

GUIDELINES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR LOCAL/REGIONAL AUTHORITIES ON:

HOW TO WORK WITH CITIZENS



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GUIDANCE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL/REGIONAL AUTHORITIES ON HOW TO WORK WITH CITIZENS

Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed profound global transformations, reshaping how we live, work, and interact as societies. Significant events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, military tensions worldwide, the escalating climate crisis, rapid AI development, and shifting geopolitical dynamics have created both unprecedented challenges and opportunities. These changes have accelerated digitalisation, highlighted the urgency of sustainable living and work-life balance, and brought issues like mass displacement and ageing populations to the forefront. A key challenge is civic engagement, which may boost local citizens' movements and empower people to move forward.

In this context, spatial planning and urban development must evolve to address these complex societal challenges, including a participatory approach. Several actors can contribute to this process. Engaging with citizens, students, and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is vital to encourage the co-creation of solutions that respond effectively to these shifts, including innovations. Citizens contribute invaluable local knowledge and perspectives, while HEIs

contribute cutting-edge research and innovation, a fresh generation of thinkers is also eager to tackle real-world problems. This generation consists of students who can be recognised as change agents, who should also demonstrate a high level of civic engagement and be responsible for tackling upcoming socio-economic and environmental challenges and boosting local development.

Actively involving young people and students in decision-making processes and city co-management is not only an expression of democratic values but also a strategic investment in social capital and innovation. These guidelines aim to present concrete actions that local government can take to create favourable conditions for the participation of young people, increase their civic awareness and sense of influence on the reality around them.

Historically, authorities and academia have often worked in isolation or through limited partnerships. Today, there is an urgent need for a systematic and collaborative approach that bridges these efforts with the work

of local and regional authorities. This approach accelerates sustainable spatial planning and urban development and strengthens inclusivity and trust in governance. When citizens feel heard, students see their contributions valued, and HEIs establish impactful community connections, the outcomes extend beyond physical improvements, cultivating empowered and cohesive societies ready to navigate future challenges.

This engagement must also extend beyond citizens and authorities to include businesses, NGOs, and the media. To address this need, the Erasmus+ HEIsCITI Project (*"HEIs as Innovative Triggers of Sustainable Development in European Cities in the Post-COVID-19 Era"*) was launched. Its aim is to strengthen cooperation among citizens, students, HEIs, local authorities, and other community stakeholders, creating meaningful partnerships that drive innovation and inclusive growth.

By empowering HEIs and students as active partners in smart city development, the project integrates academic research and fresh ideas into urban planning. Through platforms for

dialogue, knowledge exchange, and co-creation of ideas which can be tested and validated in the project's lifespan, the HEIsCITI project ensures solutions are visionary yet grounded in real-world needs, bridging the divide between theoretical knowledge and practical implementation. A cornerstone of the project is its focus on citizen engagement, recognising the importance of local perspectives in shaping inclusive and sustainable urban environments. By involving communities in decision-making, the project builds trust and ownership, essential for long-term success.

Additionally, the project highlights the potential to transform neglected urban spaces into vibrant, functional smart areas that address community needs. Using digital tools, innovative design, and participatory planning, the HEIsCITI project equips cities with actionable frameworks to enhance liveability and sustainability — serving as a model for how collaboration can drive urban innovation and resilience.



“By implementing such creative and participatory approaches, vacancies can not only be effectively combated but also transformed into vibrant and inclusive community spaces that enrich social and cultural life in the city.” Urban Culture Club team, Pilot Program, Hochschule der Medien



“This project provided insights into the unique aspects and challenges of public sector communication. It also allowed me to apply the structured stages of design thinking, which led to even more creative ideas.” Ruta, Pilot Program, Mykolas Romeris University



“The project opened my mind”— Participant, Pilot Program, WSB University



“Participating in this project provided valuable experience in teamwork. We learned to align different perspectives, find compromises, and work toward a common goal. Communication is more than just exchanging words; it’s about creating connections, inspiring action, and empowering communities to solve common challenges.”

Justyna, Pilot Program, Mykolas Romeris University



“For me, it was something tangible – a chance to practice essential skills like listening to people and co-creating solutions with them”—
Participant, Pilot Program, WSB University



“I liked it. That was fresh and meaningful. I felt I could give something from me to the community.”— **Participant, Pilot Program, WSB University**



These guidelines are one of the key documents of the **HEIsCITI Erasmus+ Project**, designed to empower local and regional authorities to initiate and sustain innovative, collaborative dialogue with young citizens—particularly students—supported by Higher Education Institutions, secondary schools, and other relevant stakeholders. By presenting practical methods, real-world examples, and actionable recommendations, the document aims to:

- » Better identify the needs and expectations of youth and students.
- » Equip authorities with methods and tools to promote inclusive citizen participation.
- » Increase civic engagement of young people at the local level.
- » Inspire collaboration between local governments, HEIs, secondary schools, students, public authorities, citizens, NGOs, businesses, and media to source ideas, co-create solutions, and tackle urban challenges.
- » Include the perspective of young people in the city planning and decision-making processes.

- » Highlight approaches for mapping and transforming abandoned or underutilised spaces into smart city environments that meet community needs.
- » Build a sense of shared responsibility for the development of the local community and a sense of togetherness among young people.
- » Support the development of civic and leadership competencies among youth and students.
- » Offer guidance on attracting students, HEIs, and other target groups to partner in urban development initiatives.
- » Utilise young people's intellectual potential and creativity and transform it into sustainable development.

The project's **ultimate goal** is to educate local and regional governments and equip them with the necessary know-how to build sustainable, resilient, and inclusive urban futures based on **youth engagement**, which is particularly important given the loosening of social ties in the post-COVID era.

The HEIsCITI Erasmus+ Project was implemented between December 2022 and November 2025 **by the following partners**: WSB University, Poland (Leader); Stuttgart Media University, Germany; Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania; The University of Danang, Vietnam; LAMA Cooperative Society - Social Enterprise, Italy; Rijeka Development Agency Porin (formerly Smart RI), Croatia.

Associate partners: Zamek Cieszyn, Poland; Stuttgart Region, Germany; Joniskis District Municipality, Lithuania; Aalborg University, Denmark.

More information about the HEisCITI project:

- » <https://wsb.edu.pl/heisciti/about-the-project>

Section 1

The Importance of Engaging Citizens

1.1 Why Engage?

Communities today face complex, interconnected challenges that cannot be solved through top-down governance or isolated expertise alone. Lasting solutions require diverse perspectives, inclusive dialogue, and collaboration.

Citizens, represented by a wide range of actors such as civil society, higher education institutions (HEIs), secondary schools, students, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), businesses, and media, are no longer optional in urban development, they are essential to generate innovation and achieve meaningful urban transformation.

Citizens provide a deep understanding of their communities, offering practical insights and creative ideas for addressing local issues. Participation empowers communities, fosters a sense of ownership, and strengthens social cohesion by uniting diverse groups to collaborate. By involving citizens in co-creation and co-design processes, municipalities expand the pool of ideas, enabling more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable solutions¹.

HEIs, on the other hand, contribute as hubs of knowledge and innovation. Partnering with universities and students gives cities access to innovative research, experimental projects, and new ways of thinking. This collaboration enhances urban planning and ensures that solutions are grounded in evidence and responsive to real-world needs². Secondary schools, in turn,

play a vital role in fostering a culture of civic engagement from an early age, encouraging young people to take an active interest in their communities and participate in shaping their futures. Their fresh perspectives and digital fluency contribute to innovative problem-solving approaches and long-term civic responsibility. NGOs serve as critical intermediaries, bridging the gap between public authorities and communities by advocating for marginalised groups, mobilising grassroots efforts, and providing valuable expertise in social and environmental issues. As key urban development stakeholders, businesses contribute resources, technological innovation, and sustainable economic strategies that can drive local progress. Meanwhile, media plays a crucial role in facilitating transparent communication, raising awareness, and promoting citizen participation by informing the public about urban initiatives and fostering public debate.

Public authorities must engage with citizens, represented by civil society, HEIs, secondary schools, students, NGOs, businesses, and media. Participation is not merely an option but a fundamental right and a pillar of democracy. Participation ensures that decision-making is not confined to a small elite but is instead a collaborative process where diverse perspectives contribute to shaping public policies. It enables residents to influence decisions at various stages - from planning to implemen-

¹ Wong, Y. L. (2023). What is Participatory Planning in the Urban Setting?. Inclusion Matters. Singapore: Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/research/social-inclusion-project>, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4436760> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4436760>

² Co-creating Urban Transformation: A Guide to Community Listening and Engagement for Future-fit Cities. (n.d.). <https://innovation.eurasia.undp.org/resource/co-creating-urban-transformation>



tation and evaluation - ensuring that policies are more relevant, inclusive, and reflective of community needs. This participatory democracy fosters social cohesion, strengthens collective problem-solving, and enhances the legitimacy of public decisions.

Citizen participation is transformative. It shifts individuals from passive consumers of services to active decision-makers and co-creators of their urban environments. By sharing in the decision-making process, communities move beyond traditional consultation towards meaningful collaboration, developing ownership and responsibility for public initiatives. This engagement leads to more sustainable and innovative solutions, as those who experience local challenges firsthand contribute practical insights and creative ideas to address them.

Moreover, participation increases transparency and accountability in governance. Open decision-making processes, accessible information, and continuous dialogue between authorities and residents build trust and create shared responsibility for the common good. When people see how their contributions influence final policies, it strengthens their confidence in public institutions and encourages long-term civic engagement. Transparency also ensures that public decisions are not only more legitimate but also more widely accepted and effective in practice.

In addition to citizen engagement, collaboration with HEIs, secondary schools, students, NGOs, businesses, and media plays a crucial role in fostering innovation and evidence-based policy-making. Universities provide research and analytical expertise, while secondary schools instil civic responsibility in younger generations. NGOs drive advocacy and grassroots mobilization, businesses offer technological and economic contributions, and media ensure public awareness and accountability. Engaging these diverse stakeholders bridges the gap between academic inquiry, public policy, and community-driven initiatives, ensuring that solutions are both forward-thinking and adaptable to the evolving needs of society.

Ultimately, public authorities must embrace participation to build resilient, inclusive, and forward-thinking societies. By integrating the knowledge, creativity, and experiences of civil society, HEIs, secondary schools, students, NGOs, businesses, and media into governance, authorities enhance the effectiveness of policies and strengthen the foundations of democracy, trust, and collective progress. Participation is not just a mechanism for decision-making, it is an ongoing process of engagement, education, and empowerment that leads to lasting societal transformation³.

³ Enhancing the Student Civic Experience. <https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/resources/student-civic-engagement>

1.2 Strategic Importance

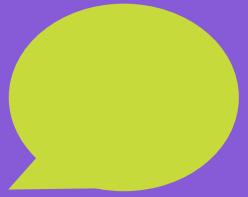
1.2.1 Citizens as Agents of Change

Participation is a fundamental right of citizenship and a cornerstone of democracy. It ensures that individuals have the means, space, and support to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives and communities. Meaningful participation transforms citizens from passive recipients of public services to active decision-makers and co-creators of their environments. This shift strengthens social cohesion, deepens trust between communities and authorities, and fosters shared ownership over public initiatives.

Engaging citizens in co-creation and co-design processes broadens the pool of ideas, making policies more responsive to diverse needs. Through participation, individuals and communities become empowered to critically analyse and challenge existing power structures, leading to more equitable and inclusive governance.

Transparency in decision-making, open consultations, and access to information further strengthen public trust and accountability, ensuring that policies align with social priorities and gain broader acceptance.

Benefits of collaboration for Public Authorities:



More Effective and Accepted Policies

- » Engaging citizens ensures that public policies reflect real needs and priorities, leading to better outcomes and higher satisfaction.
- » Solutions that emerge from participatory processes tend to have stronger public support, reducing resistance and increasing compliance with regulations and initiatives.

Increased Social Cohesion and Trust in Authorities

- » Transparent decision-making and open dialogue strengthen the relationship between authorities and the community.
- » Citizens who feel heard and valued are more likely to trust institutions, reducing social tensions and political polarization.

Enhanced Problem-Solving and Innovation

- » Citizens bring practical, context-specific insights that experts may overlook.
- » Crowdsourcing ideas from diverse groups leads to more creative, inclusive, and adaptable solutions.

Stronger Community Engagement in Implementation

- » When people contribute to shaping decisions, they are more likely to participate in implementing and sustaining initiatives, easing the burden on public administration.
- » Active citizen involvement can lead to long-term partnerships, civic initiatives, and volunteer efforts that complement government actions.

1.2.2 Higher Education Institutions as Innovation Hubs

HEIs play a crucial role in bridging research, innovation, and public policy. As centres of knowledge and learning, their involvement ensures that decision-making is grounded in evidence-based approaches and informed by the latest advancements in various disciplines.

Collaboration between public authorities and HEIs fosters interdisciplinary problem-solving and enables the testing of innovative strategies in real-world settings. This improves the quality of public services and strengthens the connection between academia and society, ensuring that education and research remain aligned with pressing community needs.

1.2.3 The Benefits of Participatory Governance

Participatory governance represents a long-term investment in building resilient, inclusive, and responsive societies. This governance model moves beyond a democracy based solely on elections, empowering citizens to influence policies at all stages of decision-making, from planning and implementation to evaluation and revision.

Integrating citizens, students, HEIs, and other stakeholders into governance processes creates a collaborative ecosystem where decision-making is shared and inclusive. This approach strengthens accountability, fosters transparency, and builds trust among stakeholders. By prioritizing collaboration, local authorities can develop solutions that are more effective, equitable, and aligned with community needs.

Participation is both a means to an end and a transformative process that educates, empowers, and strengthens democratic governance. Public authorities must embrace this shift, recognizing that engaging citizens and HEIs is essential for building resilient, innovative, and inclusive societies.

Engaging citizens and HEIs in decision-making processes leads to:



More relevant and effective public policies

- » Ensuring that policies reflect the needs and expectations of the community through social consensus.

Greater transparency and accountability

- » Open dialogue and shared decision-making increase trust in public institutions.

Enhanced quality of life

- » Participation allows communities to influence local infrastructure, services, and social initiatives, leading to better outcomes.

Stronger social cohesion

- » Collective problem-solving fosters a culture of collaboration and solidarity.

A shift towards participatory democracy

- » Moving beyond election-based governance to an inclusive model where residents shape policies at all stages.

Engaging citizens and HEIs in decision-making processes provides the following key benefits for Public Authorities:



Access to Expertise and Evidence-Based Decision-Making

- » Collaboration with universities ensures policies are grounded on the latest scientific knowledge, rather than outdated assumptions or political pressures.
- » Research partnerships help identify root causes of social challenges and propose innovative, effective interventions.

Testing and Scaling Innovative Solutions

- » HEIs provide opportunities to pilot new approaches in controlled environments before scaling them for widespread use.
- » Public authorities can use university-led experimental projects as testing grounds for policy innovation.

Developing a Skilled Workforce for Public Service

- » Engaging students in real-world problem-solving prepares future professionals for careers in public administration, urban planning, and social innovation.
- » Authorities can recruit well-trained graduates who already have practical experience with public sector challenges.

Strengthening the Connection Between Education and Society

- » Public partnerships with HEIs ensure that academic research remains socially relevant and aligned with pressing local issues.
- » Authorities benefit from access to academic networks, fostering cross-sector collaboration and knowledge sharing.

1.3 Using the Ladder of Participation - concept in Engaging Youth

The ladder of participation (based on Sherry Arnstein's concept⁴, adapted for the context of youth) shows that engagement can take various forms, ranging from illusory engagement to those providing real influence and control. To effectively prepare youth for participation in local development and city co-management, the local government should consciously propose actions at different stages of this ladder to achieve progressively higher levels of participation.

It is important to clarify that the first level of participation—often characterized by the apparent inclusion of public opinion in decision-making—does not represent genuine engagement. In practice, this level is a form of “non-participation,” where citizens are placed in committees or advisory bodies without any real influence. The process is primarily designed to educate or “heal” citizens, serving more as a tool for legitimising decisions already made by authorities and enhancing public relations, rather than truly listening to participants’ voices. For this reason, the model presented here begins at Level 2: Information, which marks the first meaningful step toward authentic engagement, as it at least involves providing youth with access to relevant information about local government actions.

⁴ Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of planners*, 35(4), 216-224.



The levels of participation can be distinguished as follows:

Informing

(Level 2: Information)

What it means:

Youth are informed about local government's activities, decisions made, and their impact on city life, but without the possibility of influencing these decisions. This is a fundamental step in building civic awareness.

Action for local government:

Creating accessible and engaging information channels directed at young people (e.g., a dedicated section on the local government's website written in simple language, active profiles on social media popular among youth, regular newsletters to schools and universities) and organising open days at the city office, where youth can learn about the work of local government.

Consulting

(Level 3: Consultation)

What it means:

The local government gathers opinions from young people on specific topics or proposals, but the final decision rests with the authorities. Youth have a voice, but there is no guarantee that their input will be taken into account.

Action for local government:

Organising social consultations on youth issues (e.g., development of public spaces, cultural programmes, transport), using methods preferred by young people (e.g., online surveys, meetings in schools/universities, workshops). After consultations, the authorities should provide feedback on how the collected opinions influenced (or did not influence) the final decisions.

Cooperating/Involving

(Level 4: Co-option/Consultation-moving towards lower levels of citizen power in some models)

What it means:

Youth and the local government work together on specific projects or initiatives that are mainly initiated and controlled by local authorities, but where the voice of youth matters and is actively sought.

Action for local government:

Inviting young people (e.g., members of the Youth Council, representatives of organisations, active students) to participate in working groups preparing specific solutions (e.g., concerning urban revitalisation, organising a city event, creating a scholarship program) and enabling youth to co-organise city events (e.g., youth festivals, debates, ecological campaigns).

Partnership

(Level 5: Partnership)

What it means:

Decisions are made jointly by local government and youth (or their representatives). Power and responsibility are shared equally in a defined area.

Action for local government:

Establishing a Youth City Council with real decision-making powers within a designated budget or in specific areas (e.g., allocating funds for small youth projects, co-deciding on the schedule of events for youth). Creating joint (local government-youth) bodies managing specific programs or spaces (e.g., a youth activity centre).

Delegated Power / Citizen Control

(Level 6/7: Delegated Power / Citizen Control)

What it means:

Young people have significant, or even dominant influence on decision-making and management in a given area, within the framework defined by the local government. The local government entrusts young people with responsibility for carrying out specific tasks.

Action for local government:

Transferring the management of a specific institution (e.g., youth club, co-working space for students) or program (e.g., municipal fund supporting youth initiatives) to the Youth City Council or a selected youth organization, along with an appropriate budget and autonomy while supporting youth social cooperatives or foundations implementing public tasks for their peers.

Moving up the participation ladder requires greater openness, trust, and willingness from the local government to share power and responsibility. However, this is essential for building truly engaged and civically conscious youth who will become active co-creators of the local community.

Section 2

Strategies, Methods, and Tools for Effective Engagement

2.1 Building Partnerships with HEIs

For meaningful citizen engagement in urban governance to succeed, there must be defined clear tactics, institutional support, and active participation from a diverse range of stakeholders. While the importance of civic engagement is widely recognized, local and regional authorities often struggle to identify the most effective methods to establish lasting collaborations and ensure inclusivity in decision-making.

By offering some of the most popular and accessible methods and strategies, this section will help local administrations be more proactive in including secondary schools, universities, and students in decision-making. By involving the education system at all levels (HEIs and secondary schools in particular) and acknowledging their role as innovation hubs crucial to sustainable, knowledge-driven governance models, a variety of engagement mechanisms can support sustainable and participatory urban development. Similarly, engaging youth in secondary schools and higher education promotes civic responsibility and guarantees sustained community participation in political processes.

Municipalities can institutionalise engagement mechanisms that promote sustainable and participatory urban development by implementing organised collaboration models, participatory approaches, and incentive systems.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not merely academic bodies; they are integral to society and play a crucial role in addressing urban challenges. Universities generate research-driven insights, experimental solutions, and skilled professionals, which can significantly enhance urban governance, infrastructure planning, and community engagement.

Despite these potential benefits, collaboration between municipalities and HEIs often remains fragmented or short-term. HEIs and local governments frequently work independently, leading to missed opportunities for evidence-based policymaking, urban innovation, and sustainable development.

To unlock the full potential, municipalities must establish long-term, structured partnerships that align academic research with governance priorities. This section explores key strategies for institutionalising HEI partnerships, integrating them into governance models, and ensuring their contributions are sustained and impactful.



For local and regional authorities, strong partnerships with HEIs offer:

To leverage these advantages, municipalities should implement structured engagement models with HEIs, ensuring long-term, sustainable collaboration.

2.2 Strategic Importance of HEIs Partnerships for Local and Regional Authorities

- » Access to expertise that ensures **urban policies and strategies** are based on scientific research and evidence-based practices.
- » A pipeline of future civic leaders by **fostering a skilled workforce** trained in urban problem-solving and participatory governance.
- » Opportunities for innovation, as HEIs bring **new technologies**, experimental methodologies, and interdisciplinary approaches to complex urban issues.
- » **Stronger community engagement**, as universities act as bridges between students, researchers, businesses, and the local population.
- » EU funding and cross-border collaboration opportunities, as HEIs are often eligible for research **grants and urban development programs**.

2.3 Engaging Authorities and Target Groups of Citizens

2.3.1 Approaches to Strengthening Collaboration between HEIs and authorities

Identifying mutual interests and goals

For HEI-municipality partnerships to be sustainable and impactful, both parties must clearly define their shared objectives and areas of alignment. Local authorities and HEIs should engage in structured dialogue to determine how academic research, student engagement, and institutional expertise can support municipal strategies and urban challenges.

Key steps in identifying mutual interests and goals include:



Access to Expertise and Evidence-Based Decision-Making

- » Conducting initial consultations and visioning workshops where municipal leaders, university representatives, and community stakeholders discuss key urban challenges and areas for collaboration.
- » Aligning municipal priorities with HEI research strengths, ensuring that academic expertise is channelled into areas of direct impact on local policies and community needs (e.g., urban sustainability, mobility solutions, digital governance).
- » Developing a shared vision statement or strategy document that outlines the long-term objectives of collaboration, defining how HEIs and municipalities can co-create solutions, exchange knowledge, and support community development efforts.
- » Engaging HEI leadership, faculty, and students in ongoing dialogue about how universities can play an active role in local decision-making processes and participatory governance models.
- » Facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration by ensuring that partnerships extend beyond just urban planning departments to include public administration, economics, social sciences, and technology experts who can contribute multifaceted solutions to urban challenges.

By identifying common priorities early in the collaboration process, municipalities and HEIs can maximize their joint impact, ensuring that their efforts are strategically aligned and contribute to long-term urban sustainability.

Establishing institutional frameworks for cooperation

To ensure that HEIs and municipalities move from informal collaboration to structured partnerships, local governments should implement clear governance mechanisms that define roles, responsibilities, and expectations. These frameworks should include:

Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) or Strategic Cooperation Agreements that formalize the commitment of both parties and provide a roadmap for long-term engagement.

Municipal-HEI Advisory Boards or Task Forces, where representatives from universities, local government, and civil society organizations meet regularly to discuss policy recommendations, research findings, and collaborative projects.

Joint funding structures, such as research grants, co-financed projects, and shared municipal-HEI budgets that ensure financial sustainability for long-term initiatives.

Integrated municipal-university liaison offices, which act as bridges between academic institutions and city administrations, facilitating research integration into policy implementation and urban planning.

By developing institutionalized cooperation mechanisms, municipalities and HEIs can transition from one-off collaborations to embedded partnerships that influence governance structures and community development efforts.

Creating living labs and urban innovation hubs

To translate academic research into practical urban solutions, HEIs and municipalities should establish Living Labs and Urban Innovation Hubs, which serve as real-world testbeds for smart city initiatives and evidence-based policy innovations.

These collaborative spaces should:

Provide opportunities for students and researchers to work directly with municipal authorities in testing and implementing urban mobility solutions, climate adaptation strategies, and participatory governance models.

Support experimentation with emerging technologies, such as AI-driven urban analytics, smart infrastructure planning, and community-led digital inclusion projects.

Encourage active community participation, ensuring that residents are directly involved in evaluating and co-creating municipal strategies alongside HEI researchers and city officials.

Serve as a nexus between academia, industry, and government, allowing local businesses, universities, and public institutions to collaborate on smart city innovations and sustainability initiatives.

Funding and Incentive Structures for HEI Collaboration with authorities

For HEIs to remain active and engaged partners in municipal governance, they require financial and structural support. Municipalities should consider:

Co-funding research initiatives that align with sustainability, smart governance, and community development goals.

Providing municipal research grants to HEIs for projects that contribute directly to local policy objectives.

Leveraging EU and national funding opportunities, such as Horizon Europe and Eras-mus+, to support cross-border knowledge-sharing and research-driven urban development.

Encouraging private sector involvement, where businesses co-finance research projects that enhance innovation and economic sustainability.

By investing in HEI collaboration, municipalities can ensure that universities remain key drivers of research, policy experimentation, and urban transformation.

Monitoring and evaluating HEI partnerships

To measure the impact and effectiveness of HEI collaboration, municipalities should implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that track progress and ensure accountability.

Key evaluation methods include:

Defining Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that assess the effectiveness of research contributions, student engagement, and policy recommendations.

Conducting periodic review meetings between municipal and university stakeholders to refine strategies and adapt partnership models to evolving urban needs.

Publishing joint impact reports that document the successes, challenges, and long-term outcomes of municipal-HEI collaborations.

Facilitating knowledge exchange platforms, where different municipalities share best practices, lessons learned, and case studies on successful HEI partnerships.

By implementing these evaluation measures, municipalities can ensure that HEI collaborations remain responsive to urban challenges and continue driving meaningful, research-informed policy development.

2.4 Engaging HEIs, Secondary Schools, and Students

Involving students—both at university and secondary school levels—in urban governance fosters long-term civic participation and a culture of social responsibility. Students bring fresh perspectives, digital expertise, and innovative problem-solving approaches, making them valuable contributors to community development.

However, student engagement in governance is often sporadic or tokenistic rather than structured and sustained. Local authorities need to establish mechanisms that ensure students are active participants rather than passive observers in shaping their cities.

Engaging students is crucial for fostering civic responsibility, participatory democracy, and community-driven urban innovation.

Cities must adopt structured engagement mechanisms to fully integrate students and HEIs into municipal governance. These mechanisms ensure that students move from passive beneficiaries to active co-creators of urban solutions.

Young people bring:

New technological skills, particularly in digital governance, AI-driven urban planning, and smart infrastructure.

Creative solutions to pressing urban issues, such as climate adaptation, public transport efficiency, and energy resilience.

Long-term civic engagement potential, as early participation in governance fosters lifelong citizen involvement in policymaking and public administration.

2.5 Methods and Measures for Engaging HEIs, Secondary Schools, and Students

Engaging HEIs, secondary schools, and students in urban governance requires a multi-layered approach that combines curriculum integration, experiential learning, digital tools, and participatory frameworks. Municipalities must provide structured opportunities for students to contribute to policymaking, community projects, and urban innovation initiatives.

This section outlines proven methods and practical measures for increasing student and HEI engagement in local governance. By implementing these approaches, cities can leverage students' creativity, technical expertise, and civic energy to co-develop sustainable urban solutions.

A. Integrating municipal challenges into educational curricula



Embedding urban governance issues into the educational curriculum is a foundational way to engage students, ensuring that civic matters become a core part of their academic training rather than a sporadic activity.

To achieve this, municipalities can:

- » Develop challenge-based learning modules, where university courses address real-world urban problems in collaboration with local government agencies.
- » Partner with secondary schools to integrate civic engagement coursework, teaching students the fundamentals of participatory governance, sustainability, and urban development.
- » Encourage universities to include local policy research in capstone projects, allowing students to conduct thesis work that directly informs municipal strategies.
- » Provide municipal datasets for research purposes, enabling students to analyse local socio-economic trends, transportation issues, and sustainability challenges.
- » Introduce joint university-municipality courses, where students from different disciplines (e.g., public administration, engineering, social sciences) collaborate on municipal research and project implementation.

Showcase

*Rijeka's Open Data Portal –
Promoting Transparency and Civic
Tech Engagement.*

The Open Data Portal of the City of Rijeka (<https://data.rijeka.hr>) is a digital platform that provides public access to datasets from the city administration. It is designed to increase transparency, encourage civic innovation, and support evidence-based decision-making. The portal hosts data in areas such as transport, environment, urban planning, public procurement, and demographics, in machine-readable formats compatible with EU open data standards.

*The portal is used by a wide range of stakeholders:
Students and HEIs use it for research, urban studies, and civic tech projects.*

Entrepreneurs and developers build apps and services using municipal data.

Citizens and NGOs use it to monitor public spending, evaluate services, and inform advocacy. By making public data openly accessible, Rijeka empowers its community to participate in city development through data-driven insights. The portal serves as a valuable educational and participatory tool, especially when paired with civic hackathons or university coursework.

Showcase

The UCITYLAB Erasmus+ project⁵, documented 27 cases of university-city cooperation across Europe. One highlighted practice is the Turku Urban Research Programme⁶, where Master's students conduct thesis research embedded within the curriculum that directly supports municipal governance. Their research informs practical applications such as resource distribution, stakeholder collaboration, and strategy implementation.

⁵ Case Studies Report, UCITYLAB Erasmus+ project. <https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/infpro/2019/273094/UCITYLAB-Case-Study-Report.pdf>
⁶ Turku Urban Research Programme. https://urbantransitionsmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/11_Turku_Session_UTM-in-Action_brokering-solutions-and-connecting-innovation-leaders-providers.pdf

B. Creating student fellowships and municipal internship programs



A crucial step in sustaining engagement is providing students hands-on learning opportunities through municipal internships and fellowships.

Municipalities should:

- » Create internship programs within city departments, allowing students to work on urban mobility, waste management, and policy analysis projects.
- » Offer fellowships for graduate students, where they research pressing city issues such as climate adaptation, digital governance, and public participation strategies.
- » Establish paid apprenticeship programs for secondary school students, introducing them to municipal governance and civic engagement early in their education.
- » Provide mentorship opportunities by pairing students with city officials, ensuring that they gain practical insights into governance and policy formulation.

Showcase

Local Government Academy's Municipal Intern Program (MIP)⁷ in Pennsylvania, USA. This program connects undergraduate and graduate students with local governments, councils, and municipal authorities, offering paid summer internships where students work on real municipal projects such as planning, zoning, public works, and community outreach. The program not only provides hands-on experience and mentorship from city officials but also helps bridge the gap between academic learning and professional practice, preparing students for future careers in public service.

⁷ Municipal Intern Program application period open. (n.d.). Quaker Valley Council of Governments. <https://www.qvcog.org/announcements/municipal-intern-program-application-period-open>

C. Leveraging digital tools and civic technology for engagement

With digital literacy among youth at an all-time high, municipalities can maximise engagement by using civic technology and gamified participation tools.

Recommended strategies include:

- » Developing mobile apps where students can propose urban improvements, participate in policy discussions, and track municipal initiatives.
- » Using social media platforms for civic engagement, ensuring that student voices are included in city planning discussions.
- » Creating virtual reality (VR) simulations of urban projects, allowing students to visualize city plans and provide feedback before implementation.
- » Implementing participatory budgeting platforms, where students help allocate funding for youth-driven urban initiatives.
- » Hosting hackathons and digital innovation challenges, encouraging students to develop AI-driven policy solutions, data visualization tools, and smart city applications.

Showcase

Barcelona's "Decidim"⁸ digital democracy platform enables students to vote on city initiatives and propose community projects, fostering direct engagement between youth and local government.

⁸ Decidim. (n.d.). <https://decidim.org/>

D. Organizing Co-Creation workshops and participatory design labs



Cities should move beyond consultation-based approaches and implement co-creation models, where students collaborate with policymakers, urban designers, and civil society organizations.

To facilitate participatory design and civic innovation, municipalities can:

- » Host community workshops where students contribute to urban regeneration projects by analyzing public space usage, accessibility, and sustainability options.
- » Establish living labs in public spaces, where students can prototype ideas and gather community feedback before implementation.
- » Use design thinking methodologies, where students and city sort spacing to avoid so many splits urban solutions.
- » Facilitate structured debate forums, allowing students to present policy proposals and governance models to municipal decision-makers.

Showcase

Re-Value Business Challenge in Rijeka⁹ - A successful application of co-creation workshops was demonstrated in Rijeka's "Re-Value" Business Challenge, held on a yearly basis. The event, organized by the City of Rijeka, gathers 50 secondary school students, encouraging them to develop sustainable projects on different topics.

Firenze per il Clima¹⁰ - Promoted by the City of Florence, initiative engaged secondary school students in developing proposals to address the climate emergency at the local level. Through workshops, participatory assemblies, and interaction with local institutions, students elaborated visions and concrete actions for a more sustainable and resilient city. The process culminated in the public presentation of proposals to city officials, enhancing civic education and youth empowerment in environmental policymaking.

⁹ Mbembic. (2023b, November 23). Natjecanje Poslovni izazov u Rijeci – srednjoškolci osmisljavali projekte vezane uz plavu ekonomiju i održivi razvoj – Grad Rijeka. Grad Rijeka.

¹⁰ Comune di Firenze - Firenze per il clima. (2024, May 1). Firenze per il clima. Firenze per il Clima. <https://firenzeperilclima.it/>

E.

Encouraging student-led urban innovation and entrepreneurship



Another powerful engagement method is supporting student entrepreneurship and grassroots innovation.

To foster student-led solutions to urban challenges, municipalities should:

- » Create innovation hubs and incubators, where students develop startups focused on urban mobility, circular economy models, and social innovation.
- » Provide funding for student-led initiatives, ensuring community projects and sustainability ideas receive municipal support.
- » Organise pitch competitions, where students propose projects that receive seed funding and mentorship from city officials.
- » Encourage interdisciplinary collaborations, connecting engineering, business, and social science students to co-create market-ready urban solutions.
- »

Showcase

Startup Incubator Rijeka – Fostering Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship¹¹. The Startup Incubator Rijeka is a city-run program that supports young entrepreneurs, including students and recent graduates, in developing innovative business ideas. Operated by the City of Rijeka's Department of Entrepreneurship, the incubator provides participants with free access to mentorship, coworking spaces, workshops, and expert guidance across business development, marketing, legal affairs, and pitching.

*The program is designed to:
Empower youth with entrepreneurial skills and problem-solving capacity.*

Connect students with real-world challenges and local innovation ecosystems.

Support team-based learning and interdisciplinary cooperation among participants.

By facilitating the transition from idea to prototype and even startup launch, the incubator encourages young people to take an active role in shaping their economic environment. It often partners with local HEIs, making it a successful example of cross-sector collaboration.

This initiative exemplifies how municipalities can support student engagement beyond formal education-through innovation-driven development aligned with smart city goals.

Learn more at: <https://startup.rijeka.hr>

¹¹ Exevio. (n.d.-b). Startup inkubator. <https://startup.rijeka.hr/>

Showcase

The Urban Innovation Laboratory¹² in Portugal, established in 2019. This laboratory serves as a collaborative hub where municipal technicians, private companies, universities, and research centers co-create innovative projects in mobility, environmental sustainability, and urban management.

The lab hosts Master's and PhD students for internships and action-research projects, facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration and direct municipal support for student-led initiatives. Since its inception, the lab has welcomed around 60 researchers, resulting in projects such as smart crossings and public space reallocations—demonstrating the tangible impact of student-driven innovation on city policies and infrastructure.

EUREKA Urban Innovators Labs¹³ Developed within the E+ EUREKA project, this initiative established Living Labs in collaboration with universities across five European cities. These labs engage students in real-world urban challenges related to climate action, social inclusion, and governance. Through workshops, mentoring sessions, and fieldwork, students co-design proposals that are tested in public spaces and discussed with local administrations. The labs serve as platforms for applied learning and civic entrepreneurship, transforming academic environments into engines of urban innovation and participatory policymaking.

¹² *Urban Innovation Laboratory.* (2025, June 6). <https://www.interregeurope.eu/good-practices/urban-innovation-laboratory>

¹³ Redazione, L. (2022, October 24). EUREKA – Training urban innovators. LAMA. <https://agenzialama.eu/appunti/news/eureka-training-urban-innovators/>

F. Promoting youth representation in policy development



To ensure that student engagement is not limited to isolated projects, municipalities must integrate young voices directly into governance structures.

Key approaches include:

- » Establishing municipal youth councils, where student representatives participate in city planning discussions and budget allocations.
- » Hosting town hall meetings specifically for youth, ensuring municipal policies reflect student perspectives and priorities.
- » Inviting student representatives to join policy advisory committees, ensuring their insights contribute to decision-making processes.
- » Developing participatory decision-making frameworks, where students are directly involved in shaping urban education, transport, and digital governance policies.

Municipalities have a unique opportunity to harness students' creativity, expertise, and civic energy by adopting structured engagement methods. Through curricular integration, digital participation platforms, co-creation workshops, and youth policy representation, cities can ensure that students become active contributors to urban governance and long-term civic innovation.

By implementing these practical engagement methods, local and regional authorities can foster a culture of participatory democracy, ensuring that young people are prepared to shape future cities and empowered to drive innovation and sustainability today.

Showcase

Youth Council of the City of Rijeka – Institutionalizing Youth Participation

Rijeka's Youth Council¹⁴ (<https://www.rijeka.hr/gradska-uprava/gradsko-vijece/savjet-mladih-grada-rijeke/>) is a formal advisory body established by the City Council to promote active youth participation in local public affairs. It is composed of young people aged 15 to 30, selected through a public call and appointed by the City Council for a three-year term. The Council acts as a bridge between the youth population and city authorities, proposing initiatives, expressing opinions, and giving recommendations on issues affecting young people.

The Council participates in shaping youth policies, cultural and educational programs, and strategies to improve living conditions for young people in Rijeka. It cooperates with schools, youth organizations, and city departments, ensuring that the voice of the younger generation is heard in decision-making processes.

By granting youth a structured, ongoing role in governance, Rijeka demonstrates how municipalities can institutionalize youth engagement. This model helps build civic responsibility, leadership skills, and policy awareness among young people and can be replicated in other cities looking to strengthen youth representation in local decision-making.

¹⁴ Youth Council - City of Rijeka. (2024, October 31). City of Rijeka.
<https://www.rijeka.hr/en/city-government/city-council/youth-council/?noredirect=en-GB>

Showcase

The Finland's statutory system of municipal youth councils¹⁵ is a standout European example of promoting youth representation in policy development is. According to the Finnish Municipalities Act, every municipality is required to establish a youth council or equivalent action group, giving young people the formal right to participate in planning, preparation, implementation, and follow-up activities across sectors such as education, environment, transport, and public health. These councils typically include elected representatives from local schools and educational institutions and are empowered to influence city planning discussions, budget allocations, and policy development at both municipal and county levels.

Showcase

Borgo Prossima – Spazi ai Giovani (Tuscany, Italy)¹⁶ – Promoted by the Municipality of Borgo San Lorenzo and the Tuscany Region, this participatory process involved over 150 young people in reimagining public spaces for youth. Through assemblies, workshops, and collaborative mapping, students identified underused areas and proposed projects ranging from cultural hubs to outdoor meeting places. The process culminated in a youth-led proposal document that was formally presented to the local administration, influencing spatial planning and youth policy. It stands as a replicable model for embedding youth voices in territorial development and community regeneration.

¹⁵ 5.3 Youth representation bodies. (n.d.)

<https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/finland/53-youth-representation-bodies>

¹⁶ Home – Borgo prossima | Spazi ai giovani - Open Toscana. (n.d.). Borgo Prossima | Spazi Ai Giovani.

<https://partecipa.toscana.it/web/borgo-prossima-spazi-ai-giovani>

2.6 Attracting HEIs, Secondary Schools, and Students to Collaborate

Successfully engaging HEIs, secondary schools, and students in urban development initiatives requires more than outreach; it demands a well-structured approach grounded in mutual value, opportunity, and long-term commitment. Local and regional authorities must recognize the motivations of each educational stakeholder and actively design frameworks that make participation meaningful, accessible, and rewarding.

A. Establishing Incentives for Engagement



To motivate sustained involvement, authorities should integrate civic collaboration into educational frameworks and create reward mechanisms that align with the academic, social, and professional goals of students and institutions.

Some effective incentives include:

- » **Academic recognition:** Authorities can collaborate with universities to integrate civic projects into curricula through challenge-based learning and capstone courses. For example, students can work on real municipal challenges—such as transport optimization or waste reduction—as part of their coursework.
- » **Research opportunities:** Municipalities can offer funding or resources for university-led research that addresses local issues, encouraging HEIs to prioritize applied, community-facing projects.
- » **Internships and fellowships:** Structured placements within public institutions allow students to gain experience while supporting innovation.
- » **Public recognition and professional exposure:** Certificates, awards, and media promotion of student contributions help validate the value of their involvement and motivate peers.

B. Creating Platforms for Collaborative Action



Attracting educational partners also requires a shift from episodic events to long-term collaborative ecosystems.

Municipalities should consider establishing:

- » **Urban innovation labs** where students, researchers, and public officials co-design and test urban solutions. Rijeka's Urban Laboratory under the CEKOM project is one such example, fostering cooperation between students, citizens, and experts on smart city topics.
- » **Community-based projects** where students support local regeneration efforts. The ReValue project in Rijeka engaged students and citizens in participatory design workshops to envision the future of the Export Drvo site—a post-industrial space now reimagined through co-creation.
- » **Educational challenges and hackathons**, such as Rijeka's "Revalue Business Challenge," in which secondary school students developed project proposals around the blue economy and sustainability. These initiatives combine education with innovation, giving students a sense of purpose and contribution.

C. Integrating Collaboration into Curricula



A foundational strategy is to institutionalize collaboration with public authorities within educational programs.

Municipalities can:

- » Partner with secondary schools to introduce civic engagement courses that include modules on sustainability, participatory governance, and urban innovation.
- » Provide open datasets and local policy challenges to universities for student research and thesis work.
- » Co-develop interdisciplinary courses with universities where students from diverse faculties work on joint municipal projects.

D. Sharing Success and Building Visibility



Visibility plays a critical role in sustaining engagement. Authorities should actively promote collaborative efforts to foster a culture of recognition and public interest.

Strategies include:

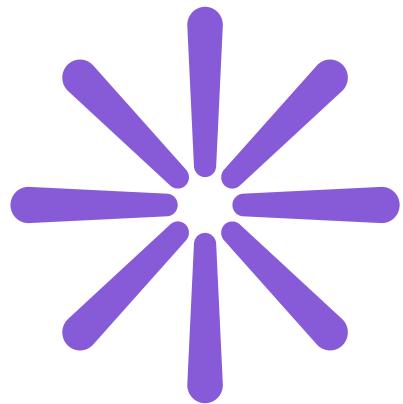
- » Documenting and publishing case studies of student-led initiatives that made tangible impact.
- » Hosting public exhibitions or forums to showcase project outcomes.
- » Using local media and municipal portals to amplify the role of students and HEIs in shaping urban futures.

Showcase

*The City of Rijeka, through its platform *Uključi se* ("Get Involved")¹⁷, actively promoted civic initiatives co-created by students and citizens. These were widely shared across local media, generating greater awareness and public appreciation.*

¹⁷ GET INVOLVED! (n.d.). <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/com/get-involved/en/index.html>

HEIsCITI Pilots: Engagement outcomes



A.

HEIsCITI Pilot Project Hochschule der Medien, Stuttgart

The „HEIs as Innovative Triggers of Sustainable Development in European Cities in Post Covid-19 era“ (HEIsCITI) pilot project in Stuttgart demonstrated an effective model for fostering citizen engagement in urban development. Conducted by HdM Stuttgart, the course engaged 11 master's and advanced bachelor's students who voluntarily enrolled, many motivated by the decline of city centres post-COVID-19 in their home-towns.

The pilot's purpose was to empower students to actively shape inclusive and sustainable urban development by improving communication between citizens and administration, understanding citizen needs, and encouraging active participation in planning for vacant urban areas. Key learning outcomes included understanding participatory approaches, recognizing citizen needs, and learning methods and tools for promoting citizen engagement.

Key Methods for Citizen Engagement:

The course utilized practical tools and methodologies:

Storytelling and Persona Canvas:

Used to define target audiences and structure narratives for community resonance.

Focus Group Meetings:

An online meeting involved student teams, city administration, commerce, and creative industries to prioritize thematic areas.

Ideation Methods:

Brainstorming and brainwriting for collaborative solution development.

Public Presentation (Urban Innovation Lab):

A final public event (exhibition and pitch) held in a centrally located „Living Lab” (a vacant retail space) allowed students to present ideas to the public, local government officials, and other stakeholders, fostering direct feedback.

Student Solutions & Outcomes:

Students formed two teams:

Urban Culture Club:

Proposed a non-commercial „second living room“ for adults, fostering community, providing a safe space, and connecting people through shared interests.

Die Grüne Bühne (The Green Stage):

Envisioned repurposing vacant spaces as a platform for local sustainability initiatives, showcasing visions, and fostering community exchange.

The project's success highlights its potential as an educational framework for fostering public participation and civic development. Recommendations derived include expanding the course to more institutions, increasing practical learning through workshops, and encouraging cross-sector partnerships to enrich learning and knowledge exchange. This pilot offers a tangible approach to empowering future generations with the skills and motivation for meaningful civic engagement in urban planning and governance.

B.

Pilot Project Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania

The course “Participation Management: tools for citizen engagement and community empowerment,” created in a framework of Erasmus+ project HEIsCITI was implemented while teaching the course “Research Methodology” (6 ECTS) taught at Institute of Communication (Human and Social Studies Faculty, Mykolas Romeris University) during the spring semester (2024 February - June). 11 students participated. They were first-year students of the master’s study Program “Communication and Creative Technologies.

Students had lectures on topics such as 1) Community participation in decision making; 2) Involvement of citizens in the municipalities development; 3) Embracing Resilience: Innovating Participatory Methods in the Post-COVID Era via example of Croatia; 4) Design thinking: stages and activities/creative techniques for each stage, tools for design thinking activities. 6) Research methods for collection of information about case & results presentation. After this theoretical input meeting with representative from Joniskis District municipality¹⁸ (vice-mayor) was organized. Vice-Mayor introduced the municipality and invited students to investigate municipalities communication. The chosen topic was somewhat connecting students’ study program and real practice of municipality. Students grouped into couples to study chosen topics, and answer the questions:

¹⁸ There are 60 municipalities in Lithuania. Joniskis district municipality is located in northern Lithuania, on the border with Latvia. With an area of 1152 km² (1.8% of the area of Lithuania), the population of the municipality on 1 January 2022 was 20 898.

- » What is the characteristic of the current involvement of citizens at Joniskis district?
- » What variables might encourage ordinary people to effectively participate in and influence policies that directly affect their lives?
- » What are the communication goals and priorities, and main topics of Joniskis municipality administration?
- » What are the characteristics of daily message?
- » How effectively does the municipality use social networks to disseminate information in times of crisis?
- » What factors could encourage the community to engage with the municipality's communication on social networks?

Key Methods:

Audit of communication for the chosen case, research methods: survey, interview, observation/monitoring
[Emphasize stage]

Creative techniques, e.g., LOTUS, DISNEY, ACTIVE MEETING
[Define stage]

Ideas sorting methods, e.g., 20 ways to use your spoon, 6 de Bono hats [Ideate stage]

Creative techniques, e.g. story board, fake it [Prototype stage]

Presentation format Pitch/Pecha Kutch with extensive reflection for public presentations & feedback collection from Joniskis municipality during visit to Joniskis [Test stage]

Implemented tools:

- » Secondary research tool
- » Stakeholders map
- » Challenges and opportunities tool

Student Solutions & Outcomes:

Students surveyed and interviewed both citizens and municipality's communication specialists, they also made content analysis of municipality's website and social media platforms. They came up with results and suggestions which were presented during the meeting organized in Joniskis district municipality. Their efforts imply: identification of goals, developing a work plan, collecting data, identifying problems, working to devise solutions and proposals for improvement, presenting their vision (solution) to a local decision maker and the public, and reflecting.

Example

Students who aimed to explore the attitudes of the residents of Joniskis district municipality towards community engagement used a questionnaire survey.

Based on a survey¹⁹, citizens indicated that the most often used method is participation at surveys of municipality: forth expresses their opinion via questionnaires. Fifth of respondents participate at online meetings of municipality. About 10 percent of respondents participate at community meetings, at meetings organized by the municipality. Two thirds of respondents would like to receive better quality information from their local authority.

In the open-ended responses, respondents indicate that they would like to see more frequent and clearer information on the preparation and outcome of decisions via email, social networks, local press and the municipality's website. There is also a lack of information on the progress of processes, feedback, meeting information (issues to be addressed, date, time, place, estimated duration of the meeting). Respondents miss the possibility to participate remotely in the various meetings and the possibility to contribute to the decision-making process by responding to the surveys.

Joniskis district residents – respondents – indicated „nonparticipation” level in terms of active participation. Respondents felt that education, involvement of young people, identification of benefits and education on the possibilities of participation in public decisions would involve more people in the region. They tend to blame that there is lack of initiatives from the municipality side (74 perc.). They lack information about engagement possibilities (75 perc.). In addition, they lack feedback or information afterward (67 perc.). Even the fear was pointed out: respondents (53 perc.) are afraid of jeopardizing the negative outcomes of participation initiatives. Less respondents pointed out themselves to be the variable for nonparticipation. The apathy of residents or contrary, the lack of time because of their business, as well as the uncertainty due to the process are named as the main obstacles referring to inner ability of residents.

The study identified some important communication needs of citizens of Joniskis district relevant for successful citizen participation. Citizen participation suffers from the information deficits. The study suggests that meeting residents' information and communication needs contributes to active civic engagement.

Students presented their findings and recommendations to the city and project staff, as well as to the university community (to spread information about the new course). Through participation in this course, students became more aware of the need for civic engagement but also acquired knowledge and skills in animating citizen-local authority relations. By fostering a sense of partnership and mutual respect, students feel empowered to approach city leaders about desired changes. Through community empowerment tools, students advocate for improvements.

¹⁹ PARTICIPANTS: 213 adults (41% men, 59% women; 47% - aged 18 - 29; 19% - aged 30 – 39, 16% - aged 40 - 49; 8% - aged 50-59, 10% - aged 60+)

B.

HEIsCITI Pilot Project WSB University, Poland

A pilot project was carried out at one of the University's branches in Cieszyn, using a project-based learning approach, supplemented with selected design thinking methods. The initiative focused on the immediate urban surroundings of the University building, which had become slightly neglected. Based on the identified needs of local stakeholders, students worked on ways to revitalize the neighbourhood in a manner that emphasizes inclusivity and sustainability. The course involved bachelor's students in the frames of their Project-based Learning course.

Key Methods for Citizen Engagement:

The course utilized practical tools and methodologies:

Stakeholder Mapping – identifying key actors impacted by or influencing the project

Spatial Mapping – visualizing spaces and areas of interaction in the neighbourhood

Field Observations – understanding how stakeholders use the space and what their needs are

Idea Generation – group brainstorming to create innovative solutions

Public Presentation – students presented their concepts to local government officials, university staff, and community members, enabling direct dialogue and feedback

Student Solutions & Outcomes:

TEAM 1:

Small-scale outdoor architecture – the group focused on designing solutions that facilitate the use of public space in accordance with accessibility principles.

TEAM 2:

Greenery around the University building – this team worked on planning the surroundings of the University in line with sustainable development values.

TEAM 3:

Shared social space with users of neighbouring properties – the team developed ideas on how cooperation with stakeholders could be implemented to revitalize the neighbourhood and foster relationships.

TEAM 4:

Parking area and outdoor learning space – this team addressed the challenging issue of the excessive number of cars parked around the building, which limits the potential use of the space for user relaxation and outdoor activities.

The Cieszyn-based pilot empowered students to co-create inclusive and sustainable solutions tailored to real stakeholder needs. Four student teams tackled not only the issue of the abandoned neighbourhood, but also important social challenges such as accessibility, green space, social integration, and transport issues. Participatory tools helped bridge communication between students, citizens, and local authorities. The project demonstrated how academic settings can catalyse community-centred urban innovation.

2.6.1 Roadmap for Strengthening Student and Youth Engagement

Strengthening student and youth engagement in regional and local affairs is a complex process that requires a strategic approach and consistent action. These target groups are best encouraged to develop their interest in local community development, which is closer to their hearts and a better-known environment. The following roadmap presents the key stages of this process.

Stage I

Diagnosis and strategic planning

All actions should be based on a thorough understanding of the situation, needs, and potential of young people within local community.

Identifying the needs, barriers, and potential of students and youth in the local community

It is crucial to gain a reliable understanding of the specific characteristics of the local youth community—its problems, aspirations, available resources, and expectations towards the local government and opportunities for engagement. The diagnosis should not be carried out solely by officials or external experts; the active involvement of students and youth at this stage is fundamental, making the study more relevant and building a sense of co-responsibility for its results.

Various methods, both quantitative and qualitative, can be used to conduct the diagnosis. These include surveys (traditional and online), individual and group interviews (e.g., focus group interviews – FGI), diagnostic workshops with student and youth participation, analysis of existing data (e.g., demographic, concerning infrastructure, educational and cultural offer), mapping community needs and resources, participant observation.

An essential element of the diagnosis is identifying barriers hindering active youth participation. These may include factors such as lack of time (resulting from school or work obligations), a sense of lack of real influence on decisions, low trust in public institutions and politicians, infrastructural limitations (e.g., lack of meeting places, poor access to public transport), particularly acute in smaller towns and rural areas.

Jointly defining goals and priorities with students and youth

A participatory approach to the planning stage is essential for subsequent, authentic youth engagement in implementing planned activities. Young people should have a tangible impact on shaping strategies and programs that directly concern them; their voice must be heard and taken into account. From SWOT analysis to goal-setting and public consultations, it shows how valuable such an approach can be.

Developing a local strategy/program of actions for youth engagement

The result of the diagnosis and joint definition of goals should be developing a formal document – a local strategy or program of actions for students and youth engagement. Such a document should be consistent with other strategic development plans of the municipality and based on reliable data from the conducted diagnosis. The strategy should clearly define goals (both general and specific), concrete actions to achieve them, a timeline for implementation, measurable success indicators, and a realistic financing plan. Creating the strategy must be transparent and involve a range of stakeholder groups, primarily students and youth themselves, but also representatives of universities, schools, non-governmental organizations, cultural institutions, businesses etc.

Authentic student and youth engagement, already at the stage of diagnosis and strategic planning, is the foundation for building shared responsibility for the community's future. Suppose young people feel that their voices are heard and genuinely considered when creating plans. In that case, they are much more willing to actively participate in their subsequent implementation and identify with these actions' goals. Omitting youth at the planning stage carries the risk of creating programs adapted to their real needs and interests, leading to a lack of interest and a low level of participation. Investing time and resources in participatory planning pays off manifold through greater engagement, more targeted initiatives, and better, more lasting results.

Stage II

Implementation of actions and initiatives

After developing the strategic framework, the next stage is the practical implementation of concrete actions and initiatives to strengthen student and youth engagement.

Catalogue of proven forms and tools for engaging students and youth

Local governments should use a wide range of participation methods and tools to be able to flexibly respond to different needs and contexts. The choice of specific forms should be preceded by an analysis of their suitability to local conditions, diagnosis of student and youth needs, and availability of resources.

A list of recommendations can be found in the “Active Participation Tools: A Handbook for Civic Engagement Facilitators” document. This document was also developed within the HEIsCITI project.

Adaptation of national and international good practices to the local contexts

These guidelines can inspire such activities, presenting experiences of other municipalities and local actors that successfully implement programs engaging students and youth. However, the key is not to uncritically copy ready-made solutions, but to creatively adapt them to the specifics of the local community, its culture, resources, and challenges. Engaging stakeholders, including students and youth, should be “tailor-made”, treating good practices as inspiration, not ready-made recipes.

Stage III

Course of actions – key aspects of implementation

**Launching initiatives is just the beginning.
How they are conducted has a decisive
impact on the actual engagement of young
people and the results achieved.**

Ensuring student and youth autonomy and real influence.

For engagement to be authentic, young people must feel that they have a real impact on decisions made and the shape of implemented actions. They should be given space for independent work, taking initiative, and experimenting, even if it involves the risk of making mistakes, as these are a natural part of the learning process. It is essential to avoid situations where adults excessively control or dominate young people's activities, as this leads to frustration and discouragement. Treating young people as equal partners, entrusting them with responsibility and trusting their competencies is crucial.

Promotion of activities and reaching out to different groups of students at universities and secondary schools

Effective communication and promotion are necessary to reach many young people with information about engagement opportunities. Communication channels popular among youth, such as social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), should be used, as well as traditional forms like posters at universities and in secondary schools and public places, informational meetings, or information in the local press and on websites. Particular attention should be paid to reaching young people in smaller towns, revitalisation areas, and abandoned areas, including those under the revitalisation processes, where access to information and diverse offers may be more limited. It is worth engaging peers as ambassadors of participatory activities.

Substantive and organizational support for youth initiatives

Young people, even full of enthusiasm and ideas, often need support from adults to implement their initiatives effectively. The role of the local government and cooperating institutions, such as universities and secondary schools, is to provide such support. It can take mentoring from experienced advisers, trainers, or facilitators who will help in planning, project management, problem-solving, or fundraising. Equally important is the provision of material resources, such as premises for meetings, office and multimedia equipment, or administrative assistance in organizing events. An important support element is training for young leaders and members of youth councils or student councils to enhance their competencies in public action.

Stage IV

Monitoring, evaluation, and ensuring sustainability

Young people's engagement is not a one-time action, but a continuous process that requires systematic monitoring, assessment, and adjustment.

Methods and indicators for monitoring progress and effects

It is necessary to collect data regularly on the course of implemented activities, the level of youth participation, and the results achieved. Monitoring should include both quantitative indicators (e.g., number of participants, number of implemented projects, turnout in youth council elections, number of active members of youth organisations) and qualitative indicators (e.g., level of participant satisfaction, competency development, attitude change).

Participatory evaluation of activities with youth involvement

The evaluation process should also be participatory – young people should be actively involved in assessing the actions undertaken and collecting their opinions, observations, and suggestions for possible improvements. Evaluation methods may include surveys (online and traditional), individual and group interviews, focus groups, evaluation workshops, etc. Youth councils and participatory budgeting representatives should carry out evaluations after each completed task and prepare annual evaluations of their activities.

Strategies for ensuring long-term sustainability and institutionalisation of actions

For young people, engagement should be sustainable and institutionalised. This includes creating stable structures supporting participation (e.g., well-functioning youth councils with secured funding and support, permanent grant programs for youth initiatives). It is also important to build the competencies of local youth leaders and facilitators who will be able to continue activities in the future. They may be embedded both at universities and in secondary schools. Youth activities should be incorporated into long-term municipal development strategies, ensuring appropriate recognition and continuity of funding. Continuous dialogue and partnership-based cooperation with youth are also key, treating them as a permanent element of local public life.

The approach to youth engagement should be dynamic and be based on a cycle of continuous improvement, comparable to the Deming cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Act). Diagnosing needs and carefully planning actions (Plan) are the starting point. Then comes the time to implement the planned initiatives (Do). The next step is systematic monitoring of progress and participatory evaluation of outcomes (Check). The conclusions from this stage should lead to reflection, modification, and improvement of the actions undertaken (Act) to best respond to the changing needs of young people and local conditions. Such an iterative process helps avoid stagnation, adapting to new challenges, and continuously improving the system of supporting youth participation, making it more effective and sustainable. This is a learning process for all involved parties – both for the local government and the students and youth.

The following table (Table 1: Potential barriers to youth engagement and strategies for overcoming them) presents potential barriers to youth engagement and suggested strategies for overcoming them.

Table 1:

Potential barriers to youth engagement and strategies for overcoming them



Barrier Type and Description

Proposed Overcoming Strategies

Example Actions

<p>Lack of time among students and young people</p> <p>Heavy workload from university and school, extracurricular activities, work; and a tight schedule.</p>	<p>Adjusting activity times and formats to the availability of students and young people; offering flexible forms of engagement; and appreciating their time contribution.</p>	<p>Organizing shorter, intensive workshops; online participation option; offering activities on weekends or afternoons; symbolic rewards or certificates for participation.</p>
<p>Feeling of having no influence and low trust in institutions</p> <p>Belief that youth voice is not considered; negative image of politicians and offices; experiences of tokenism.</p>	<p>Ensuring real influence on decisions; transparency of decision-making processes; building partnership relations; showing concrete effects of youth actions.</p>	<p>Implementing youth participatory budgets with guaranteed realization of selected projects; regular consultations with youth councils and considering their opinions; informing about how youth-submitted ideas were used.</p>
<p>Lack of interest and motivation among students and young people</p> <p>Apathy; lack of knowledge about engagement opportunities; perceiving politics as boring or negative.</p>	<p>Attractive forms of activities tailored to students' and youth's interests; promoting the benefits of engagement (personal development, new acquaintances, real influence); engaging peers as leaders and ambassadors.</p>	<p>Organizing city games, festivals, contests, artistic projects related to civic themes; using social media and influencers; creating mentoring programs.</p>
<p>Limited local government resources (financial, human, material)</p> <p>Lack of sufficient funds in the budget; insufficient number of trained staff; lack of appropriate premises.</p>	<p>Seeking external funding sources; building staff competencies through training; cooperation with NGOs and volunteers; optimal use of existing infrastructure.</p>	<p>Applying for grants (e.g., Erasmus+); organising training for officials; making university and school halls or cultural centre rooms and companies' premises available for students and youth activities.</p>
<p>Infrastructural and communication barriers (especially in small towns/villages).</p> <p>Difficulties with commuting to meetings, limited access to information, and fewer organisations and institutions.</p>	<p>Decentralisation of activities, use of online tools, supporting local youth leaders, and mobile activity centres.</p>	<p>Organising meetings and workshops in different parts of the municipality; creating online platforms for communication and participation; supporting programs for students and youth initiatives in rural areas.</p>
<p>Lack of adequate support from adults (guardians, teachers, parents)</p> <p>Insufficient competencies of local governments representatives; lack of understanding of youth needs; excessive control or passivity.</p>	<p>Training and support for officials and teachers; educating parents about the benefits of youth participation; promoting partnership relations between adults and youth.</p>	<p>Workshops for youth council guardians, informational meetings for parents, and creating guides and educational materials for adults working with youth.</p>
<p>Unrealistic expectations and demands from youth</p> <p>Submitting ideas impossible to implement due to financial, legal, or technical reasons.</p>	<p>Educating students and youth about local government's possibilities and limitations; clearly defining the support's criteria and rules; and supporting refining ideas.</p>	<p>Organising informational meetings about the municipal budget and decision-making procedures; providing substantive support at the project submission stage.</p>

2.7 Involving Civil Society Organizations and Other Stakeholders

Engaging civil society organizations (CSOs) and other key stakeholders in urban development, such as businesses and media, fosters a more inclusive, transparent, and participatory decision-making process. A diverse range of actors—non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, trade unions, businesses, and media outlets—contribute valuable perspectives, expertise, and resources. An integrated approach that combines public consultations, digital engagement, and community-led initiatives ensures meaningful participation and strengthens collaboration between local authorities and these stakeholders.

Civil society organisations are crucial in advocating for social causes, representing marginalised communities, and mobilising public participation. Businesses contribute through corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, innovative solutions, and public-private partnerships. Media outlets, both traditional and digital, help disseminate information, raise awareness, and facilitate dialogue between authorities and citizens.

Recommended actions ➤

A. Public consultations and participatory planning processes



- » Host town hall meetings, focus groups, surveys, and workshops to gather input on proposed policies or projects.
- » Involve CSOs, businesses, and media as key partners in discussions to ensure a broad representation of interests.
- » Use participatory budgeting methods to allow citizens and organizations to influence funding decisions directly.

Showcase

The Berlin Strategy 3.0, a city development plan, was developed through a participatory process²⁰ involving a steering committee with representation from all Senate departments, ensuring comprehensive input and coordination. The process included a public opinion survey conducted in early 2020 to gather perspectives on key topics related to the city's future. A follow-up survey was conducted to assess the potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on public opinion. The results of both surveys informed the evaluation of specific thematic areas within the strategy.

²⁰ "Shaping the City Together" and the Urban Development Concept Berlin 2030.
<https://oidp.net/en/practice.php?id=1253>

B. Using digital platforms for wider reach and engagement



- » Implement online platforms for surveys, idea submissions, and feedback collection, allowing CSOs, businesses, and media representatives to contribute their insights.
- » Use geospatial tools like digital maps to crowdsource community input on urban issues.
- » Engage media outlets to amplify participation opportunities and keep the public informed about decision-making processes.

Showcase

In Amsterdam, Netherlands, the municipality launched the "Amsterdam Smart City Platform²¹" a digital tool where citizens, students, and HEIs can propose ideas and collaborate on urban innovation projects. This platform has led to successful initiatives, such as community energy-sharing networks and sustainable housing prototypes.

Showcase

The City of Stuttgart has developed a citizen participation portal called „Stuttgart -Meine Stadt²² „, as part of its efforts to enhance digital services and civic engagement. This innovative platform enables residents to actively participate in local governance, contribute to city projects, and engage with community initiatives. It serves as a comprehensive digital resource, providing information on urban development, civic participation opportunities, and local community news.

²¹ Amsterdam Smart City. (n.d.). Amsterdam Smart City. Amsterdam Smart City. <https://amsterdamsmartcity.com/>

²² Bürgerbeteiligungsportal. (2024). Stuttgart-Meine-Stadt.de. <https://www.stuttgart-meine-stadt.de/>

C. Encouraging community-led initiatives and volunteerism

- » Partner with local CSOs, businesses, and media to co-develop and implement community projects.
- » Encourage businesses to support urban initiatives through corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, sponsorships, and skill-based volunteering.
- » Engage media outlets to highlight successful community-led projects, inspiring broader participation.
- » Provide micro-grants to support grassroots initiatives that align with municipal priorities, such as sustainability projects, social inclusion programs, and digital literacy initiatives.

Showcase

Human Cities/Smoties-Creative²³ works with small and remote places, led by the Human Cities network, involving universities, centres and consultancies, including a regional design centre Zamek Cieszyn (Poland). SMOTIES was focused on urban regeneration, especially in small, remote places which are depopulated and distant. Project's aim was to uncover and stimulate local evolutionary processes. The collaborative design processes with local communities took place in the selected spaces. The project also resulted in the preparation of Design tools for the creative transformation of public spaces in small and remote places.

Section 3

Cooperation for Participatory Approach - Requirements for regional and Local Authorities.

3.1 Foundation for Effective Local Government Action

Clear and stable legal frameworks should be created to support collaboration between regional and local authorities, schools, academia and students and youth. In particular, when establishing advisory and consultative bodies—such as youth councils and their statutes—precisely define their tasks, competencies, and operating principles. Developing and implementing municipal programmes or strategies for cooperation with these groups is therefore essential. These documents should be created in a participatory manner, with the active involvement of students and youth themselves, as well as schools and academia, to define long-term goals and directions for action.

For local government to effectively strengthen student and youth engagement in community activities, its employees and decision-makers must possess appropriate competencies, ensure adequate resources, and create a supportive environment.

Therefore, human resources demonstrating specific knowledge and competences seems to be a strategic resource in this field. Effectively engaging students and young people requires regional and local government representatives to have substantive knowledge, well-developed soft skills, and an open, supportive attitude.

Key competency areas include:

» Communication competencies: The ability to convey information precisely and understandably, tailored to the specifics of a young audience,

is fundamental. Active listening, openness to youth arguments, and dialogue based on mutual respect and understanding are essential. Communication should be two-way, allowing young people to express opinions and ask questions freely.

» Participatory competencies: Local government employees should know about various methods and tools of participation and the ability to practically apply them in working with youth. This includes designing and facilitating consultation and co-decision processes that are genuinely inclusive. Also, crucial is the readiness to share responsibility, and even part of the power, and to give initiative to young people, treating them as equal partners in action, not just passive recipients.

» Competencies in working with academia, schools, students and youth: Understanding the specifics of adolescence and early adulthood, with particular attention to the needs, aspirations, problems, and potential of young people, is necessary. The ability to build relationships based on trust, empathy, and support, as well as possessing appropriate personality predispositions for working with this age group, is essential.

The table below (**Table 2: Key competencies of local government in youth engagement**) summarises the key competencies of local government necessary for effective student and youth engagement.

Table 2:

Key competencies of local government in youth engagement

Competency category	Specific skill/ knowledge	Examples of practical application
Communication	Active listening, empathy, adapting language to the audience, ability to conduct dialogue and moderate discussions, precise message formulation, and providing constructive feedback.	Conducting consultation meetings with students and youth, drafting informational materials in an accessible way, and mediating in conflict situations.
Participatory	Knowledge of participation methods and tools (e.g., workshops, debates, online consultations, participatory budgets), ability to design inclusive processes, facilitation, and readiness to share power and responsibility.	Designing and implementing a participatory budget for students and youth, organising strategic workshops with these target groups, conducting open consultations etc.
Working with students and youth	Understanding students and youth developmental psychology, knowledge of the specific needs and problems of young people, ability to build trust and authority, motivating and supporting their initiatives, assertiveness.	Arranging a students and youth municipal council, conducting animation activities, supporting informal students and youth groups, responding to difficult situations and the needs of individual young people.
Managerial and organisational	Strategic planning, project management, fundraising, partnership building, activity coordination, and knowledge of legal frameworks concerning youth and participation.	Developing and implementing a municipal youth strategy, coordinating inter-institutional cooperation in youth activities, managing grant programs for youth organizations.
Interpersonal and personal	Openness to new ideas, flexibility, creativity, patience, teamwork skills, willingness to learn and change one's attitudes, and high personal culture.	Adapting proven practices to local conditions, experimenting with new forms of students and youth engagement, building positive relationships with young leaders, coping with failures and drawing conclusions from them.

Source: own elaboration

Summarising, effective student and youth engagement requires regional and local government officials to transform their role from a traditionally understood administrative function focused on administration to mentors, facilitators, and enablers of participatory processes. A friendly attitude, readiness to change one's views as a result of dialogue, and respect for the opinions of young people are key. Regional and local government officials must primarily prioritise the development of soft skills, demonstrate flexibility, openness to experimenting with new forms of cooperation, and move away from traditional, hierarchical management models towards more partnership-based relations.

Some examples of efficiently used competences in collaboration with young people could be:

- » Assigning dedicated youth coordinators or youth plenipotentiaries within the municipal/city office structures. These individuals should be responsible for initiating, coordinating, and monitoring activities aimed at young residents.
- » Training on staff of officials and employees of subordinate units (such as cultural centres, libraries, schools) in the specifics of working with youth and modern methods of civic participation is also crucial.
- » Establishing a youth municipal/city council and designing competent and engaged guardians who should demonstrate formal qualifications to perform this function, and the necessary predispositions to work with youth. They should be encouraged to be a mentor and facilitator, supporting the council in its activities, ensuring a smooth flow of information between the council and local government bodies, but not dominating its work.

Regional and local authorities should also ensure that additional assets are available when discussing collaboration with students and youth and their engagement in public affairs. There should be financial resources, material and technological resources and digital resources.

Financial resources provided by the regional or local authorities should be stable and transparent funding for students and youth activities in the budget of the local government unit. Specific funds should be allocated for the functioning of youth councils, including administrative and office support, and reimbursement of travel costs for council members to meetings or events where they represent the council. In a more extended model, youth participatory budget can be established, which gives young people direct influence over the allocation of part of public funds, and the creation of local grant funds for initiatives submitted by youth or student organisations. Another option is to support youth and youth organisations in obtaining external funds, for example, from programs such as Erasmus+. It is key that students and youth have access to appropriate material and technological resources. This includes access to youth-friendly and easily accessible premises for meetings, workshops, debates, and project implementation, as well as basic office and multimedia equipment and broadband internet.

Additionally, using digital platforms and online tools for communication, conducting consultations, voting, or collaborating on projects is becoming increasingly important. Students and youth navigate the digital world proficiently, so the regional and local government should also be present and active in this space.

3.2 Building a Supportive Ecosystem for Students and Youth to Participate in the Ground Actively

Individual actions by the regional and local government may not bring the expected results if they are not embedded in a broader, supportive environment. It is therefore crucial to build a local ecosystem for students and youth activities based on the cooperation of various entities—governmental, non-governmental, educational, business—that cooperate, providing young people with support and autonomy and creating a network of mutual connections and opportunities.

An effective ecosystem can be built on the following pillars:

- » Close cooperation with universities and schools, including student councils operating within them, is essential. Educational entities, especially in rural areas, often monopolise young people's activities, so they must become more open to external initiatives, cooperation with other entities, and genuine partnerships with students.
- » Partnership with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working for young people or run by young people. These organisations often have specialised knowledge, experience in working with the young generation, and flexibility that public institutions may lack.
- » Engagement of local cultural institutions (such as libraries, cultural centres), sports and recreation centres, and other entities that can offer young people attractive forms of spending

time and developing interests should also be involved in activities for student and youth and they may be considered as a supportive platform to start dialogue with young generation.

- » Engaging locally based companies that may consider CSR activities as a ground to finance valuable initiatives for students and youth, attract them to local businesses as promising drivers for future careers, and build their sense of togetherness in this way.

Creating a coherent ecosystem of support for students and youth, instead of implementing individual, isolated actions, significantly increases the chance of lasting and effective engagement of young people. The synergy of actions by various entities —regional and local government units, universities, schools, non-governmental organisations, cultural institutions and businesses—creates more diverse opportunities and makes it easier for young people to find their path of activity and engagement. The regional and local government should act as an initiator, coordinator, and mentor in building such a local ecosystem, creating platforms for dialogue and cooperation, and encouraging various entities to take joint, systemic action for students and youth. Isolated initiatives, although valuable, generally have less impact, limited reach, and a lower chance of long-term consolidation of results.

3.3 Why Public Engagement Tools Matter

Public engagement is critical in participatory processes, as it fosters inclusive decision-making and community involvement. This section presents a comprehensive overview of tools designed to facilitate and support public engagement.

Public engagement tools offer valuable resources for a wide range of stakeholders, such as higher education institutions, secondary schools, civil society organizations and public authorities. These tools enhance collaborative decision-making processes, promote social cohesion, and empower communities to actively contribute to shaping their environments. The strategic application of these methods enables stakeholders to harness collective intelligence, foster inclusivity, and improve the quality of outcomes in policy-making and local development projects.

Public authorities face growing expectations to involve citizens in decision-making to enhance transparency, accountability, and trust. Engage-

ment tools help local governments and public administrations better understand community needs, align policies with citizens' priorities, and co-create solutions that reflect local realities. Participatory methods such as stakeholder mapping, participatory budgeting, and public consultations enable public authorities to gather diverse perspectives, bridge gaps between decision-makers and communities, and mitigate potential conflicts. Moreover, tools like co-design workshops and listening sessions facilitate collaboration between local governments and residents, strengthening democratic governance and fostering social inclusion.

By integrating public engagement tools into policy-making processes, public authorities can improve the legitimacy of decisions, increase the effectiveness of service delivery, and promote a culture of active citizenship. These methods not only empower citizens but also enhance the capacity of institutions to respond to complex societal challenges.

3.4 Toolkit for Public Authorities

This guide is intended to serve as inspiration and support for implementing projects that thoughtfully and effectively engage local communities and academic environments. Collaboration, openness to diverse perspectives, and modern participatory tools are ways to drive change, especially in neglected areas requiring intervention and rebuilding social relations in the post-COVID era.

In line with participatory and project-based approaches and based on the methodology developed within the HEIsCITI project, the following recommended techniques and tools for participation processes are presented.

These tools, rooted in design thinking, PBL, and participatory methods, have been tested and verified for their effectiveness in teaching students. They engage project teams (students) and stakeholders in transforming urban spaces. The tools facilitate team collaboration, user engagement, and innovative solutions while fostering shared responsibility for challenges and outcomes.

1.



Storytelling:

Collecting community-relevant stories to uncover problems, potential, and values of a specific space. Using narrative strength enhances understanding of resident needs and creates impactful solutions.

2.

Stakeholders Map:

Identifying and analysing key individuals, groups, or organizations affecting or affected by a project. Categorizing them by influence and involvement aids in understanding needs, expectations, and potential conflicts.

3.

Space Mapping:

Visualising connections between system elements or processes to identify key areas of interaction, challenges, and optimization opportunities. Spatial mapping is crucial for urban planning and revitalization.

4.

Persona:

Creating detailed profiles of fictional users representing typical end-users of a solution. Persona Canvas focuses on motivations, needs, and challenges, ensuring user-centred solutions.

5.

Diagnostic Survey:

Collecting quantitative and qualitative data to understand community opinions, priorities, and experiences. Surveys provide trends, while interviews offer deeper insights.

6.

Observations:

Systematic monitoring of human behaviours or interactions in their natural context to discover real user needs and challenges.

7.

Challenges and Opportunities Analysis:

8.

Identifying barriers and advantages within a project to prioritize actions, reduce challenges, and maximize benefits.

Charrette:

An interdisciplinary workshop method, particularly effective in urban planning, engaging diverse stakeholders to collaboratively design solutions.

9.

Idea Generation:

Techniques like brainstorming or brainwriting facilitate generating innovative solutions, focusing on quantity and creativity before evaluating ideas.

10.

Prototyping:

Prototyping is the process of creating early often imperfect versions of products or services to test ideas in practice. Its goal is to quickly verify concepts, identify problems, and gather user feedback. Prototypes can be paper models, digital designs, or working versions. It helps understand user needs, test functionality, and improve solutions early in the design process—especially important in methods like design thinking.

Comprehensive descriptions and specifications of the tools provided here can be found in the ["Active Participation Tools: A Handbook for Civic Engagement Facilitators"](#) document. This document was developed as part of the HEIsCITI project.

3.5 Correlations Between Tools and Possible Implementations in Regional and Local Authorities Actions

The approach adopted in the project assumes that students develop their participatory competencies to engage in local affairs during their academic or school education, often going beyond the standard framework of education, while at the same time regional and local authorities learn how to cooperate with the education sector (universities, secondary schools) to prepare well and in a multifaceted way for cooperation with students. The table below (Table 3: Correlations between tools and possible implementations in participatory processes on students' and youth's engagement in local affairs) provides examples of possibilities of using the tools presented in point 3.4. in connection with the implementation of selected public activities in which young people should participate.

Table 3.

Correlations between tools and possible implementations in participatory processes on students' and youth's engagement in local affairs

Tool/activity	Youth Municipal Councils	Youth Participatory Budgets	Spatial planning	Investment planning and development	Public services design and development	Local strategy development	Grassroots initiatives	Public consultations and dialogue	Cooperation with student councils and organizations
Storytelling				X	X	X	X	X	X
Stakeholders map		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Space mapping			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Persona	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Diagnostic survey	X	X			X	X	X	X	X
Observations	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Challenges and opportunities analysis			X		X		X		
Charrette			X		X	X	X	X	
Idea generation			X		X		X	X	X
Prototyping			X		X	X	X	X	

Section 4

Summary and Conclusion

In recent years, significant global transformations, including the COVID-19 pandemic, military tensions, the escalating climate crisis, and technological advancements like AI, have reshaped societies and presented unprecedented challenges and opportunities. These shifts underscore the urgent need for spatial planning and urban development to adopt a participatory approach. This document, a key output of the „HEIs as Innovative Triggers of Sustainable Development in European Cities in Post Covid-19 era“ (HEIsCITI Erasmus+ Project), provides guidance and policy recommendations for local and regional authorities on how to effectively work with citizens. The project aims to bridge the historical gap between authorities and academia, fostering meaningful cooperation for sustainable spatial planning and urban development.

Engaging citizens, students, and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is vital for co-creating innovative solutions that respond effectively to these complex societal challenges. Citizens offer invaluable local knowledge and perspectives, while HEIs contribute cutting-edge research and innovation. Students, recognized as agents of change, bring fresh perspectives, digital fluency, and a strong desire to tackle real-world problems, making their active involvement in decision-making a strategic investment in social capital and innovation.

Citizen engagement is no longer optional but essential for meaningful urban transformation, ensuring that decision-making is a collaborative process that incorporates diverse perspectives. This approach empowers communities, fosters

a sense of ownership, and strengthens social cohesion. For public authorities, the benefits are substantial: it leads to more effective and accepted policies, increases social cohesion and trust, enhances problem-solving and innovation, and strengthens community engagement in implementation. HEIs, as innovation hubs, provide evidence-based approaches, opportunities to test and scale innovative solutions, and help develop a skilled workforce for public service, ensuring research aligns with pressing community needs.

To facilitate this crucial engagement, the document outlines comprehensive strategies, methods, and tools:

Building Partnerships with HEIs is paramount, moving from fragmented collaborations to structured, long-term partnerships. This involves identifying mutual interests and goals, establishing institutional frameworks like Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and joint advisory boards, creating Living Labs and Urban Innovation Hubs for real-world testing, ensuring stable funding and incentive structures, and implementing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track impact.

Engaging HEIs, secondary schools, and students is crucial for fostering long-term civic participation.

Key methods include:

- » Integrating municipal challenges into educational curricula, through challenge-based learning modules, civic engagement coursework, and policy research in capstone projects. Examples like Rijeka's Open Data Portal and the Turku Urban Research Programme illustrate this integration.
- » Creating student fellowships and municipal internship programs, providing hands-on experience and mentorship within city departments. The Municipal Intern Program in Pennsylvania, USA, serves as an example.
- » Leveraging digital tools and civic technology, such as mobile apps, social media, VR simulations, participatory budgeting platforms, and hackathons, to maximize youth engagement. Barcelona's "Decidim" platform and Stuttgart's "Stuttgart – Meine Stadt" portal exemplify this.
- » Organizing Co-Creation workshops and participatory design labs, where students collaborate directly with policymakers and urban designers, moving beyond mere consultation. Rijeka's „Re-Value“ Business Challenge and „Firenze per il Clima“ are successful applications.
- » Encouraging student-led urban innovation and entrepreneurship, through innovation hubs, funding for initiatives, and pitch competitions. The Startup Incubator Rijeka and Portugal's Urban Innovation Laboratory demonstrate this approach.
- » Promoting youth representation in policy development, by establishing municipal youth councils and inviting student representatives to advisory committees, ensuring young voices are directly integrated into governance. Rijeka's Youth Council and Finland's statutory system of municipal youth councils are prime examples.



Attracting these educational stakeholders requires establishing incentives (academic recognition, research opportunities), creating platforms for collaborative action (urban innovation labs, community projects), integrating collaboration into curricula, and actively sharing successes and building visibility. Pilot projects from Hochschule der Medien (Stuttgart), Mykolas Romeris University (Lithuania), and WSB University (Poland) showcased practical applications and positive outcomes, empowering students to tackle real urban challenges and co-create solutions.

For effective local government action, clear and stable legal frameworks (e.g., for youth councils) and municipal programs/strategies developed participatorily are essential. Local government employees must possess key competencies: communication, participatory, and working with academia/students/youth competencies, along with strong managerial and interpersonal skills. This transforms their role from administrators to mentors, facilitators, and animators of participatory processes. Furthermore, adequate financial, material, technological, and digital resources are crucial to support youth activities, including dedicated funding and accessible online platforms.

Ultimately, successful student and youth engagement hinges on building a supportive ecosystem that involves close cooperation with universities, schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), cultural institutions, and businesses. The local government should act as the initiator, facilitator, and coordinator of this ecosystem, fostering dialogue and systemic

action. The document also highlights a roadmap for strengthening engagement through four stages: Diagnosis and strategic planning, Implementation of actions and initiatives, key aspects of implementation, and Monitoring, evaluation, and ensuring sustainability, emphasizing a continuous improvement cycle and strategies for overcoming common barriers to participation.

Finally, a toolkit of public engagement tools, rooted in design thinking and participatory methods (e.g., Storytelling, Stakeholders Map, Idea Generation, Prototyping), is presented to enhance collaborative decision-making and empower communities, demonstrating how these tools can be implemented across various municipal activities from spatial planning to public service design.

Ultimately, by embracing the comprehensive strategies and tools outlined in these guidelines, local and regional authorities have a unique opportunity to transcend traditional governance models. This collaborative ecosystem, fuelled by the insights and energy of citizens, students, and HEIs, is not merely about addressing current urban challenges; it is about building a foundation for sustainable, resilient, and truly democratic societies that are equipped to co-create their future and thrive in an ever-evolving world. These guidelines serve as a vital blueprint for fostering deeper civic engagement and ensuring that the voices of all community members, especially the youth, are integral to shaping the cities of tomorrow.

Local & Regional Authorities: Shape Your Future!



Empower Youth:

Recognize students & young people as key agents of change for urban development.

Collaborate with HEIs:

Forge strategic, long-term partnerships for innovation & evidence-based policies.

Embrace Participation:

Implement inclusive governance models that build trust & ownership.

Integrate Learning:

Embed municipal challenges into educational curricula to foster civic responsibility.

Leverage Digital Tools:

Utilize civic tech & online platforms for wider engagement.

Invest in Competencies:

Equip staff with participatory & communication skills to mentor young leaders.

Build an Ecosystem:

Partner with schools, NGOs, and businesses to create a supportive environment.

Act Systematically:

Follow a roadmap for engagement – plan, implement, monitor, and adapt.

Transform Your City: Drive sustainable, resilient, and inclusive urban futures through active citizen involvement.

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