultural Mentoring for Schools Project has proven). Therefore, it needs both: Existing and ongoing relationships and a digital environment to which participants are used to interact with others.

Some interview partners found that the best way to run a civic engagement activity is to work **with a blended format that integrates both offline and online activities** (as participants in the Civic and Intercultural Adult Education Course at University of Belgrade agreed). In this sense, online activities and digital tools are seen as a supplement for civic activities taking place offline. The digital environment provides students a space to collaborate, collect materials and resources, and ensures longer permanence and visibility of the work they have done.

Another aspects revealed by the analysis that are crucial for the implementation of a student DCE activity are **organisation and coordination**. These can take place by providing students with specific training in the area of their engagement activity (as it is the case in the project UMSumário by the student union of the University of Minho, where volunteers receive training concerning pedagogical skills, motivation, and child psychology). Additional, students and teachers need to get familiar with digital tools, for which HEIs can help with training or seminars to provide the necessary skills. These measures ensure that **“civic engagement is not improvised”** [5], as the coordinator of the Virtual Student Service Learning Programme at UNED said.

Another aspect for coordinators and project leaders to organise students' learning processes

during the DCE activity is to ***maintain contact to their students***. In particular in a digital environment, follow-ups and feedback are vital otherwise students' engagement may decline. Some didactic materials can foster students' learning, such as the logbook where students reflect on their learning processes while partaking in the Virtual Student Service Learning Programme at UNED.

Following the perspective of the students interviewed, ***universities' student unions can play an important role*** in raising students' awareness of becoming civically engaged. Students are more likely to participate in a student civic activity if they feel that the student community at their university is already connected to civic society. In addition, ***the social aspect plays a key role***. Students are more inclined to partake in civic activities if they have the opportunity to meet new people and build a connection with those in the community they aim to help.

For most of the students interviewed, a major reason to become civically engaged is that they want to contribute and give back to community (as reported by the students in the AIT – FLAC Society or the GMIT – Student Digital Civic Engagement Project). They also see their civic engagement as part of their professional development where they can gain first-hand experiences and necessary skills for their future work (as is the case in the P5 Medicine Centre, where senior medical students assist the health team to provide useful information for clients in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic).

This is where HEIs itself come into play. The analysis of the case studies shows that there is a ***lack of public advertising at HEIs*** to show students opportunities for their civic engagement. Therefore, HEIs need to make (digital) civic engagement activities visible and clearly demonstrate the benefits students acquire when they engage in a civic activity. This should also include different types of engagement activities from which the students can chose. This goes hand in hand with the students' demand that policy makers provide appropriate equipment so that students can conduct their DCE activities in a purposeful way.



# 5 INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGIC STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING OF DIGITAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



Integrating DCE in HE teaching and learning needs innovative pedagogic strategies. Promoting student DCE requires universities to be more open to methods that adapt changes in attitudes towards teaching and learning. The European Union has supported curriculum development and encouraged HEIs to use more e-learning possibilities for decades. However, substantial changes in HE teaching and learning have occurred since the COVID-19 pandemic when learning environments had to be entirely transferred to digital platforms. University staff and students had to acquire new skills related to online teaching and learning.

## ► 5.1 Need of Transferable Skills and a Competence-Learning Approach

In a quickly changing world and the diffusion of social networks, education and training that focus on transferable skills are important for people to enable smoothly their working path and be active community members. The European Commission (2019) recommends eight key competences that are essential for young people to find fulfilling jobs and become independent, engaged citizens, especially in a digital world. They involve skills such as critical and analytical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, communication, creativity, and negotiation in an intercultural sphere.

The case studies described above show clearly that extra-curricular activities (e.g. service-learning, project-based activities, volunteering) enhance the development of important transferable skills. These communication, digital and leadership skills help students to engage with people and situations in one's social life in a more thoughtful and responsive way. Moreover, the case studies are examples of good practice for student DCE as part of study programmes or extra-curricular activities. They illustrate how law students engaging in legal advice processes, medical students volunteering in hospitals, or teacher training students helping pupils with learning difficulties while making usage of digital technology. They demonstrate how DCE can be integrated into different study programmes through various activities, teaching, research, or services with the community.

However, HEIs also constitute vital learning spaces for engagement where university staff and students form a community for a variety of engagement activities. For example, students can get involved in student unions participating in universities' decision-making processes, they can be involved in teaching as tutors, in quality assurance and in curriculum development activities through feedback, they can help new students as mentors, assist in organising conferences or participate in research activities and projects.

Encouraging student DCE, it is important that HEIs value students' civic engagement and offers different learning approaches, especially in an innovative field. The European Framework on **Key Competences for Lifelong Learning** (European Commission, 2019) states that competence-oriented approaches such as project based, arts based, inquiry based, experiential or work-based learning improve learners' engagement and their learning achievement. Combining learning processes with digital tools, learners are also supported in the development of their digital competences. Thus, student DCE not only encompass civic skills and digital competences, it also touches social and emotional learning and thus increase the overall learners' motivation, performance and active participation. The case studies presented above indicate that using a competence-oriented approach encourages students not only gain deeper knowledge on certain topics but also develop useful skills to become more confident as digital civic engagers dealing with societal issues in a digital age.

## ► 5.2 Innovative Methods for Student Digital Civic Engagement

Student engagement activities can be integrated into HE teaching and learning by using different active learning methods. The service-learning or community-based learning approach as well as project and problem-based learning are excellent examples that can be used for students' active

engagement in solving societal needs and thus support civic and social responsibility. Several other approaches, such as contextual learning, challenge-based learning, flipped classroom, design thinking and learning through storytelling are great options for student engagement. These teaching and learning strategies still seem to be rarely new and innovative methods which enables to achieve future competences and develop student DCE.

**Service-Learning** is a pedagogical approach that connects theory and practice by allowing students to participate in a service that meets community needs and to reflect on the experience in class in order to gain a deeper understanding of the course content and an enhanced sense of civic engagement (Bringle et al., 2006). This learning approach supports students to apply theories, practice, and reflection tools to broaden knowledge and critical thinking skills for social change (Elmhurst University, 2019). Albanesi et al. (2020) point out that Service-Learning complies with the principles of active learning and contributes to developing professional, personal and social competences. It is experiential and focuses on the students' collaborative and intellectual learning. Service-Learning activities promote meaningful and deep learning in real-life scenarios, which are complex and often challenging (Resch & Dima, 2021). They facilitate the transfer of what has been learned in classroom to different social environments.

**Problem and project-based learning** are two approaches of inquiry-based teaching where teachers or students work on real-world problem-solving situations by working on a topic for a longer period of time and applying multiple perspectives on the topic. Problem-based learning tackles a real-world problem from the community, and project-based learning involves a complex task and a project-based form of student activity creating an actual project output, product or artefact (Vega 2012).

**Problem-based learning** is a student-centred pedagogy by which students learn about a subject through the experience of solving an open-ended problem found in the course material. The **problem-based learning** process does not assume a unique pre-defined solution, hence it allows the development of other desirable skills and attributes. These include knowledge acquisition, enhanced group collaboration and communication within the group.

**Project-based learning** is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects. Students work on a project over an extended period of time (from a week up to a semester) that engages them in solving a real-world problem or answering a complex question. They demonstrate their knowledge and skills by creating a public product or presentation for a real audience. As a result, students develop deep content knowledge as well as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication skills (Buck Institute for Education). Project-based learning can be used widely for student engagement in very different subject areas as well as for community and civic engagement activities.

**Contextual learning** is based on a constructivist theory where the learning takes place when the information is presented to the students in such a way that they are able to construct meaning based on their own experience. Renouard and Mazabraud (2018) state that each individual constructs one's own experience of the world in a specific context. This latter designates "contextual elements" with individuals interact specifically, such as media, teaching and learning resources, or their social environments. Thus, each individual selects the appropriate answers from his alternative and/or scientific conceptions that depend upon his specific context. Since the main characteristics of contextual learning are emphasizing problem solving, taking account the interactions between individuals and different contextual elements as well as recognising that teaching and learning is occurring in multiple contexts, this approach is well suited for implementation of student digital engagement activities within different subject areas or curriculum.

**Challenge-based learning** is a framework for learning focusing on solving real-world challenges. This approach is based on collaborative and hands-on activities, encourage students to communicate to other students and community members to identify 'big ideas', ask good questions, discover and solve challenges, gain in-depth subject area knowledge, develop different

skills (including digital skills), and share their thoughts with others. Johnson et al. (2009) point out that challenge-based learning takes its ideas from real-world issues that students translate into solutions of local applicability, thus a very wide range of curricular areas can be addressed. The challenge-based learning approach is a good method to involve students in engaging with problems of the community or broader society. It leverages technology tools to put the daily experiences of students in the service of their education. It focuses on real-world issues, gives students a chance to work on important problems, gets their voices heard, and empowers them to influence their community for the better. Challenge-based learning has real potential to reverse the slipping trend of poor retention, low scores, and disengagement, turning learning into a meaningful experience (Johnson et al., 2009).

**Design thinking** is a learning approach that includes a specific mind-set, collaboration, and problem solving. The design process is a structured framework for identifying challenges, gathering information, generating potential solutions, refining ideas, and testing solutions. Design thinking can be flexibly implemented and serves equally well as a framework for a course design or a roadmap for an activity or group project. Since one of the main features of design thinking is creativity that helps to solve “wicked problems” and reach the “A-HA Moment” (Luka, 2014), this approach can be easily adapted for student digital engagement activities and directs students to creatively solve problems arisen in society.

**Flipped classroom** is an instructional strategy and a type of blended learning, which aims to increase student’s active participation, engagement, and learning (Al-Samarraie et al., 2020). In a flipped classroom, the primary delivery of content and instruction is completed online, prior to a scheduled class session, and practice for applying this content is completed during the class session. The more traditional classroom practices (e.g. lecturing) take place online, leaving more time for active, engaged interactions and collaborative modes of learning during class (University of Southern Carolina, 2021). Giving instruction during class, students and teachers can take more time for hands-on practice, collaborative problem-solving, and active learning that require students to use higher-order thinking skills. This method enables higher education teachers to make the most of the students’ time spent together with them as well as having discussions together to find solutions to societal problems.

**Learning through storytelling** refers to a process in which learning is structured around a narrative or story as a means of sense-making. Storytelling views stories as the basis for the learning experience and encourages teachers and students to share stories and interpret their experiences as well as perform role plays (Alterio & McDrury 2003; Flanagan, 2015; Knowledge Hub, 2020).

The Storying Sheffield project points out that when stories are produced in dialogue with others, unexpected resonances and connections between very different lives frequently reveal. Stories embody a complex web of relationships and interdependence at the core of the self, while also preserving the uniqueness of each teller’s perspective on and knowledge of the world (Storytelling Sheffield, 2021). The learning through storytelling approach could be a good option for students to learn from the experience and knowledge of other people of their city and region and thus encourages civic engagement. The digital dimension can be included for example by narrative-centred learning environments which situate learners within a story-world (by using virtual realities).

## ► 5.3 Challenges for Integration Innovative Pedagogic Strategies

### ► Assessment of competences acquired from civic engagement activities

It is important to acknowledge that the evidence offered to evaluate the degree to which Service-Learning courses and other community-based courses meet intended learning outcomes mirrors general practices in HE for gathering these types of evidence. Assessment is heavily dependent on self-report instruments that students complete, usually at the end of the

semester (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). Widely used assessment methods to assess the knowledge acquired by students within a given subject are individual exams or tests.

Many other creative assessment methods and assessment tasks in addition to oral or written exams are more suitable for evaluating students' participation in civic engagement activities. These are, for example, case study analysis, group projects, reviews of articles, product or service demonstrations, social media and blog postings, photo or video evidence, educational game creations, observation summaries, podcasts, (e-)portfolios, formats of self-analysis, etc. Most of them can be used for a digital learning format.

Social learning, collaborative inquiry and group discussion are valued and promoted if students take control of their own learning and its evaluation. The capability of evaluating one's own learning progress and attainment is of the heart of autonomous and self-determined learning (Sambell, 2013). It is valuable to involve students in the selection of assessment methods and criteria.

### ► **Role of teaching staff and the use of technology**

The role of teaching staff is essential in transforming learning process more beneficial for students. Their willingness in using different methods and creativity to create innovation in teaching is also vital. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for prompt transition into digital environments brought along more active use of various digital tools, which enabled teachers to activate learners and facilitate their mutual cooperation with tools such as polls, videos, online team-work and communication environments. In order to successfully meet challenges in a digital learning environment, the provision of technical support and experience exchange seminars for sharing know-how as well as introductions of new digital tools became more popular than ever. Inevitable transition to digital learning has shown that universities should provide comprehensive and prompt support both to students and to teachers as well as encourage teaching staff to continuously develop their pedagogical and digital skills in applying new digital solutions. The existence of fast communication channels, such as information lists, direct mailing lists or social media groups, facilitated the rapid transmission of information through online experience seminars. Teachers need to be open to students' initiatives in using digital technologies. Integrating educational games or possibilities of virtual reality in study processes might be supportive both for the course of study and student DCE.

### ► **Security and data protection in digital learning**

Another aspect that needs attention when using innovative digital tools is connected with security, data protection and assuring privacy. Defining digital citizenship in terms of safety and responsibility is focused on three aspects: (1) educators should inspire students to positively contribute to and responsibly participate in the digital world, (2) the safe and responsible technology use, (3) legal, ethical, and safe behaviour related to technology use. Digital instruments are assumed to be intelligent tools but they still need to be treated with caution and criticism. It is important for teachers to use pedagogical work modes and learning environments that favour autonomy and critical thinking.

### ► **Social aspect and group dynamic in digital learning**

The case studies highlighted that even in the digital era the face-to-face classes are important to create social relations since human contacts are important for social wellbeing. The digital communication is on the one side, but the personal relations are on the other side. And developing personal relationships via digital communication is something that does not function good. This is the basic problem with digitalisation.

When designing digital learning with integration of innovative aspects and digital tools, it is important to consider the dynamics of the group. One interviewee, an expert in the field of group dynamics and organisational development, argues that digitalisation has a significant

impact on group dynamics, e.g. in terms of how effectively digital tools work and can therefore be used. Also, from the case studies can be concluded that person to person activities worked well enough but if the team-work was needed, the students were more struggled with group assignments due to either technological issues or problems arose from team-work dynamics.

Thus, careful planning for online learning includes not just identifying the content to cover but also carefully tending to how different types of interactions that are important to the learning process to be supported (Albanesi et al., 2020). An innovative idea is to encourage less digitally competent students to study together with students without these competences, so that in addition to acquiring knowledge on certain topic, digital skills will also be developed and everyone can participate in the digital world more equally.

## ▶ 5.4 Conclusion

There are a variety of different competence-oriented teaching and learning approaches to enhance student engagement and develop students' knowledge, different skills and attitude towards civic society. Teaching staff should continuously develop their pedagogical and digital skills, be creative, explore and test different ways and ideas how digital tools can be used in conducting student civic engagement activities. For example, a tool could help to translate and simplify things, (visually) present information in a different way and transfer theoretical concept to the practical level. Digital tools can be powerful and support innovation in teaching and learning. However, in order to be able to use them effectively in digital learning environments and benefit from them in student civic engagement studies, it depends on universities' technological capabilities and support, the teachers' and students' digital skills, creativity and readiness to use different tools as well as access to internet and technology for involved community members.





# 6 SUMMARY



In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are strong arguments in favour of awarding civic engagement a larger role in HE, especially in a digital arena. Civic engagement by students in HE encompasses a broad field of activities. However, while research on civic engagement is well advanced, research on digital civic engagement is less advanced to date – this *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* wants to contribute to closing this knowledge gap as it followed this research question: What is digital civic engagement (DCE) and how can it be integrated on different levels of higher education (policy, teaching, and learning)?

Digital civic engagement refers to civic engagement activities in relation to digital tools. Student's digital civic engagement refers to civic engagement activities carried out by students as they use digital tools to convey and perform their civic action during their time of studying. These digital activities can be optional, e.g. volunteering in a student union, engaging as a mentor, or can be part of study programmes, e.g. as a service-learning coursework. Of course, digital civic engagement also contains risks, especially the risk of excluding students through digitalisation, an inappropriate use of digital tools (exploitation of personal data etc.) and low levels of trust in civic engagement which takes place online.

Policy documents either focus on student civic engagement or on digitalisation, however, the link between the two is largely missing. The *National Digital Competence Initiative 2030* (Portugal) was identified as the only strategic policy paper on national level that promotes the development of digital skills in the terms of exercising active citizenship. On an institutional level, there is only the *University of Edinburgh Community Engagement Strategy 2017* (UK) which emphasises the value of digital tools for student engagement within communities. These policies can be seen as guiding models to strengthen students' digital civic engagement in policy documents.



The case studies provide a wide range of practical examples on how student DCE can work and is used in practice. They show that face-to-face contacts still play an essential role for communication in a digital environment and building personal relationships that help to serve the community. Moreover, they point to the need to promote student DCE activities at an institutional level and make students aware of their DCE opportunities.

Especially for the field of HE teaching and learning, this *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* elaborated didactic methods which are suitable to promote digital civic engagement: Service-Learning, problem and project-based learning, contextual learning, challenge-based learning, design thinking, flipped classroom, and learning through storytelling.

Finally, we hope that the *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* can help HE institutions to strengthen their institutional profiles and to set priorities connecting both civic engagement and digitalisation. Also, this Guide provides selected evidence for what works in digital civic engagement within higher education to date and at the same time hopefully leads to much-needed acknowledgement of the efforts of community-engaged staff, students, and lecturers.

# 7 RESOURCE SECTION



- ▶ Find the *Guide to Digital Civic Engagement* online:  
<https://www.researchgate.net/project/Students-as-Digital-Civic-Engagers>
- ▶ Find more information and materials about the SDCE project on the project website:  
<https://www.studentcivicengagers.eu/>
- ▶ Find the first SDCE newsletter:  
<https://mailchi.mp/ade16ec4b0b1/eucen-13411479>
- ▶ Follow the SDCE project on social media:
  -  <https://www.facebook.com/StudentDCE>
  -  <https://twitter.com/StudentDce>

▶ **Links to similar projects:**

Find the TEFCE project online:  
<https://www.tefce.eu/>

EU project on the promotion of students' digital skills:  
<https://www.digitalskillsaccelerator.eu/>

EU project on students' digital wellbeing:  
<https://www.digital-wellbeing.eu/>



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# 9 ANNEX














► **Interview Guide for Case Studies (see Chapter 4)**

Questions
<p><i>Introduction: We are interested in the intersection between civic engagement (please use also other terms accepted in your country/institution) and digitalisation.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How would you describe your experiences with civic engagement and digitalisation? How and why have you come in contact with these topics?</li> </ul>
<p><i>Examples of civic engagement in HEIs</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can you give a concrete example of civic engagement using digital tools in your university and tell us, how you are involved in such projects, programmes, or activities?</li> <li>Can you describe the example in detail: Who is involved? What is the objective? Which activities take place? Do participants utter any specific characteristics of this activity being held online?</li> </ul>
<p><i>Future Outlook</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In your opinion, how can civic engagement using online tools be promoted in the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or university?</li> <li>What digital and technical possibilities are available in the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or university to promote civic engagement?</li> <li>What would you wish from policymaker in terms of digital civic engagement in the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for the future of teaching and learning online in upcoming pandemics or similar situations?</li> </ul>

► **Overview of Qualitative Interviews for Case Studies (see Chapter 4)**

No.	Case study title	Country	Date	Duration	Gender	Position
1	University of Klagenfurt Student Volunteer Projects for Caritas		11.12.2020	46 min.	Male	Professor of the course
2	University of Klagenfurt Student Volunteer Projects for Caritas		21.01.2021	38 min.	Female	Student

No.	Case study title	Country	Date	Duration	Gender	Position
3	Civic and Intercultural Adult Education Course at University of Belgrade		22.01.2021	40 min.	Female	Professor of the course
4	Civic and Intercultural Adult Education Course at University of Belgrade		16.02.2021	45 min.	Female	Students of the course
5	Virtual Student Service Learning Programme at UNED		08.02.2021	40 min.	Male	Coordinator of the UNED Service -Learning Office
6	Virtual Student Service Learning Programme at UNED		18.02.2021	40 min.	Female	(Adult) student
7	The Starter Program at the University of Tartu		04.02.2021	30 min.	Female	Professor of the course
8	The Starter Program at the University of Tartu		04.02.2021	51 min.	Female	Student
9	AIT – FLAC Society		22.03.2021	41 min.	Male	Lecturer
10	AIT – FLAC Society		22.03.2021	39 min.	Female	Student
11	GMIT – Student Digital Civic Engagement Project		23.03.2021	40 min.	Male	Student
12	GMIT – Student Digital Civic Engagement Project		23.03.2021	41 min.	Female	Lecturer

No.	Case study title	Country	Date	Duration	Gender	Position
13	VOLUNTARIUM: UMSumário by the UMinho's Students' Union		08.01.2021	20 min.	Female	Student, VOLUNTARIUM coordinator
14	VOLUNTARIUM: UMSumário by the UMinho's Students' Union		08.01.2021	30 min.	Male	Student
15	Digital Ambassadors at the University of Edinburgh		15.02.2021	55 min.	Male	Community Engagement Projects Coordinator
16	Intercultural Mentoring for Schools Project		26.01.2021	40 min.	Female	Student
17	Intercultural Mentoring for Schools Project		26.01.2021	36 min.	Female	Student
18	Tartu Welcome Centre		03.02.2021	44 min.	Female	Programme leader, CEO of the NGO
19	Tartu Welcome Centre		11.02.2021	44 min.	Female	Student
20	P5 Medicine Center		06.01.2021	40 min.	Male	Student
21	P5 Medicine Center		06.01.2021	20 min.	Male	P5 Medical Center CEO



# STUDENTS

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