DIGITAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACCELERATOR
FOR STUDENT LEARNING
AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT
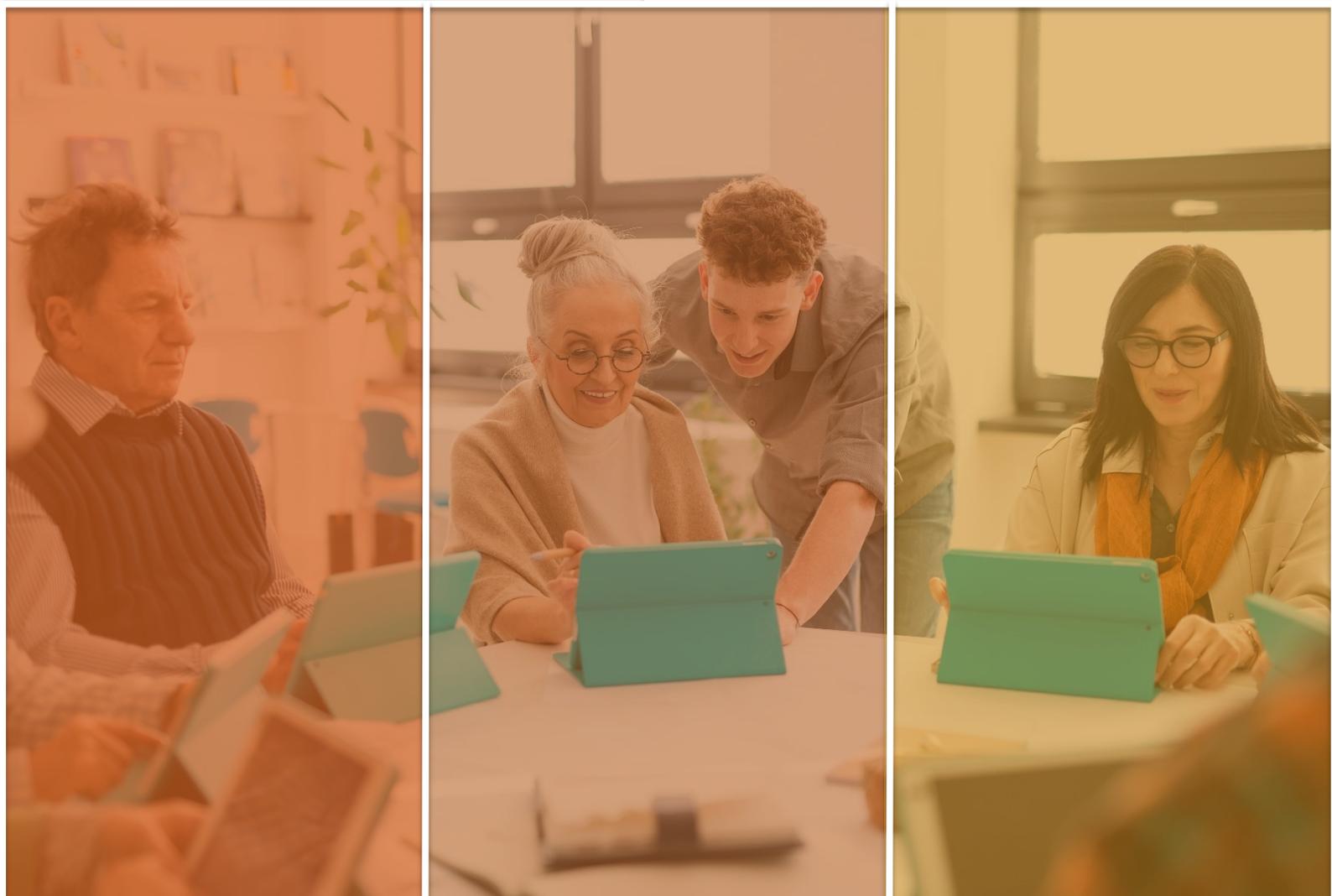
DIGITAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Perspectives from Five Countries: Germany, Italy, Romania, Slovakia and Spain

Project: Digital Community Engagement Accelerator for Student Learning and Socio-economic Impact - DiCE

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SUMMARY

This report presents five reviews on Digital Community Engagement (DiCE) in higher education with a country focus on Germany, Italy, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. It aims to provide an overview of DiCE by identifying the current trends and characteristics, benefits, risks and key recommendations for its implementation. The findings set the basis for the development of the DiCE Project and are also useful for providing higher education stakeholders with an introduction to DiCE. The project partners also developed a summary version available as Digital Community Engagement: Literature Review Report (Hadidomova et al., 2023): https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7722806

This report begins by introducing the context of DiCE in Germany, characterized by the "platformisation" with various tools for civic and citizen engagement, mainly platforms and Civic Tech initiatives. Additionally, Germany presents well-defined strategies in HEIs for E-Service-Learning (electronic Service-Learning [eSL] or Virtual Service-Learning [vSL]). Second, the report introduces the context of Italy, where community engagement is not a well-established practice, but with a recent acceleration in its development, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the main concerns in the Italian context has been the establishment of frameworks and indicators to monitor as a strategy to define and identify specific practices.

The third country focus is Romania, where DiCE has been critical in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a means for people to stay connected and engage with each other. One of the most notable examples of DiCE in Romania since 2020 has been using social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, to organize virtual events and gatherings. Fourthly, the report presents the perspective of Spain, a country with a rich background and tradition in service learning. DiCE has recently emerged in Spain with social media, mobile applications and a rich discussion on digital competencies.

Finally, the report presents the perspective of Slovakia, where community engagement is currently a hot topic due to the growing attention gained by issues such as social responsibility in higher education. Despite the lack of frameworks for defining and operationalising DiCE, it has already been implemented through international projects, digital platforms, eSL, and volunteerism.

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the experience of DiCE across diverse higher education systems and includes specific examples from various contexts in Europe.

CONTENT

ABBREVIATIONS

CE - Community Engagement

SC - Citizen Science

Civ Tech - Civic Technology

DCE - Digital Civic Engagement

DiCE - Digital Community Engagement

eSL - Electronic Service-Learning

EU - European Union

Gov Tech - Government Technology

HEI - Higher Education Institution

KPI - Key Performance Indicator

NGO - Non-Governmental Organisation

SL - Service Learning

SMEs - Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

STEM - Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

UK - United Kingdom

vSL - Virtual Service-Learning

GLOSSARY

Civic engagement: individual and collective actions which are designed to identify and address issues of public concern. It can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organisational involvement to electoral participation (APA. 2009). It is often used synonymously with community engagement. The term 'civic' does imply a focus on promoting active citizenship and democratic values. The term is most frequently used in the USA.

Community: is defined as all possible communities of place (geography), identity (demography), or interest (experiences). It encompasses organisations from government, business, and civil society, as well as citizens (Farnell, 2020).

Community engagement: is a strategic process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest, or affiliation to identify and address issues affecting their well-being. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilise resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices (CDC/ATSDR, 1997).

Community engagement in higher education: is a process whereby universities engage with external organisations to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial, even if each side benefits in a different way. The principle of mutual benefit is central to community engagement (Benneworth, P. & Zeeman, 2018).

Digital Community Engagement (DiCE): DiCE blends established digital humanities, public humanities, citizen science, and community engagement practices. DiCE refers to using digital methodologies when partnering with communities and using digital platforms to reach a wider public. "DiCE projects often draw upon the approaches and values developed in the field of academic civic engagement, which encompasses community-based research, place-based engagement, public scholarship, and service learning or community-based learning" (Wingo et al., 2022).

Engaged university: A university that engages directly with external communities and embeds engagement as a core activity, meaning that engagement is incorporated into teaching and research rather than as a peripheral third mission (Farnell, 2020).

Engagement: is defined as the range of ways in which university staff, students and management interact with external communities in mutually beneficial ways, whether as a part of teaching and research, of joint projects and initiatives or of university governance and management (Farnell, 2020).

Public engagement: describes the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Its definition is very close to the definition of community engagement in higher education. The term is frequently used in the UK (NCCPE, 2019).

Service Learning (SE): is a community-based learning or a pedagogical approach that combines the goals of service to the community with the learning opportunities offered to the engaged students. It is generally described as experiential learning that includes a balanced focus on the service provided to the community and the learning that takes place in that service (Furco, 2002). Service learning can be fully integrated into the curriculum.

Societal needs: refer to all political, economic, cultural, social, technological, and environmental factors that influence the quality of life in society (Farnell, 2020).

University-Community Engagement: involves a relationship between universities and the community that will support research and facilitate learning through teaching practice, community service, and other public engagement (Heloise, 2021).

Volunteering: is time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain. It involves actively seeking out opportunities to assist those in need and making substantial and ongoing commitments to help, often at a significant personal expense, while also maintain these commitments over extended periods of time (Snyder, 2001). It is a part of the wider concept of civic participation.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE DiCE PROJECT

Universities' third mission aims to enable higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop society and its communities, to become a bridge between the scientific community and the people, and to strengthen community engagement (CE). This engagement usually occurs in physical spaces and through various activities aimed at supporting the surrounding ecosystem of the institutions. At the same time, digitalisation has consolidated as an omnipresent mediator of social interactions, from healthcare, urban planning, and waste management to education. What we have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic is that we can move many processes and services into the digital world, which opens new possibilities for institutions and society.

University-CE can also benefit from the positive outcomes of digitalisation. For example, consolidating Digital Community Engagement (DiCE) strategies can help universities broaden their activities, interact with stakeholders beyond the physical borders, and connect with people from various cultural, social and economic backgrounds. DiCE refers to using digital methodologies and tools when engaging with society (external stakeholders). DiCE initiatives include community-based research, place-based engagement, online hackathons, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) approaches, online fundraising, crowdsourcing, citizen science (SC) projects, and digital service learning, to name a few.

However, interlinking DiCE and universities may be challenging, as educators and course directors often need to learn how to proceed. First, they need more information about tools and procedures that might help improve student's learning and social impact. Second, they need to catch up on the guidance to help them step-by-step set up the CE courses in the digital space, often resulting in frustration and failed motivation. This document provides an overview of a literature scanning on DiCE conducted by the partners participating in the DiCE project, focusing on their countries.

1.1 Purpose of the Literature Review

These literature reviews present academic and non-academic resources (success stories, good practices) and reflects state-of-the-art community engagement focusing on DiCE. It aims to inform the development of the DiCE Project, serving as a basis that offers a panorama of the status quo on DiCE in the countries participating in the project. Additionally, it examines current trends, practices, and initiatives in university community engagement with digital elements and explores the risks and benefits associated with its implementation. All this information has been

summarised in the DICE Literature Review Report to paint a holistic picture of DiCE in HEIs in Europe.

A student survey was conducted to compare students' understanding of DiCE with the findings obtained from the literature review. The literature review and student questionnaire survey inputs provide the necessary basis for creating two value maps: the value map of students' learning and the value map for Social Impact. Those value maps are analytical frameworks to be used by the target groups (university educators and course directors) to help them improve study programs, student learning and social impact by creating DiCE courses

1.2 The DiCE Project

The objective of the Digital Community Engagement Accelerator for Student Learning and Socio-economic Impact (DiCE), a project funded by the European Union, is to promote the digitalization and third mission of universities. This is achieved by equipping educators and course directors with practical guidance on developing digital community engagement courses that can have a positive impact on the surrounding community. The project gathers the latest knowledge on support for advancing CE initiatives, builds an acceleration program, and pilots the accelerator in HEIs. The results include a digital tool, enhanced capacity, and orientation to dissect the complex challenge of digitalising community engagement into smaller parts and translate it into enhanced student learning and social impact.

In order to achieve its objectives, the project undertakes research to create two value maps that reflect the perspectives of the final users, namely students and communities. With a literature review, the partners understand the state-of-the-art CE in Europe and current trends and developments in DiCE in each country. This literature review is enhanced with a student survey to examine their understanding of DiCE. The results of these two inputs feed the development of the value maps. These value maps contain information on the perception of students on the priorities and the benefits that the implementation of DiCE brings to the communities.

Furthermore, the project aims to develop a comprehensive manual for university educators and course directors, which will offer detailed, step-by-step guidance on creating DiCE courses. The manual also supports the creation of an innovative Digital Accelerator Platform for enabling educators and course directors to develop their tailored courses according to their requirements. Additionally, the created manual and accelerator are operationalised into workshops and capacity-building strategies to promote usability. Finally, the project summarises the key learnings from piloting the accelerator in a handbook to implement DiCE in higher education and a best practices report.

Thus, the DiCE project answers two of the most significant challenges of contemporary higher education: fostering digitalisation and advancing the third mission.

Germany

2
GERMANY

by Hugo Buitrago Carvajal, Accreditation Council for Entrepreneurial and Engaged Universities.

2.1 Community Engagement in Germany

Community, civic or social engagement is emerging as a third mission-core activity in European higher education. This trend reflects the increasing pressure on HEIs to provide evidence of their accountability, impact, contribution, and relevance to society (Godonoga & Sporn, 2022).

Developing support mechanisms, frameworks, and policies for social engagement is necessary to assist HEIs in institutionalizing their collaboration with the community, as stated by Schmidt (2020). In addition, developing support resources for social engagement will enable HEIs to address societal challenges better and demonstrate to policymakers the importance of such engagement.

The third mission is also a crucial element for German HEIs. In 2020, Berghaeuser and Hoelscher identified three central dimensions of third mission activities in German HEIs: knowledge and technology transfer, further education/lifelong learning, and societal engagement. These three dimensions align with the existing literature about Germany (Henke et al., 2016; Hachmeister et al., 2016). However, the research also showed that most HEIs emphasize knowledge/technology transfer and economic impact and pay less attention to connecting with society. Furthermore, three trends in the mission of engagement with society are the most visible in Germany: service learning (SL), CS, and consolidation of networks supporting engagement.

Compared to other European countries, SL in Germany has a recent tradition. As mentioned by Schröten (2011), service learning was introduced by the Freudenberg Foundation in 2001 as a pedagogical approach to combine the teaching of specialist knowledge and fostering civic and democratic values. The aim was to achieve more youth participation in their communities and that they acquire knowledge and skills into practice (Schröten, 2011). Nowadays, many universities have support units organizing SL at the institutional level as a co-curricular activity. For example, the University of Kassel is a leader in SL (UniKasselTransfer, 2021) by integrating this perspective in about 30 courses, awarding ECTS to the participants, embedding this practice in diverse fields of study, and implementing partnerships with external organizations.

In the SC field, according to Science Europe (2018), thousands of SC projects are being carried out in Germany. The cooperation of the DACH countries (D-Germany, A-Austria, CH-Switzerland) has consolidated a model offering guidelines, such as the Citizen Science Strategy

2030 for Germany (Bonn et al., 2022). SC is a modality of research in which citizens participate in one or several stages of a research project by achieving specific tasks. Farnell (2020) mentioned that in Germany, community-based research (research-driven the necessities of the communities) often relates to the social sciences and to public health, while SC projects are predominantly in the life sciences (biology, ecology, ornithology, astronomy, meteorology and microbiology).

The country has created diverse mechanisms to advance social engagement. First, observatories and networks at the EU and national levels, such as the European Observatory of Service-Learning in Higher Education-EOSLHE and Hochschulnetzwerk Bildung durch Verantwortung (Higher Education Network on Societal Responsibility). Next are internal support structures that plan, advise and develop independent activities, such as creative labs and living labs (Creative Lab Ruhr, Edible Cities Network, etc.) or science shops (Wissenschaftsladen Bonn, etc.). Other institutions have a section for social engagement embedded in the knowledge transfer or entrepreneurship units (SL at the University of Kassel). The HEIs also offer courses focused on social engagement, such as:

- **Case 1 - Module Service-Learning International:** Engage, Connect, Reflect (University of Fribourg): In this co-curricular module, students get involved in their local community. They volunteer in intercultural teams, support projects in local NGOs, contribute to local solutions for societal challenges and expand their networks. The module includes theoretical framing, practical experience, and peer advising.
- **Case 2 - UNIAKTIV - Centre for Social Learning and Social Responsibility (University of Duisburg-Essen):** This unit centralizes service-learning and social engagement opportunities, projects, resources, orientation, seminars and all the support students need to engage with their communities effectively.

2.2 Digital Community Engagement in Germany

According to the findings of the Third Civic Engagement Report (HIIG, 2020) in Germany, it is evident that civic engagement among young people (aged between 14 to 27) is quite prevalent. Specifically, 64.2% of young individuals in the age group engage in civic activities through clubs and associations, 30.3% participate in informal groups, and 21.9% participate in online civic engagement activities.

Based on the sample of respondents, 43.2% of individuals identified themselves as "digitally involved people." These individuals engage with others through various digital media platforms to varying degrees, with 26.1% engaging partly, 14.4% engaging predominantly, and 2.7% engaging exclusively through digital media.

According to the report, the key topics on digital civic engagement are data protection, the fight against hate speech and living together in a digitalized world. DiCE represents an excellent

potential for public relations, charitable initiatives, personnel and programme development, recruiting of volunteers, funding, crowdsourcing, civic Tech, and SC, among others.

The interest in DiCE is a growing topic since "digital means expand not only the forms but also the contents of engagement. Digitalisation itself is becoming a matter of civic engagement" (HIIG, 2020, p.8). This change in engagement does not only challenge users but organizations promoting CE, obliging them to adapt their strategies, initiatives and processes. The COVID-19 pandemic became an eye-opener and an accelerator of digital changes worldwide. It became clear that "there are signs of a development towards a digitized civil society. Civil society actors are increasingly and actively shaping the process of digitalization in society as a whole" (HIIG, 2020, p. 9). The HIIG report (2020) found a wide variety of tools for civic and citizen engagement, mainly platforms and Civic Tech initiatives, which they define as the "platformisation" of digital engagement.

During the pandemic, efforts to advance methodologies for DiCE were made in Germany, such as the Practical Guide on e-Service-Learning (Albanesi et al., 2020). As a result, e-Service-Learning (electronic Service-Learning [eSL] or Virtual Service-Learning [vSL]) was defined as a course mediated by ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in which the instructional component, the service component, or both occur online or in a hybrid model (Waldner et al., 2012; Manjarrés et al., 2020; Albanesi et al., 2020). The recommendations for implementing eSL (Albanesi et al., 2020; Hoyer-Neuhold, 2020) are grouped into three types:

- **Virtual pedagogies and specific course design:** instructional design adjustment (preparation, action and analysis), preparation of guides, planning for pedagogical activities, and evaluation.
- **Technological solutions:** skills; technological capacities; support; synchronous and asynchronous tools; social media; digital collaboration, and engagement.
- **Communication and interaction:** definition of communication channels and expectations; continuous feedback; group work; and online discussion.

To better illustrate a panorama on the diversity of activities involving DiCE in higher education, the following cases present initiatives developed in Germany in different fields of study:

- **Case 1 – Garten-Bestäuber (garden pollinator), Technical University of Munich and the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (SC project):** This project investigates how urban community gardens contribute to protecting wild bees. Citizens receive training for counting, measuring, and reporting, through digital means, the wild bees in their gardens.
- **Case 2 - Corona crisis hotline, social commitment of psychology students, University of Kassel (e-health project):** project developed in cooperation with the health department and the social department of the city of Kassel, which aimed at supporting (by phone or digital means) people psychologically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, who was unsettled, afraid of the future, suffered from loneliness or needed any phycological help.

- **Case 3 - Women Entrepreneurs in Science, University of Wuppertal (entrepreneurship support):** This support unit works with women interested in founding a company by integrating them with their entrepreneurial ecosystem. It uses digital resources such as online mentorship, workshops, and crowdsourcing on Slack channels with regional entrepreneurs.
- **Case 4 - German-Brazilian EdTech Hackathon, Universität Münster (international online hackathon):** students from Germany and Brazil work in digital-mediated environments with entrepreneurs, educators, policy-makers, mentors, and researchers to propose technological solutions to current challenges in digital education.

2.3 Risks and Benefits of DiCE in Germany

The pandemic period created a pick of enthusiasm for the digitalisation of most social activities; nevertheless, the world has come back to a certain level of "normality." The debate about increasing the levels of digitalisation is ongoing, yet some risks remain, including:

- Increase of the digital divide because of the lack of resources to access equipment, software and training.
- Less inclusivity in democratic life because of the increasing divide between diverse demographic groups.
- Radicalisation of the discourses and political opinion because of the spread of misinformation, prejudices, polarisation, and threats to social cohesion.
- Inappropriate use of digital technologies in activities of data harvesting, manipulating public opinion, promoting propaganda, and creating and disseminating deep fakes, among others.
- Low levels of trust in digitalised digital civic processes due to a lack of visibility of the benefits, impacts and changes that those activities generate for society.

On the other hand, the benefits that DiCE can bring to students and to society are undeniable. The benefits of onsite and digital community engagement overlap because the aim is the same, but the change occurs at the means level. The following table presents a panorama of the benefits that DiCE brings to students and communities:

Benefits for students	Benefits for communities
Increased experiential and social learning: • Application of theoretical knowledge. • Application and enhancement of digital skills. • Acquiring knowledge from mentors and societal stakeholders. • Problem analysis and problem-solving skills.	Increased citizens' knowledge and skills: • Acquisition and enhancement of skills related to digital literacy and digital citizenship. • Closing basic generational skill gaps. • Opportunities for updating knowledge with HEIs.
Increased employability skills:	Increased social cohesion and integration:

• Acquisition of soft skills like coordination, presentation, working in groups. • Development of digital skills related to content creation, moderation, marketing, social media. • Shadowing organizations and work positions. • Interpersonal skills. • A résumé-builder (gain work experience).	• Empowerment and integration of people from different backgrounds and age groups. • Increased trust in community organizations and governance. • Enhanced community-university relations.
Increased integration of civil society activities: • Strengthening of relations with the communities. • Participation in civil society and democratic life. • Development of critical thinking. • Improved social responsibility and citizenship skills.	Increased participation in democratic and civic processes: • Strengthening local networks of community members. • Opening spaces for discussing social concerns. • Opportunity for enhancing diverse social initiatives.
Enhanced network of contacts and public relations: • Networking with peers interested in the same topics. • Networking with businesses, SMEs, entrepreneurs. • Awareness of the network of organizations working with social issues onsite and digitally (NGOs, civil society organizations, public authorities, HEIs).	Valuable human resources needed to achieve community work: • Improved the liveability of local communities. • Provision of non-for-profit services. • Reduced stereotypes and increased intercultural understanding.
Increased leadership skills like: • Project management and coordination. • Self-awareness. • Empathy. • Motivation.	Increased agency capacity of communities: • Consolidation of digital opportunities for social actions. • Cooperative work to advance social initiatives.
Personal development: • Personal fulfilment for contribution to society. • Greater sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and ethical development. • Increased intercultural understanding. • Improved ability to understand complexity and ambiguity.	Increased support for mental wellbeing: • Personal fulfilment and satisfaction to contribute to society and to the own community. • Increased intergenerational understanding.

2.4 Recommendations on How to Advance DiCE in Germany

DiCE and other related practices such as eSL or vSL are vital topics to promote intergenerational integration, develop a sense of belonging, advance digital citizenship, and develop digital literacy, among other key topics. DiCE is advancing with institutions such as Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (HIIG), which provides knowledge on digitalisation and society,

European projects such as Students as Civic Engagers (2020-2022) that have developed tools, and the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens-DigComp (Vourikari, 2021) that provides the competence framework at the EU level.

There are scattered actions to promote the skills students, researchers, educators, HEIs, and communities need to implement DiCE effectively in higher education. However, no specific courses are dedicated to DiCE, posing a challenge to integrating new forms of digital interactions and practices among students, institutions and society. So, the consolidation of DiCE implies advancing competencies such as planning and managing digital civic initiatives, managing online volunteering, engaging in digital democratic processes, digital crowdsourcing, Civ Tech, Gov Tech, and digital fundraising.

The key recommendations to advance DiCE and the related activities promoting the engagement of higher education students with society included in this article come from fields such as digital civic engagement (DCE), CS and eSL:

DiCE and other related practices as eSL or vSL are key topics to promote intergenerational integration, develop the sense of belonging, advancing digital citizenship, and developing digital literacy, among other key topics. DiCE has is advancing with institutions as Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (HIIG) that provides knowledge on digitalisation and society, European projects such as Students as Civic Engagers (2020-2022) that have developed tools, and the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens-DigComp (Vourikari, 2021) that provides the competence framework at the EU level.

There are scattered actions to promote the skills that students, researchers, educators, HEIs and the communities, need to implement DiCE effectively in higher education, but there are no specific courses dedicated to DiCE. This is a challenge because it is not a matter of translating traditional CE practices into online environments, it is about integrating new forms of digital interactions and practices among students, institutions and society. So, the consolidation of DiCE implies advancing in competences such as planning and management of digital civic initiatives, managing online volunteering, engaging in digital democratic processes, digital crowdsourcing, Civ Tech, Gov Tech, digital fundraising, among others.

The key recommendations to advance DiCE and the related activities promoting the engagement of higher education students with society included in this article come from fields as digital civic engagement (DCE), CS and eSL:

- Facilitating and strengthening digital competencies in pedagogical work and promoting the development of new digital skills for educators and support staff.
- Creating support structures that enable initiative creators and organisations to take advantage of digital environments.
- Combining established and digital practices of CE to enrich the content of the current institutional strategies for engagement.
- Promoting diverse aspects of digital literacy and digital competencies across society to facilitate a common language of participation.

- Generating data on digital engagement in diverse sectors and young people to better understated the emergent neds and opportunities.
- Promoting diverse Civ Tec, Gov Tec and platforms disrupting the field of civic engagement.
- Visibilising diverse civic engagement initiatives and opportunities through diverse platforms and media.
- Setting roadmaps to show how citizens can take part in diverse digital initiatives such as SC, crowdsourcing, etc.
- Developing synergies among initiatives to enhance the communication impact.

The "platformisation" of civic digital engagement is a phenomenon influencing the development of DiCE in Germany, as HIIG (2020) mentioned. Platforms play a crucial role in supporting the development of projects, advancing skills, and supporting the process of engaging with communities through digital means.

Two examples of DiCE in Germany are:

- **Case 1 - OPIN - Platform for digital youth participation in Europe (European Toolbox for Youth eParticipation Projects):** OPIN is an open-non-profit platform that motivates young people to get involved in politics by allowing organizations to create digital participation projects. The platform facilitates collective idea generation, participation in political planning, and engagement in electoral processes. To ensure that projects are well-designed, they offer an e-learning journey through the stages of the design of the project, namely: idea phase, preparation phase, participation phase, result phase.
- **Case 2 – PROJEKT Jugend.Beteiligen.Jetzt (Youth Involve Now):** project developed to promote young people's digital participation in politics. The project offered support through know-how, tools and platforms to consolidate a culture of a youth-friendly society in diverse municipalities, youth welfare organizations, youth initiatives, and associations. They developed guides such as the Municipal youth participation in the digital society (Kommunale Jugendbeteiligung in der digitalen Gesellschaft) and the curriculum to Practice Digital Youth Participation (Curriculum „Praxis digitale Jugendbeteiligung"). These tools map the skills required to get involved with DiCE.

In conclusion, DiCE in higher education is a growing trend in Germany, reflecting the increasing importance of social engagement in higher education and the increasing use of digital technologies in society. This article identifies the key benefits of DiCE for students and communities and critical cases that are advancing the topic. The three most visible trends in Germany are SL, SC, and the consolidation of networks supporting engagement. In addition, HEIs offer various support structures, courses, and activities to advance social engagement and provide students with opportunities to engage with their communities. Overall, DiCE plays a crucial role in advancing the third mission in German higher education and enabling institutions to address societal challenges better.

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ITALY

3
ITALY

By Tommaso Fratini and Luca Russo, Università Telematica degli Studi.

3.1 Community Engagement in Italy

In Italy, community engagement activity has emerged without any particular order, although it still needs widespread adoption. However, essential experiences document an effort to move towards a European dimension.

We report here on the experience of some universities in Northern Italy. The first is the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona, characterized by its teaching strength and interdisciplinary focus, offering opportunities for dialogue, debate and interaction with society through educational and cultural events and projects, sharing academic results and contributing to spread of knowledge related to culture in Verona and Italy.

The Department has numerous local and national collaborations with many institutions: MIUR, Regional Scholastic Office, educational and academic institutions of all levels, the Municipality of Verona, the Academy of Fine Arts of Verona, the Veneto Region, associations for the promotion of culture, banking foundations and cultural foundations.

Another essential experience is that of the University of Umbria. A crucial part of studying at the Umbra Institute involves establishing a deep connection with the local community and actively engaging in Italian culture, which applies to students and participants. For this reason, Umbra provides students with a diversified curriculum that incorporates the immense educational resources of Italy, particularly in the city of Perugia, through community engagement. Community engagement at Umbra is the cornerstone of our educational philosophy. It is the collaborative process of combining academic study and work with community partners through ongoing dialogue, planning, research, and action. As a result, students benefit from intercultural exchange, language acquisition, and a more global perspective. In addition, Umbra actively maintains vibrant, well-established relationships with its partners in Perugia—local artisan and internationally recognized companies, schools, city and regional governments, fair trade cooperatives, museums, and Italian families. This collaboration allows students to incorporate real-world practice with theoretical coursework.

In conclusion, public engagement in Italy has yet to be so widespread, but there are certainly some vital experiences relating to territorial centres.

3.2 Digital Community Engagement in Italy

In the past few years, the digitalization of the community engagement process grew after the pandemic. Without a doubt, it was an ongoing process, but the pandemic boosted its development. Two practical examples are provided to describe this trend: university and health.

The first example is based on the university apparatus. As Compare et al. (2022) suggest, the COVID-19 pandemic caused abrupt changes to teaching and learning. The transition from face-to-face to emergency remote teaching was challenging for all levels of education as it was rapid and unexpected. Before the pandemic, only online universities had a proper digital communication system. Since then, even traditional universities have begun to use digital tools to engage students. Besides the instructional sessions, the primary emphasis of digital communication and the DiCE is on fostering a sense of community and providing ongoing support to students and local residents. Universities are increasingly utilizing social media and video platforms to initiate public engagement, conducting numerous webinars. Nevertheless, this process is not yet completed at all, especially regarding gender equality (Anzivino, 2021). Italian universities are monitored by ANVUR (the agency for university supervision) regarding the policy and strategies of public and community engagement.

The second example of alternative community engagement is related to health. In fact, in the last few years, there is a reduction in the distance between scientists and the community. Scientists actively engage with society to interact, connect and facilitate the relationship between the scientific world and the world of non-experts (Anzivino, 2021). Even in medicine and health, the trend is to create better community engagement strategies. It is common to see doctors and professionals use their social channels to engage people and inform them about health issues. While the top-down approach is deemed effective, alternative methods such as peer approaches are also employed. The integration and involvement of volunteers, peers, groups of patients, and social networks with formal health and social care services or programs have bolstered the concept of community engagement initiatives (Longo et al., 2022). This approach, using digital and non-digital methods, leads to conclude that CE is a fundamental pillar of contemporary welfare systems because of both the changing demography and epidemiology and the disruptive impact of platform economy models (Longo et al., 2022).

It is crucial to emphasize the necessity of adequate digital literacy among the general population to enable them to take advantage of the benefits of DiCE, as seen from our standpoint.

3.3 Risks and Benefits of DiCE in Italy

Only recently, Italian universities have systematically built a model that is more present and engaged in the territory (Boffo & Gagliardi, 2015), more engaging towards the public than previously. Nevertheless, the necessary skills to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of strategies are still missing. Furthermore, unlike most companies, which follow customer requests according to ad hoc studies, many universities fail to meet the needs of the

target "markets" and therefore do not fully exploit the potential to give significance to social contributions, economic and cultural aspects of the territories in which they are present.

Given the excellent variety of interaction mechanisms between universities and surrounding territories, it becomes difficult to classify and analyse the activities under the label of the third mission.

Universities contribute to the life of society in a variety of ways. Activities such as third-party research, the creation of spin-offs or the management of intellectual property have been progressively institutionalised, have regulatory definitions, created specific organisational structures of the universities, and activated professionalisation of personnel. Some institutional entities, namely: museums and archaeological sites involved in producing and managing cultural assets, may have reduced internal traceability and external visibility. This is particularly relevant when considering the significance of their institutional websites as a means of communication with students, institutions, and communities. Still others, for example, the communication of science or participation in public debate, are mainly carried out on individual initiative and pose problems of detection and evaluation, as well as of representation and dissemination to society. However, dedicated resources and the impact on the community appears limited in most universities. Some limits of the evaluation concern the provision of activities that are only sometimes entirely attributable to public engagement: many initiatives are centred on aspects of the orientation and image of the universities rather than on the meaning of public engagement and its potential.

Furthermore, the evaluation concerns the institutional level; activities attributable to individual initiatives cannot be evaluated, and some activities are already institutional (for example, open days). Nevertheless, a set of potentials remains largely unexplored, and a concrete work program for Italian universities can be recognised. As confirmation of this, experiences have been launched to detect some partial indicators, and the implementation in many national universities of offices, working groups, and research centres focused on the activities in the study of the relationships of sharing of intentions between the university and the community.

Benefits for students:

- Supporting individual student initiatives.
- Improving communication potential among students.
- Creating university research centres to support the potential of students.

Benefits for communities:

- Assessing the effectiveness of public engagement implementation strategies.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of public engagement implementation strategies
- Increasing community resources that are still limited.

3.4 Recommendations on how to Advance DiCE in Italy

1. Produce more than **a virtual community.** Blasi et at. (2022) showed that despite a very active use of social networks, some citizens did not show an active engagement, especially in big cities. In light of these results, this aspect should be managed best by encouraging digital and onsite activities and events.

2. Create **a stimulating learning environment** with the possibility to self-aggregation according to individual needs and priorities. This aspect requires a very detailed engineering of the digital accelerator. The possibility to collaborate on real issues (connected with real everyday life) should be provided.

3. Create a better awareness of the "digital word" to use the web as a real way to create community and not only as a "tool for fun". A good starting point could be to use the socials in this project as a working tool. It is essential to underline that DiCE could be considered a "social incubator"; therefore, focus should be on the social impact (Sansone et al., 2020). For this reason, a good recommendation could be to focus on digital awareness.

Two successful stories of projects of digital service-learning in Italian universities are:

- **"Service Learning & Community Engagement" at the University of Bologna.** "We are a team of community psychologists with a solid academic education that, thanks to our mentor Bruna Zani, has developed operative and research interests in the Service-Learning (S-L) methodology. We have been attracted by the possibility of integrating research, intervention, and community development. We are also fascinated by the idea of establishing solid university-community partnerships, bringing innovation both in academic education and social settings we deal with. We believe that the values of our discipline can positively "contaminate" other disciplines through the S-L, implementing learning spaces capable of valuing resources and competencies (often implicit) of different actors (students, faculties, partners, and community members)." Details of the project area available at: https://site.unibo.it/servicelearning-labpsicom/en

- **"Frontiere di comunità"** event in June 2016. This congress focused on the complexity of the community and the use of service learning for community creation, active citizenship, and community engagement for a healthy lifestyle. The congress was one of the first events in these aspects. Details of the event and the book of abstract have been published at: https://core.ac.uk/reader/143609670#page=37

3.5 Digital Community Engagement of HEIs in Europe

The latest Eurydice Report on digital education in Europe (EACEA/ Eurydice, 2018) showed that for the reference year 2009/10, all European countries had national strategies in place to promote the use of ICT in education. Indeed, the European Commission had just adopted a Digital Agenda for Europe in 2010, reaffirming digital and media literacy as one of the central challenges

in education. While the report found that all European countries had national strategies to encourage the use of digital technology in different areas, 28 countries had adopted a digital strategy specifically dedicated to education. Strategies aimed to ensure students had the necessary digital skills, dedicated teacher training, and up-to-date technology and infrastructure.

Continuous and growing digitisation in all life contexts and changes within technology means that government strategies and policies become obsolete quickly. Therefore, European countries must continuously review their approaches to meet the new demands for high-quality digital education at school. Unsurprisingly, almost a decade after the last Eurydice Report, virtually all education systems still have digital education strategies. In general, digital education is included as a component of a broader strategy in approximately 50% of the countries, with the majority of these nations situated in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. On the other hand, 18 education systems have a specific strategy, most of which are part of Western, Central and Northern Europe. The different general strategies, including digital education, are as follows.

- Lifelong learning and education strategies (French and Flemish Communities of Belgium, Estonia, Croatia, Cyprus, Latvia, Finland, Albania and North Macedonia);
- Digital, media literacy and information society strategies (Greece, Malta, Portugal, Romania and Montenegro);
- Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) strategies (Liechtenstein);
- Socio-economic development and industrial strategies (Poland and United Kingdom - England);
- Innovation strategies (UK - Northern Ireland).

Currently, only six education systems do not have a strategy related to digital education: the German-speaking Community of Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, and Turkey. However, in Lithuania, the previous strategy lasted until 2016, and a new strategy is being developed. A digitalisation strategy/agenda was presented in the Netherlands in March 2019. In Turkey, without a top-level strategy, the FATIH (Movement of Enhancing Opportunities and Improving Technology) represents a large-scale project and an educational movement supported by top-level education authorities, which aims to increase digital literacy and the pedagogical use of technology in schools.

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ROMANIA

4
ROMANIA

By Emilia Binchiciu, HELIXCONNECT Europe.

4.1 Community Engagement in Romania

Digital community engagement refers to using digital technologies and platforms to facilitate interactions, communication, and collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) and their surrounding communities in Romania. Although in recent years, digital community engagement has become increasingly important as technology has changed how people communicate and connect. The following presents an overview of the current trends of community engagement (CE) in Romania:

- **Collaborative Research Projects:** Collaborative research projects between universities and local organisations have become increasingly popular in Romania. This community engagement allows universities to contribute their expertise and resources to solve local problems and improve community well-being.

- **Volunteer Programs:** Universities and colleges in Romania actively encourage students to participate in volunteer programs and community service initiatives. These programs help students gain practical experience and positively impact their communities while strengthening relationships between the university and the community.

- **Sustainability Initiatives:** Sustainability and environmental protection have become critical priorities for universities and colleges in Romania, as reflected by the growing number of community engagement initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development and reducing the negative impact of universities on the environment.

- **Digital Engagement:** With the increasing importance of technology in higher education, universities and colleges in Romania are using digital platforms and tools to engage with their communities. The digital tools include online forums, social media, and other digital platforms that allow universities to reach a wider audience and build stronger relationships with the community.

- **Community Outreach Programs:** Community outreach programs have become increasingly popular in Romania as universities and colleges seek to provide educational and cultural resources to the community. These programs can take many forms, including public lectures, workshops, and other educational events that unite the university and the community.

- **Focus on Social Responsibility:** Many universities in Romania also focus on social responsibility as a critical aspect of their community engagement initiatives. Institutional

social responsibility includes efforts to address local issues, such as poverty and inequality, and promote equality and diversity.

In conclusion, CE in Romania is evolving, with universities and colleges seeking new and innovative ways to build stronger relationships with their communities. These trends reflect the growing importance of community engagement in higher education, as universities and colleges work to impact society positively and contribute to sustainable development.

4.2 Digital Community Engagement in Romania

In Romania, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on how people interact and engage with each other, as well as with their communities. In response, many communities have moved their engagement activities online, relying on digital tools and platforms to keep in touch and maintain a sense of community spirit. Overall, digital community engagement (DiCE) has been critical in Romania during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a means for people to stay connected and engage with each other, even when they cannot physically be together. One of the most notable examples of DiCE in Romania since 2020 is using social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, to organize virtual events and gatherings. For instance, community leaders and organizations have used these platforms to host virtual concerts, fitness classes, book clubs, and other activities.

In addition, online forums and discussion groups have become popular, providing a platform for people to share information, ask for advice, and connect with others who share their interests. These forums have become particularly important during the pandemic as they continue to provide a sense of community and support for those who are isolated or struggling with mental health issues. Another aspect of DiCE in Romania since 2020 has been using crowdfunding platforms to raise money for community projects and initiatives. For example, several campaigns have been launched to support local businesses, schools, and hospitals during the pandemic. HEIs in Romania have started to recognize the potential of digital technologies to enhance their community engagement efforts. For example, many universities use social media platforms, online forums, and virtual events to connect with their local communities and provide opportunities for engagement and collaboration.

4.3 Risks and Benefits of DiCE in Romania

Risks of DiCE Implementation in Romania:

1. **Cybersecurity Risks:** DiCE involves the using technology and the internet, making it vulnerable to cyber-attacks. Hackers and cybercriminals can easily access personal information and cause harm to the community.

2. **Data Privacy Concerns:** DiCE often involves collecting and storing sensitive information, such as personal and financial information. This information can be misused or stolen if not adequately protected, leading to potential privacy violations.

3. **Technical Glitches and Errors:** Technical issues can be a significant risk in DiCE as it requires various digital tools and systems. Technical glitches and errors can cause delays or even failures in communication and engagement between the community and HEIs, negatively impacting the effectiveness of the engagement.

4. **Digital Divide:** DiCE may exacerbate existing inequalities and the digital divide, particularly for communities that do not have access to technology or digital devices.

5. **Lack of Interpersonal Interaction:** DiCE may lack interpersonal interaction and face-to-face communication which is critical for building trust, relationships, and understanding between communities and institutions.

Benefits of Digital Community Engagement Implementation in Romania:

Benefits for students:

1. **Career Preparation:** DiCE provides students with opportunities to apply the skills and knowledge they have acquired in the classroom to real-world situations. These opportunities allow students to develop their professional and leadership skills, preparing them for future careers.

2. **Enhanced Understanding of Community Issues:** Through CE, students can gain a better understanding of the complex social, economic and environmental challenges facing communities in Romania. This can help them develop a sense of empathy, compassion and social responsibility.

3. **Improved Sense of Purpose and Fulfilment:** Engaging in community-based research can give students a sense of purpose and fulfilment as they can see their work's positive impact on others' lives. This feeling can increase motivation and satisfaction with their academic pursuits and foster a lifelong commitment to community service.

4. **Network Building Opportunities:** CE provides students with opportunities to interact with community leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders. This networking opportunity can help them build networks and relationships that benefit them in their future careers.

5. **Cross-Cultural Learning:** Through CE, students can interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures, providing them with opportunities to learn about different perspectives, values, and lifestyles. As a result, their understanding of the world can expand and they can develop greater cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Benefits for communities:

1. **Improved Quality of Life:** Society engaged research can help communities in Romania identify and address critical issues that impact the quality of life for residents, resulting in the development of innovative solutions and improvements in areas such as health, education, and the environment.

2. **Increased Awareness and Understanding:** Society engaged research can raise awareness and understanding of the needs and challenges faced by communities in Romania and hence building support and mobilizing resources to address these issues.

3. **Strengthening Community Resilience**: Engaging in society-based research can assist Romanian communities in developing resilience and adapting to various changing conditions, including economic or environmental changes, thereby promoting these communities' long-term sustainability and viability.

4. **Empowerment and Community Development:** Society-engaged research can empower communities by giving residents a voice and role in shaping their futures. Consequently, this can build a sense of ownership and pride in the community, leading to increased community development and improvement.

5. **Improved Relationships between Community and HEIs:** can foster greater collaboration and partnerships, leading to more effective and sustainable solutions for community issues.

4.4 Recommendations on How to Advance DiCE in Romania

- **Enhance Security Measures:** Implementing strong security measures, such as encryption, two-factor authentication, and regular security audits, is essential to ensure the security and privacy of personal data.

- **Develop User-Friendly Platforms:** To maximize the effectiveness of digital community initiatives, it is essential to foster interpersonal interaction and encourage face-to-face communication by integrating online and offline engagement methods. Furthermore, user-friendly platforms should be developed to ensure everyone can easily access and use them.

- **Encourage Collaboration and Partnerships:** Establishing collaboration and partnerships between higher education institutions, communities, and government agencies is necessary to advance digital engagement in higher education in Romania.

- **Provide Support and Resources:** To ensure the success of digital engagement initiatives, support and resources such as technical assistance, training, and funding should be provided.

DiCE courses are designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills to engage communities through digital platforms and technologies effectively. These courses often cover topics such as:

- The use of social media and other digital tools for CE.
- Strategies for creating effective online campaigns and advocacy efforts.
- The impact of digital technologies on CE and empowerment.
- The ethical considerations of DiCE.
- The role of digital media in promoting social justice and equality.

The course is usually delivered through lectures, discussions, and hands-on projects, allowing students to develop practical skills and gain real-world experience. In addition, these courses are

often offered through communication, public relations, marketing, or community development programs

- **Course 1 - CIVIS Micro-Program "Global Awareness":** The European Higher Education network CIVIS is focused on addressing global challenges concerning energy, climate, and the environment. The University of Bucharest, the Autonomous University of Madrid, and the University of Tübingen have joined forces to create the Global Awareness Program, which aims to teach students about globalization and facilitate understanding of cross-border processes. The courses offered cover a broad range of topics, teaching students interdisciplinary competencies, allowing them to solve problems of this era and promote anti-racism and peace. To further its mission of civic engagement, CIVIS has created a micro-program titled "Civic Engagement", offered by the three universities above. It encourages students to take responsibility and reflect on their volunteering experiences. The micro-program consists of three parts – a service-learning course, a record of civic engagement of at least 180 hours, and an academic feedback session – at least one must be completed at a university abroad. Through this, students gain a deeper understanding of their roles in society and the importance of civic engagement.

- **Course 2 - Aspire Academy**: Aspire Academy is a leadership and entrepreneurship academy in Romania, where participants can learn from top Ivy League professors and lecturers, top industry speakers, and successful regional CEOs and entrepreneurs. The Academy develops an eight-day program specifically designed to encourage motivated students to pursue their passions and cultivate a proactive, communal spirit filled with shared interests and values. Participants can create their Aspire experience by selecting elective courses that best match their needs and interests. The Academy is founded on four fundamental pillars: leadership, personal development, entrepreneurship, and networking with Aspire alumni. During the program, participants can engage in interactive sessions with leaders from various professional backgrounds, as well as communication and self-development projects, lectures on how to build a start-up, and discussions with regional entrepreneurs. Participants can also attend workshops led by Ivy League speakers and lecturers on authentic leadership development, strategic planning, design thinking, and business and ethics. At Aspire Academy, students can discover how to set goals and create plans to achieve them, gain insights into their leadership styles and professional objectives, and learn how to build successful careers. Entrepreneurship can have a powerful and positive impact on the world. It can create jobs, foster innovation, and stimulate economic growth. It can also help create a more equal society by providing everyone with the opportunity to create their own success. At Aspire Academy, students can learn about entrepreneurship and its potential to improve their communities and the world. They can gain knowledge and skills in communication, leadership, and team building through lectures and workshops. To join Aspire Academy, applicants must show a commitment to creating positive change, academic excellence, emotional maturity, a driven personality, and a good command of the English language. These qualities will help them develop the entrepreneurial skills necessary to make a positive difference in society. By taking on an entrepreneurial approach and challenging themselves

to think outside the box, students can explore their ideas' potential and understand the positive impact of their work.

4.5 Digital Community Engagement of HEIs in Europe

- **Digital Technology-Based Community Engagement:** With the advancement of technology and the increasing popularity of digital devices, digital technology-based community engagement has become a popular trend outside Europe. For example, in Asia and Africa, various digital tools such as social media platforms, mobile applications, and online forums are used to engage with local communities, provide information and services, and solicit feedback. (Reference: https://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/how-technology-is-changing-community-engagement/)

- **Collaborative Community Engagement:** Collaborative community engagement is another growing trend that involves community organisations and stakeholders working together to identify and solve local problems. For example, in Latin America, partnerships between governments, non-profit organisations, and businesses are becoming more common to address social and environmental issues. (Reference: https://www.collaborativecommunityengagement.org/what-is-collaborative-community-engagement)

- **Volunteer-based Community Engagement:** Volunteer-based community engagement has become a popular trend as more people become more conscious of social and environmental issues. For example, in Australia and New Zealand, volunteer programs have become a common way for individuals and organisations to engage with local communities and make a positive impact (Reference: https://www.volunteer.org.au/).

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Volunteer-based Community Engagement: https://www.volunteer.org.au/what-is-volunteering

SLOVAKIA

5
SLOVAKIA

By Nina Hadidomova, Technical University of Košice.

5.1 Community Engagement in Slovakia

Despite the emphasis on the third mission of universities in many documents and studies across the world and the European Union, it is almost unknown in the Slovak higher education system. Before 2014, no strategic document containing the terms "third mission" or "third role" of universities was found (Matulayová, 2014). The documents also do not mention community engagement (CE) in universities. Instead, universities are oriented towards industry and the private sector (Brozmanová Gregorová et al., 2019).

The current conceptual document dealing with the development of higher education, which has been in force since 2018 and is valid until 2027, the "National Programme for the Development of Education", mentions the "Implementation of instruments to support the implementation of the third mission of universities". However, this measure needs to be further specified.

What is more visible and considered to be a hot topic in the university environment in Slovakia are volunteering and CE. Universities are approached by organizations looking for volunteers for their activities and volunteering programmes. They largely support such cooperation, but volunteering is perceived as an extra-curricular activity and part of non-formal education. Engaging staff and students in this new role and encouraging CE and social responsibility is a challenging option for 'traditional' higher education institutions (HEIs) as centres of science, research, and education. Many of them are still not open to collaboration with public and non-governmental organizations in the region in which they exist and do not have sufficiently developed capacities to engage with local, regional, or national challenges and problems.

As for the trends in CE in higher education, the lines are blurry. The terms volunteering, civic engagement and community engagement are frequently interchanged or considered the same. Nevertheless, these are the main trends in CE in Slovakia:

1. **Service learning as a pedagogical strategy:**

One of the strongest and most frequent trends observed in CE is SL. The term is a pedagogical strategy for an engaged university (Brozmanová Gregorová et al., 2019). SL, in this case, is

understood as "community-based learning" or a pedagogical approach that combines the goals of service to the community with the learning opportunities offered to the engaged students (Heffernan, 2001). SL is generally described as one mode of experiential learning that includes a balanced focus on the service provided to the community and the learning that takes place in that service (Furco, 2002).

One of the HEIs that embedded service learning (SL) into their curricula is Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. SL has been implemented there since 2005. In 2017, the university rector officially recognized it as one of how the university can fulfil its third mission. The following models of SL are applied in various forms:

- as a course in which SL is an option;
- as an alternative to the classical course;
- as research conducted in the community;
- SL course
- practice in the form of SL.

Other Slovak universities have also embedded SL courses into their curricula, such as the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra. The principles of CE and participation are also taught at other Slovak universities but in the form of different courses, not as SL. The core of these courses is to motivate students to take an active part in their environment and to show their initiative. These courses usually have the form of project-based learning, as the practical part focuses on designing and implementing a project of public benefit.

2. Volunteering:

Volunteering is much more prevalent in Slovakia, and it is mainly done as an extra-curricular activity, which means it's not embedded into the formal structures of the HEIs. Based on the research conducted in 2019, the categories in which volunteering has been organized most frequently are in the field of environmental protection and development of the environment (e.g. cleaning up illegal dumps, beautification brigades - 18%), sports (e.g. organizing sporting events - 12%) and support for charity (helping with public collections, organizing volunteers... - 12 %) (MR SR, 2020).

Digital elements can be observed in volunteering in Slovakia, as online volunteering portals have grown in popularity in recent years. These portals connect people and organizations to help the wider community and foster the interest of young people in their region. In addition, it is an online space to match organizations needing volunteers with an individual willing to offer their resources for a specific cause. One such example is the online portal Growni, a Slovak initiative dedicated to (not only) volunteering.

3. Linking the corporate and civil society sectors in joint initiatives

In recent years, there has been a development of corporate social responsibility and a more significant involvement of corporations in the activities of civil society in Slovakia (Bútorová, 2017). The contribution of these corporations is no longer financial aid, as it was in the past,

but they are trying to focus on creating partnerships with NGOs as well. The corporates often create conditions for young students to combine a professional internship with participation in community engagement at the same time. Examples of such initiatives are Change for Slovakia/Teach for Slovakia (leadership programmes for young people to improve the education system in Slovakia and tackle problems such as illiteracy). Slovensko. Digital is an NGO offering services to improve the quality of digital government services in Slovakia. They offer involvement in inspiring activities, a wide community, a network of contacts, know-how, and the opportunity to contribute to better government services. They also offer the space for young people to implement and create services to make life easier for citizens.

4. **Start-ups and other initiatives:**

The significant development of start-ups in Slovakia also falls into this category. For example, the Helfni Platform was created from the start-up centre of the Technical University of Kosice. It is a platform linking volunteers with volunteering activities. It was set up to raise awareness of opportunities for help and to mediate effective communication between volunteers and public and private organizations. Helfni is available online as a platform or as an app (Android and IOS), enabling effective communication between the two key players – volunteers and organizations seeking volunteer help. In addition to ensuring that the needs of both groups are met, thus contributing to the development of communities, it also popularizes volunteering in the form of *gamification*.

5.2 Digital Community Engagement in Slovakia

There is currently no framework specifying digital community engagement (DiCE) in Slovakia. DiCE is developed mostly through participation and implementation of international projects which are funded by the European Union or other grant schemes. They are usually focused on SL as a means to foster universities´ third mission and their connection to communities. Examples of such projects implemented since 2017 are:

1. **e-Service Learning for more digital and inclusive EU Higher Education systems** (e-SL4EU)**:** The project focuses on *e-Service-Learning* as an innovative pedagogical approach based on experiential learning within the context of HEI. The project's general objective is to increase the social responsibility of HEIs by promoting the use of e-SL to develop students' hard and soft skills, positively impacting community organizations and, consequently, the wider society.
2. **SLIDE - Service-Learning as a pedagogy to promote inclusion, diversity, and digital empowerment:** The SLIDE project aims to intertwine the SL pedagogy with digital empowerment to promote inclusion and diversity. The overall goal of SL is to foster a sense of civic engagement and responsibility in students, while digital empowerment aims to make individuals fit into digital technology, placing that individual at the centre of teaching. Digital Empowerment will be fostered by creating:

- training program for HEI teachers, trainers and educational leaders in the form of *e-learning.*
- Virtual European Hub, an *online space* for exchanging & disseminating knowledge on SL and Digital Empowerment.
- *online events* (Online World café for teachers and Social Hackathon for Students).

3. **Youth Council of Slovakia:** This initiative has received a grant (SAMRS/2021/RV/1/10) from the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation. The project is aimed at increasing public awareness of development cooperation in the Slovak Republic, deepening awareness of global development and increasing the involvement of young people in solving global problems at the local level. Within this project, a *digital platform for civic engagement* is created to provide concrete guidance for advocacy activities to address environmental challenges at a local level, as well as examples of successful activities already implemented in young people's neighbourhoods.

The following projects are not focused on digital community engagement, but they are aimed at enhancing SL to support community engagement:

1. **Service learning in higher education - promoting the third mission of universities and the civic engagement of students (SLIHE):** The main objective of the project is to strengthen the capacity of HEIs in fulfilling their third mission and to increase the civic engagement of students through the implementation of an innovative SL strategy. The critical activity of the project consists of developing, testing and disseminating innovative outputs (training for teachers and a manual for trainers, a manual for teachers and a set of good practice examples) to promote the social role of universities and to increase the civic engagement of students.

2. **Service-learning – Engaged and Collaborative Teaching and Learning in Social Work:** The project is based on transferring and sharing knowledge about SL. SL itself is based on the cooperation between the university and the community. The project involves teachers and students from universities and community collaborators (public and non-profit organizations working in social work or cooperating with social workers).

5.3 Risks and Benefits of DiCE in Slovakia

The following aspects **pose a risk** to the implementation of DiCE in Slovakia:

- One of the negative phenomena that Slovakia faces in the long term, which poses a risk to DiCE, is brain drain, mainly of STEM experts (MIRRI, 2019). It creates an employee shortage of educators and students who could create and implement digital CE courses and programmes.
- **Disparities between universities:** The state of digitisation of universities is highly heterogeneous. Given their high level of autonomy, the method and level of digitisation

depend on the decisions and possibilities of the individual university (MINEDU, 2021, p. 18). Some universities can have better conditions for digital community engagement than others.

- **Bureaucracy:** Unfortunately, Slovakia struggles with a great deal of bureaucracy, which means financial and time constraints when applying novel solutions. Sometimes even small changes, such as introducing new public initiatives or new subjects (e.g., service learning, digital CE projects), are often hindered and can take a lot of time and patience.

The following **benefits** of digital community engagement implementation in Slovakia were detected:

Benefits for students:

- Equipping students with digital competency (SLIDE, 2023).
- Development of critical and design thinking (SLIDE, 2023).
- Ability to conduct an interview (structured or non-structured) (Service Learning Univerzita Kmateja Bela, 2019).

Benefits for communities:

- Involvement of communities in decision-making processes that have an impact their lives (access to quality and objective information from town halls to local authorities) (Pedagogická Fakulta - Univerzita Mateja Bela, 2021).
- Increased financial literacy (Service Learning Univerzita Kmateja Bela, 2019).
- Breaking down stereotypes and prejudices.

5.4 Recommendations on How to Advance DiCE in Slovakia

1. **Comprehensive systemic change in education:** Analyses and discussions with the experts confirm that Slovakia needs a comprehensive systemic change in education to ensure that primary, secondary, and HEIs offer more subjects and disciplines in which students acquire advanced digital and technological digital skills and receive quality education. In the same way, the education system must be adapted to respect the requirements of the labour market in the digital age (MIRRI, 2019). By introducing more digital-oriented subjects throughout all levels of education, a sound basis for embedding digital elements into all other subjects arises, including community engagement.

2. **Digital inclusivity:** Providing tailored experiences reflecting the different needs of communities and different approaches should be considered. Hence, some groups can be reached only in person or prefer to be reached personally (e.g. homeless persons, elderly), but some people prefer to be contacted by email or by phone call. Primarily Gen Z is used to constant notifications via social media and apps. Community engagement is no exception. When creating a community engagement strategy, it is good to consider digital inclusion before realizing that some groups have been omitted because they do not interact with a particular form of a digital tool. Marginalized or vulnerable groups must also be involved in

designing and developing digital devices, services, policies, and programmes (United Nations).

3. **Inspiration from abroad:** CE in Slovakia is in its early stages compared to the USA or Australia. Many universities abroad implement community/civic engagement courses as part of their curricula, often offering success stories and case studies. Moreover, many universities are adopting digital practices, from gamification civic engagement platforms to virtual reality. These sources can serve as a significant source of inspiration for Slovak universities.

Description of CE courses with a special focus on DiCE in Slovakia:

1. **You (TH) Participate! (2021 – 2028, Slovakia):** is an initiative of the Council of Europe, European Youth Foundation, Youth Council of the Košice Region and Košice self-governing region. "You (TH) Participate!" aims to strengthen the civic engagement of young people from Eastern Slovakia, to develop the competencies necessary for active participation and to provide a space for developing cooperation between young people and so-called important adults, youth representatives at the level of municipalities, schools, and NGOs.

   A programme of six consecutive online sessions introduces young people to different opportunities for civic engagement in the local community. It introduces them to how they can participate in public decision-making, making them aware of their potential and building their sense of initiative.

   Using non-formal learning activities, brainstorming, group work, creative methods, etc., a safe space is created for sharing ideas, discussing, and proposing solutions. The programme is designed for active young people aged 16-25 and representatives of relevant organisations and institutions working with youth in cooperation with relevant representatives of the city and county governments.

   The programme uses *digital storytelling*, a combination of the art of telling stories with various multimedia, including graphics, audio, video, and Web publishing. Digital storytelling aims to capture the identified problems in communities and bring them to the public's attention. The programme participants are taught to use digital storytelling to also propose a solution to selected problems in the communities. The success story is available at: https://youthfullyyours.sk/sk/zorganizovali-sme/ype-intro/

2. **Digital Innovation for Civic Engagement Projects (2021, Tallinn, Estonia)**: The Summer Schools in Europe platform offered course called Innovation for Civic Engagement Projects in the summer of 2021. It was a two-week programme for digital transformation in communities and civic initiatives to involve more people in the discussion and decision-making process using technology. The programme aimed to experience what it means to be an active citizen, community member and leader in participatory democracy and learn about the biggest challenges in civic engagement. Participants had a chance to learn how to start a digital transformation in communities and civic initiatives. This programme was designed for socially

active campaign leaders, community leaders, and active people identifying social problems in their communities or society and have initiated community projects.

The programme aimed to improve participatory leadership skills, learn to design civic engagement projects using technology and do it in a culturally diverse and start-up-minded environment. In this hands-on training, participants worked with their projects to learn to initiate digitally innovative engagement projects. The testimonials from summer school are available on Youtube. The success story is available at: https://www.summerschoolsineurope.eu/course/14689/digital-innovation-for-civic-engagement-projects

3. **Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Finance for non-financial professionals (2019, Slovakia):** The project "Finances for non-financiers" was implemented by two university students in the academic year 2018/2019 as a part of the SL course. The project responded to the need to help homeless people in the Home for the Needy in Banská Bystrica. As part of the identification of the needs of the community, after interviewing the management of the facility and the clients, the needs were focused on the area of finance. The main goal of the project was to increase the financial literacy of people who found themselves in an unfavourable life situation. The secondary objectives were to teach clients to manage their finances (pensions, social benefits) and to teach them to prioritize their finances. The preventive nature of the project also consisted in eliminating petty theft among the facility's clients and preventing clients from going into debt through non-bank lenders.

The students gave a total of four lectures at the facility on the topics of "How to survive on welfare", "How not to get into debt" and "How to get into the labour market and the possibility of getting a second income". Each lecture lasted 60 minutes and included a discussion with the clients on their problem situation and how to solve it.

In addition to this area, students also participated in other activities of the facility - they helped the clients in writing their CVs, worked with them in the garden and landscaping the surroundings of the charity, helped in the kitchen, sorted clothes, and participated in small daily activities of the facility. The success story is available at: https://www.servicelearning.umb.sk/studentske-projekty/financie-pre-nefinancnikov

5.5 Digital Community Engagement of HEIs in Europe

Following trends of Slovakia, we found as the main trends in DiCE in Europe the following:

1. **The use of digital platforms:** The trend of young people using digital tools in everyday life is very well known, and it also concerns CE. Students are engaged in community life mainly through social media or civic tech platforms. One of the most widespread university trends in the past couple of years is online platforms for community engagement (Schroedel, 2020). They are a great tool to inform the public about civic engagement events, surveys, or initiatives in a very similar way as social media, but more specialised. They provide up-to-

date information about the news in the local community. Online platforms are an excellent way for young people to share their ideas and stay informed. However, it is easier to run them on a local scale.

2. **Re-emerging of university-community engagement as a policy priority.** Given the climate crisis, the impact of the pandemic, unceasing migration, and a continuously strengthening trend of an ageing population, the community engagement of HEIs becomes a priority, as universities are increasingly becoming a great source of help in responding to societal needs. The question of how universities can use their knowledge and resources to contribute to social and economic rehabilitation is high in policymakers' agendas, not only at the EU level but also at national and local (university) levels (Farnell, 2020). One of the examples can be Digital Education Action Plan of the European Union(2021-2027) which aims to bring education and training to the digital age.

3. **Service learning as a part of curricula to enhance students´ civic engagement.** Another trend observed in the past five years is the introduction of SL (sometimes community learning) as a part of curricula. SL can improve civic engagement by placing students into organizations dealing with community-related issues. By implementing SL into their curricula and syllabus design, universities can help students become more relevant in their community, increase their civic engagement, and make a difference by actively participating. Moreover, in countries where migration is a vital topic, in Sweden, for example, SL operates as an additional way of integration by allowing migrants to engage with local communities and share their issues. This way, students' civic engagement also helps embrace diversity and foster inclusion (Skledar Matijević et al., 2020).

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SPAIN

6
SPAIN

By Inés López Baldominos, Vera Pospelova, and Luis Fernández Sanz, University of Alcalá.

6.1 Community Engagement in Spain

Community Engagement (CE) in higher education institutions in Spain mainly focuses on applying Service learning (SL) activities.

Universities have extensively shown their commitment to the approach of CE with even specific units or programs in some of them with specific names (e.g., Service Learning Programme at the University of Burgos, Service Learning at the University of Valladolid, or Service Learning Unit at the University of Salamanca). Other universities integrate this aspect in their units of cooperation and volunteers. Furthermore, there is the University Service-Learning Association (ApSU), created by universities for better promotion of SL. Additionally, the National Association of Rectors/Presidents on Spanish Universities published a declaration referring to the institutionalization of SL as an essential part of sustainability and social responsibility; CE and the third mission of universities (CADEP, 2015). This trend has been confirmed in the report Service-Learning in Europe: Dimensions and Understanding from Academic Publication (Sotelino-Losada et al. 2021), showing an exponential growth of contributions in literature over the last 20 years, particularly in Spain, concentrating most of the academic contributions on this topic. According to the Annual Report Building on Civic Engagement during Pandemic Times (Ribeiro et al., 2021), Spain leads the number of projects and experiences reported in the observatory's channels.

In collaboration with the Spanish Ministry of Universities, universities organize annual conferences, such as the XI National and V International Congress of University Service-Learning of the University Network of Service-Learning at the Casa de Convalescència in Barcelona, to compile and share trends, results, and initiatives. The conference has taken place every year for the past 11 years.

6.2 Digital Community Engagement in Spain

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a transformation in the approach to SL projects. The pandemic has been the turning point. To avoid suspending the projects, it has been decided to

adapt them to include the technological environment, as explained in this paper (Paz-Lourido & de-Benito, 2021). However, we cannot limit it to the effects of the pandemic since it is linked to the evolution of distance education itself and the innovations and mediations of technologies. The use of social media, mobile applications and digital competencies is a reality that should be considered to achieve successful CE projects.

Social media is a current trend in SL. The social network Instagram also offers the possibility of exchanging knowledge and academic information from an asynchronous, dynamic, and non-paternalistic perspective. Sotelino-Losada and Castro (2021) presented the results of a virtual SL experience in which students in the Bachelor's Degree in Social Education program have included Instagram in their academic work dynamics. María Santágueda Villanueva et al. (2021) also developed their service-learning projects through a mobile application with which students and teachers are in constant interaction.

Digital competencies are one of the main topics regarding digital community engagement (DiCE) in Spain; this example is aimed at older adults (Rocío Anguita-Martínez et al., 2019) or people with special needs (Estrella et al., 2017). Special mention should be made of the experiences in the initial training of teachers and their digital competencies, which we consider key to implementing this methodology in their future professional development and projects. Virtual service learning is a reality and should be considered part of the learning path. Examples of this approach are these projects:

- Virtual service-learning in times of health emergency: an experience of academic reinforcement of teachers in training. (Carlos Corrales Gaitero et al., 2021).
- Digitization, commitment and resilience. Service-learning project with future teachers. (Isabel Dans Álvarez de Sotomayor & Cristina Varela Portela, 2021).
- Service learning and higher education in Galicia. What do the teachers think? (Losada, 2015).
- Socio-emotional learning in online communication through the Service-Learning methodology in adolescents. (Ana Cebollero Salinas, 2021).

6.3 Risks and Benefits of DiCE in Spain

Risks of DiCE implementation in Spain:

- Difficulty in sustaining collaboration and implication for students beyond the action or project in SL.
- Real impact on the community and students should be based on objective and transparent metrics, and KPIs and projects do not often include them. General comments about impact and relevance should be avoided, and use a specific and tangible approach instead.

- One risk to be avoided is that the perception of society might see these projects as a way of using young people as cheap workforce, even with pressure of trade unions and relatives, without reflecting on what they can learn from these activities.
- A deficit in digital skills in population which impacts in two ways: unfavoured population who could be a target of SL does not have enough skills and equipment to benefit from some digital initiatives and secondly, university students, especially those out of engineering degrees, also suffer from an inconsistent training on digital skills, something that might hinder their capacity to offer.

Benefits of Digital Community Engagement Implementation in Spain:

Salam et al. (2019) presented a systematic literature review of SL in higher education. The gathering of research and projects leads to compiling a considerable number of benefits for different stakeholders. Among those presented, we selected these as applicable to the Spanish situation.

Benefits for students:

- Promotes the discovery of one's own interests and professional orientations.
- Enhances a multifaceted view and a critical perspective on different social issues. Participants face their local context from perspectives different to their own.
- Students work better when: they understand the purpose of the project classroom, its usefulness becomes apparent, and they are given a certain degree of responsibility and autonomy.

Benefits for communities:

- Obtaining tangible products and results per their objectives, when delivered through digital options, may overcome barriers of community members such as geographical distance, disability, and mobility conditions, to name a few.
- Involve its members with real problems and processes for solving them, benefiting themselves and the whole community.
- Develop interpersonal relationships among community members with different socio-economical, cultural, and educative contexts.

6.4 Recommendations on How to Advance DiCE in Spain

There is a deficiency in digital literacy and competencies within our society, and they do not naturally develop in younger generations. The so-called "digital natives" (under 26) do not have better digital skills (López Baldominos et al., 2020). Education cannot remain oblivious to this reality; teacher training must prepare teachers for this situation and include training on digital skills so they can incorporate technology in their educative programmes and service-learning projects.

Technical skills are not the only competencies needed. Other essential skills are personal skills or soft skills among teachers, which are also to be developed among students participating in the projects. These skills are essential not only for their development as citizens but also for their development as successful employees. Basic skills for the labour market and society include commitment, accountability, group work, and communication.

A coherent and successful approach for digital CE will create synergies with already existing programmes. Technology is transversal to all areas, and many existing projects can benefit from its use. It is not necessary to create new systems or platforms from scratch. An interesting approach will be incorporating existing knowledge and expertise into programmes connected to the new digital and connected society.

These are the two success stories of projects of digital service learning in Spanish universities:

- **"Español en vivo" (Spanish live**) (Garcia-Gutierrez et al., 2017): intercultural competencies and global citizenship, based on the improvement of oral expression skills among students from the Faculty of Education of the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia - UNED (National Distance University of Spain) and the ones from the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Porto Novo (Benin), the ones from Strathmore University (SU) in Nairobi (Kenya) and, the ones from Dschang University (Cameroon). The UNED students are trained as future social educators, and the Africans study Spanish as a second language and, in some cases, as teachers of our language. This project is developed through online conversations and interviews, where African students from these universities can practice speaking Spanish with native speakers, and Spanish students deepen the contents of their subjects from an intercultural and global citizenship perspective. This experience occurs entirely in cyberspace, supported by digital resources that facilitate this interaction -Skype, Hangout (Google) or WhatsApp- which each group chooses according to their possibilities of access to the network and devices.

- **Service-Learning at University: Helping Schools Respond to Diversity Using ICT. (Estrella et al., 2017):** In this project, university students from Universidad de Jaen s in the Degrees of Pre-School and Primary School Education, as part of the training practices, have developed ICT materials for the attention to diversity, which met the needs demanded by schools in their region to be used in their classrooms. More than 200 micro-projects have been developed for the creation of ICT materials for diversity ICT materials for attention to diversity, ranging from the creation of multimedia materials for the work of mathematical content, learning how to read, social skills, how to work on interactive whiteboards, to the creation of educational videos or subtitled materials for deaf people, etc. Participants developed competencies related to their educative training but also raised their awareness of the special needs that some of their future students might have.

6.5 Digital Community Engagement of HEIs in Europe

As commented, SL is the primary trend in the implementation of CE in Europe, as reported in countries. The so-called e-learning service has been the preferred option for implementing digital SL and CE. The general trend of e-SL in HEIs in Europe has been extensively analysed in reports like Building on Civic Engagement During Pandemic Times (Ribeiro et al., 2021), with reference to 50 experiences. Under the concept of e-SL, it is possible to find up to four categories of virtualisation (Waldner et al., 2012), from Hybrid Type 1 (service on-site, instruction fully online) to extreme e-SL (Xe-SL) with everything entirely online, no on-site component. Many experiences (48%) are happening in modality Xe-SL and another 40% in Hybrid Type III (blended service and instruction, partially online and partially on-site).

The disciplines with more initiatives in SL are Education, business, and economics (35%, according to Ribeiro et al., 2021); thus, medicine & health and psychology stand out and have increased considerably, probably because of COVID-19.

The trend about the involvement (immersion) of technology, according to the categories from (Culcasi et al., 2022), could involve four categories starting from Type I of mere instrumental channel in which technology is basically a resource to implement both the service and the learning components that would occur without technology and learners do not need any special technological expertise. The deepest immersion appears with Type 4 Integrated Objective: here, technology is the objective of learning and service components and includes creating new digital tools, so students need advanced technological skills. The lowest level of technological interaction may require advanced students' personal and social skills, while digital skills may be minimal. The highest technological interaction could also require critical technological skills, while students' personal and social skills are different from the first type and possibly with lower importance. Generally, the lowest level of digital interaction is most frequent, 54%, while intermediate options accumulate 42%, and only 4% are at the highest level.

These data show trends in the evolution of CE through e-SL, such as:

- Increasing number of initiatives starting with a **virtual design,** moving towards extreme only virtual initiatives or, at least, to hybrid blended formats with both the services and instruction partially online.
- **The involvement of technology** is increasing in all stages of projects, although it is frequently only instrumental and not exploiting all the potential of online service, probably for limitations in digital skills beyond the basic level and also for the resources and effort to develop technical assets, a nontrivial task not well understood by those out of technology and digital profession.
- The trend to **virtualisation** also causes the emergence of new life of communities in virtual contexts, providing a new dimension that should be properly managed to maintain social connections and acquire or develop the necessary skills.

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