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ADVANCING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND CITIZENS: A MEDIATING ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

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Annotation: Students are understood as intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual human beings who interact reciprocally with the political, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of their communities (Maistry & Thakrar, 2012, p. 65). In this context, a new study course was developed and piloted to strengthen students' preparedness for community engagement practice. The article presents this study course, outlining its aims, content, structure, and instructional design, and discusses its accessibility for higher education institutions seeking to foster citizen participation processes.

The implementation of the course at Mykolas Romeris University (Vilnius, Lithuania) is used as an illustrative case to demonstrate its applicability and potential impact. The course “Participation Management: Tools for Citizen Engagement and Community Empowerment” builds on students' knowledge to promote compassionate, socially engaged, critical, and responsible citizenship. By engaging students with real community challenges and integrating them into purposeful activities, universities assume a mediating role in addressing societal issues and preparing future professionals capable of contributing to community resilience.

Keywords: community engagement; citizen participation; municipality; local communication; community problem-solving; higher education; study course; Lithuania

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Introduction

The term *community engagement* refers to activities carried out collaboratively with and through groups of people to address issues affecting their social well-being (Woronkiewicz, 2018). The overall purpose of citizen participation is to enhance the quality and legitimacy of policy decisions and to shift from a service-focused approach to a citizen-oriented one (Ianniello et al., 2019). As it leads to services that respond more effectively to citizens' needs, citizen participation is regarded as a factor that maximizes the efficiency of public policy (Bensus, 2021; Lappas et al., 2022). Sustained involvement of diverse participants in community-led decision-making corresponds to participatory processes adhering to democratic standards (Yet et al., 2022).

However, creating equitable citizen participation processes – that is, establishing dialogue among heterogeneous actors – is not always easy. Managing participatory processes correlates with increased workload for officials and entails considerable costs (Buckwalter, 2014). In addition, officials often place little trust in the skills, intelligence, and experience of ordinary people. Arnstein (1969) notes that “in most cases the have-nots really do perceive the powerful as a monolithic ‘system,’ and powerholders actually do view the have-nots as a sea of ‘those people’” (p. 217). Citizen involvement often centres on the needs and goals of the party initiating the involvement rather than those of the citizens themselves. Thus, encouraging participation in decision-making through the development of long-term partnerships with local community groups is challenging. Partnerships remain elusive unless partners are able to articulate, debate, and resolve disagreements (Ianniello et al., 2019).

Students must be educated and prepared for engaging with communities. Through community engagement – which is not the exclusive domain of universities but also of local communities – local people can articulate what local community issues are, where and when they arise, and how these issues could be addressed, drawing on their lived experiences. These facets of knowledge are relevant to a university's mission of fostering sustainable development by addressing issues that matter to the community (Mbah, 2019). Students and faculty benefit from applying their knowledge and skills to real-world problems, which has been shown to positively affect academic performance, civic engagement, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and leadership capacity (Hahn et al., 2020). Moreover, higher education institutions that promote students' social and civic responsibility through community engagement contribute to the socio-economic development of the country (Maistry & Thakrar, 2012, p. 65).

The present study aims to disseminate information about a new study course, *Participation Management: Tools for Citizen Engagement and Community Empowerment*, created within the framework of the Erasmus+ project KA220-HED-96EB51E1.

Contextual information: about the project

The Erasmus+ project titled “HEIs as Innovative Triggers of Sustainable Development in European Cities in the Post-Covid-19 Era” (HEIsCITI) focuses on teaching students effective ways to facilitate and coordinate communication between citizens and local authorities for inclusive and sustainable urban development in the post-Covid-19 period. HEIsCITI aims to equip students with a set of skills and knowledge necessary to understand the importance of responsible citizenship and inclusive, sustainable urban development.

The main objective of the project is to provide a universal methodology, tools, and policy guidelines for efficient communication between citizens and local/regional authorities. The development process of the universal toolkit included the following phases:

- Conceptualizing the curriculum design (April 2023 – June 2023),
- Developing the curriculum design (September 2023 – November 2023),
- Developing tools (learning/teaching materials) (November 2023 – March 2024),
- Curriculum piloting and evaluation (April 2024 – June 2024),
- Editing the curriculum and tools (refinement phase) (September 2024 – May 2025),

- Developing guidance for local/regional authorities (January 2025 – May 2025).

The methodology was piloted in three European regions: Cieszyn (a city on the border between Poland and the Czech Republic), Joniškis District (a Lithuanian district on the Lithuanian–Latvian border with a Latvian minority), and the Stuttgart region (one of the best European examples of integration activities with migrants and refugees). The methodology and tools are universal and focused on soft skills, enabling all universities – regardless of their specialisation – to integrate them into the curriculum.

Description of the study course “Participation Management: tools for citizen engagement and community empowerment”

In the framework of the Erasmus+ project, the course “*Participation Management: tools for citizen engagement and community empowerment*” was created and implemented (piloted). The key goal is to sustain students’ involvement in community development by building partnerships between various community engagement actors. The course aims to influence urban policy and practice toward a system that emphasizes the sharing of decision-making power through improved information, communication, and dialogue. The objectives of the course are as follows:

- To define the concept of community engagement
- To provide a variety of tools enabling responsible participation in local contexts
- To guide students in the process of designing a project/plan addressing particular community needs

Learning outcomes imply that students gain knowledge and also develop a range of skills: research, special, social, and personal (Table 1).

Table 1. Course content in terms of knowledge and skills

	SKILLS			
Knowledge	Research	Special	Social	Personal
Civic engagement: concept, principles, forms, issues	Action research Case study	Communication for citizen engagement	Group cooperation Problem solving	Creativity, personal responsibility
Knows main principles of participation approach and ways how to implement it	Is able to identify and formulate research problems, initiate and independently implement media and communication research, creatively apply scientific methods, collect empirical information, properly manage time, human and financial resources.	Is able to analyze the organization's information environment, manage internal and external communication, create relations with audiences based on mutual understanding and cooperation, prepare and implement communication strategies.	Is able to solve problem situations, and assumes civic and social responsibility for the results of his and his team's activities, their impact on public welfare and the environment.	Is able to think analytically, strategically, creatively, initiate and organize projects, takes responsibility for one's actions.

The volume of the course (module) is 2 ECTS credits. The estimated student workload is 27 hours per 1 ECTS credit. However, the actual workload may differ across institutions. Different institutions may have different implementation possibilities: integrating the course into an existing

higher-credit module or offering it as a separate micro-credential, either compulsory or elective, taught to Bachelor's or Master's students.

The course contains three main modules:

1. Theoretical input describing the concept of community engagement. Lectures cover topics such as: levels, forms, and methods of citizen engagement; engagement strategies and mechanisms; guidelines for community participation; issues hindering citizen engagement; and tools enabling both social and vertical communication between citizens and authorities.
2. Contextual information – gaining local knowledge on topics such as municipality characteristics, policy context, and tensions between citizens and institutions.
3. Project-based engagement emerging in practice – preparing a project/plan based on action research addressing particular community needs (setting strategic priorities for service delivery, resolving conflicting interests, measuring progress).

The working hours of a student (student workload) in the course are classified into contact hours and self-study hours (independent work). Contact work refers to teaching staff-guided activities (lectures, seminars, training exercises, knowledge checks, consultations, etc.). Independent work hours are dedicated to the individual study of additional material and the completion of assigned tasks. By preparing and presenting the results of their individual work, students contribute to the development of the subject content by sharing specialized insights.

Thus, the course is divided into two main parts.

The first part – theoretical – introduces students to the implementation of the course and provides knowledge and skills related to participation for societal engagement and the participatory approach. In addition, the municipality's characteristics and policy context are introduced.

The second part – practical – aims at implementing students' own projects. After completing the theoretical sessions, students begin the process of determining which aspect of policy, practice, or the built environment they wish to investigate. Student grouping for the onsite task (project) is based on their interests (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of working hours

TOPICS	Contact work hours			
	Lectures	Seminars	Consultation	Assessment
Students guidelines				
Introduction to the course (aim, objectives, content, assessment strategy, resources)	2	2		
Theoretical part				
Municipality's policy context	2			
The concept of citizen engagement (levels, forms, and methods; issues, guidelines)	4	4		
Participatory tools	4	4		
Empirical part				
Challenge introduction – municipality case				
Engagement emerges in practice: participatory action research (project), including using participatory tools – independent student work			6+	
Presentation of participatory action research (project)				2

During participatory action research (the project), students have the opportunity to apply the acquired knowledge in practice. The independent work hours are dedicated to applying selected tools to create a participatory approach and to implement the project. Each project is based on a prepared scenario – a case study – to be solved. Consultation hours are also planned for the lecturer to discuss project issues, clarify rules, and outline the goals to be achieved. The final stage is a presentation of the results, accompanied by a detailed written report.

Lecturers act as mentors who support and promote students' individual development. They encourage critical thinking, creativity, independence, and initiative, helping students realize their full potential. This requires significant restraint and creative guidance from the educator to allow students to operate with agency and autonomy. In addition, the lecturer is responsible for making arrangements with municipal representatives or decision-makers who may encourage and endorse student involvement, provide explicit permission to work on planning or design projects, and offer guidance if needed.

Goals must be consistently agreed upon for partnerships to bring benefits to all parties. Ultimately, city leaders make the final decisions – there is no guarantee that students' ideas will be implemented. This requires leaders to recognize that intentional inclusion is essential for genuine partnership to flourish.

Students play the role of community participation promoters. They facilitate communication from residents to officials, monitor the quality of public spaces or specific issues, gather complaints and requests from residents, and inform community leaders. They also conduct surveys to learn more about residents' opinions on possible changes before (and after) interventions are implemented. As a result, practicing planners are challenged to find ways to authentically include youth voices in productive and non-tokenistic decision-making frameworks (Botchwey et al., 2019).

The course can be described as a transdisciplinary teaching and learning experience based on collaborative pedagogy that builds on students' knowledge as a means of developing compassionate, socially engaged, critical, and responsible citizens. The course provides students with a transdisciplinary experience, allowing them to engage with societal issues from different perspectives. Through knowledge co-creation, sharing, and assimilation, the framework of collaborative engagement can be beneficial in advancing, fostering, and realizing the interests of local partners and the community (Mbah, 2019).

The course is devoted to civic participation, which concerns the relationship between authorities and citizens/students. This type of participation is sometimes referred to as public participation – participation related to public affairs or vertical participation, i.e., interaction between citizens and authorities. In the literature on democracy and participation, another form is also discussed: participation that involves cooperation among various individuals or groups in achieving a common goal, for example, neighbors working together to improve a shared courtyard or social organizations collaborating on initiatives for people with disabilities. This type is often called social participation, because it concerns the community, or horizontal participation, because it involves relationships among residents or groups.

The implementation of a course “Participation Management: tools for citizen engagement and community empowerment” at Mykolas Romeris university

The project-based course “Participation Management: Tools for Citizen Engagement and Community Empowerment” (2 ECTS) was implemented while teaching the course “Research Methodology” (6 ECTS) at the Institute of Communication during the spring semester (February–June 2024). Eleven students participated. They were first-year students of the Master's programme “Communication and Creative Technologies”. Students' workload is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Student workload

Number of ECTS credits allocated	Institution	Student workload	Contact work hours and planned learning activities	Independent work hours
2	MRU	54	12 lectures, 16 seminars, consultations	24

After the introduction part (project information, course description), students received lectures on the following topics:

- 1) community participation in decision making;
- 2) involvement of citizens in municipal development;
- 3) embracing Resilience: Innovating Participatory Methods in the Post-COVID Era (case of Croatia);
- 4) design thinking: stages and activities; creative techniques and tools;
- 5) research methods for collecting information about the case and presenting results.

After this theoretical input, a meeting with a representative of Joniškis District Municipality (the Vice-Mayor) was organized. The Vice-Mayor introduced the municipality and invited students to investigate its communication practices. The chosen topic was aligned with both the students' study programme and the practical needs of the municipality.

Active citizenship is facilitated by a communication infrastructure, which includes both human communicative agents (everyday conversations, local meetings) and mass media. By using communicative formats at multiple levels, citizens engage in discussions and meetings that lead to small changes or large transformations. Communication infrastructure supports the formation of a participatory culture. Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) states that members of a community build connections to a storytelling network that enables collective action: "storytelling networks in a communication action context are initiators of collective action. As members of a society communicate with each other, they develop a sense of togetherness within the society" (Kang, 2016, p. 451).

Thus, students were guided to investigate the communication infrastructure of Joniškis District Municipality. They worked in pairs to analyse selected topics and answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the characteristics of current citizen involvement in Joniškis District?
- 2) What variables might encourage ordinary people to participate effectively in policies that affect their lives?
- 3) What are the communication goals, priorities, and main messages of the municipality?
- 4) What are the characteristics of daily communication?
- 5) How effectively does the municipality use social networks to disseminate information in times of crisis?
- 6) What factors could encourage the community to engage with municipal communication on social networks?

Students conducted surveys and interviews with both citizens and municipal communication specialists and performed a content analysis of the municipality's website and social media platforms. They developed results and suggestions, which they presented during a meeting at Joniškis District Municipality.

At the end, students presented their findings and recommendations to city representatives, project staff, and the university community. Students' participatory action research strengthens youth participation by providing a strong argument for balancing youth-led and adult-led planning efforts. By fostering partnership and mutual respect, young people feel empowered to approach local leaders with proposals for change.

Through community empowerment tools, students advocate for improvements. Their efforts include: identifying goals, developing a work plan, collecting data, defining problems, creating solutions and proposals for improvement, presenting their vision to local decision makers and the public, and reflecting on outcomes.

Participation in the course increased students' awareness of the importance of civic engagement and helped them develop knowledge and skills in facilitating communication between citizens and local authorities.

Students evaluated the course positively. They emphasized its impact on their attitudes toward constructive dialogue and cooperation. Some participants noted:

"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. As a marketing professional, I found it fascinating how the older generation appreciates communication innovations in social media and engages deeply". (Ruta)

"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)

The pilot has elements of partnership embedded in its structure. It addressed real issues and proposed improvements directly to decision makers. MRU students were offered the opportunity to share their visions for improving municipal communication strategies. They were free to propose any intervention, as long as it was grounded in their analysis. They shared their understanding of community needs and presented solutions they believed would benefit the municipality.

The "Participation Management" curriculum teaches young people about civic and municipal issues while empowering them to engage with real-world problems affecting their communities.

Conclusions

Sustainable urban development relies on effective communication between local authorities and citizens, as well as on shared values between these actors. Citizens need to know that their point of view matters to local authorities, and city authorities should not only consult their decisions with citizens, but also ask them what needs to be changed, improved, and, above all, how it should be done. Citizens experience the city on a daily basis, so they know best what and how to improve to make the city more open, inclusive, and environmentally friendly.

Students must be educated and prepared to engage with communities. Universities can serve as a link between the needs of citizens and the objectives of local authorities – a trigger for innovation that brings together the expectations of both sides by identifying common values. The HEIsCITI project equips students from different specialties with skills to facilitate citizen–local authority communication based on inclusive civic engagement, with a focus on sustainable development and environmentally friendly solutions. Within this framework, the curriculum "Participation Management: Tools for Citizen Engagement and Community Empowerment" offers unique opportunities for students to learn about their communities and engage with decision makers. It empowers young people to assume leadership roles, offering suggestions and pathways for influencing policy and environmental conditions.

A central feature of teaching this study subject is the close link between theoretical knowledge and practical application. The course is divided into two main parts. The first part – the theoretical component – introduces students to the implementation of the course and provides knowledge and skills related to societal engagement and participatory approaches. Additionally, students are introduced to the municipality's characteristics and policy context. The second part – the practical component – aims at implementing independent projects. After completing the theoretical lessons,

students determine which aspect they want to investigate. Student grouping for the onsite task (project) is based on their interests.

The course can be described as a transdisciplinary teaching and learning experience based on collaborative pedagogy that builds on students' knowledge as a means of developing compassionate, socially engaged, critical, and responsible citizens. It provides a transdisciplinary experience that allows students to engage with societal issues from multiple perspectives. Through participation in this course, students become more aware of the need for civic engagement and develop the knowledge and skills required to facilitate communication between citizens and local authorities.

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