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An Introductory Guide for Higher Education Staff

CampusEngage
Network for the Promotion of Civic Engagement in Irish Higher Education

Community-Based Research

Do you work in a higher education institution?

Are you keen to connect your students' curriculum and research with the needs and experience of civic society organisations?



Definitions

CBR "is a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings" (Israel et al., 1998, p. 177). The student often conducts the research as part of their academic requirement, e.g. final year project or postgraduate research, thus ensuring its embedment in the curriculum. One of the important differences between CBR and traditional academic research is that the research question is provided by the community. The other is that research is undertaken with and for, instead of on, the community.

Community-based learning (CBL), in contrast, is a course or discipline-based collaboration between students, lecturers and civil society partners for mutual benefit through shared learning (Martin and O'Mahony, 2013). While a distinction is made between CBR and CBL, there is a great deal of cross-over as regards organisation of projects, interaction with community partners and pedagogical supports provided by academic staff.

What is Community-Based Research?

Community-based research (CBR) begins with a research topic of importance to the community and has the aim of combining knowledge with action to achieve social change.

Community in this sense can mean groups that are non-governmental, non-profit, and do not represent commercial interests. These include: NGOs, professional associations, charities, grass-roots organisations, trade unions, faith-based committees, schools, and/or groups pursuing a common purpose in the public interest.

CBR practice

Once a proposal is received from a community partner it is translated into a research project to be carried out by students and/or staff in collaboration with the community group.

Projects carried out through higher education structures are seen as being scientifically impartial and thus can provide organisations with increased legitimacy in political debates or enhance their lobbying activities. CBR projects also enable the community to benefit from the application of specialised methodological approaches and technology located in their local Higher Education Institution (HEI).

The students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, are given an opportunity to develop skills and abilities, while being supervised by experienced researchers.

While CBR projects are commonly underpinned by a participatory element which emphasises a balance of power relations, shared ownership of data and collaborative research design and processes, there is variation in the level of participation among community groups in the CBR process.

Some groups are content to provide a question and receive a research report at the end of the process, whereas others operate as full partners in the design, decision-making and data collection, and share full responsibility for the study.

The degree of participation can be influenced by a range of factors, including:

- **HEI research cultures;**
- **Demands on community groups;**
- **Perceived levels of skill;**
- **Ability of the CBR initiative to mentor and support a fully participatory process.**

Many structural, practical, skill and power components can be negotiated throughout the research process to facilitate the desired level of participation and collaboration by partners.

CBR in action

Student research projects can have a large and sustained impact

Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) is a community-based research initiative in University College Cork that aims to meet the research needs of community partners principally through student dissertations. Here is one example of a CARL facilitated project between a student and a Cancer Support charity.

Cork ARC Cancer Support sought to attract new service users through a blog as well as provide emotional support and practical information to people with cancer and their families. The student researcher did a review of related research to establish whether there was evidence for the efficacy of such a blog. Following this review, a blog was created by the student and, at the end of the pilot, the blog had more than 1,000 users a month, many of whom were new to Cork ARC. CARL is now working with this group to further develop the use of technology through the development of a mobile app on evidenced-based dietary plans for cancer patients and survivors.

Interdisciplinary research with the LIFELINE project

LIFELINE is a community-led project exploring the potential for transitional land use in the central north west of Dublin. The project aims to stimulate public awareness and be a catalyst for the development of a network of green infrastructure in this area. To date, the project has involved eleven different student cohorts from Dublin Institute of Technology who have participated in LIFELINE research, facilitated by DIT's Students Learning with Communities office. For example,

- **Nutrition students researched the relationship between community gardening and consumption of fruit and vegetables;**
- **Engineering students researched, designed and developed an aquaponics system to sustain fish and plants together in a local community garden;**
- **Chemistry students have conducted a long term study of local soil quality.**

This project illustrates the potential for innovative, interdisciplinary student projects using the CBR approach.

The CBR process

There are a variety of approaches to the CBR process depending on how this is organised in a particular institution.

This four step approach outlined below, based on the Science Shop in Queen's University Belfast, is similar to that used by many CBR initiatives in Irish HEIs:

1. The submitted proposal is reviewed by an Advisory Group to see if it meets acceptance criteria (e.g. not for profit, clear question, achievable, identified purpose/goal, 'fit' with student research capacity and course timelines).
2. If matched with a student and supervisor, a 3-way meeting is organised involving the community partner, the student, the supervisor and the CBR coordinator. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss and agree the scope of the actual research project, the methodology to be employed, the format for reporting the findings to the community group and the project timescale. A research agreement is signed at this meeting by all participants to ensure full understanding of the project and to record the dates of the deliverables.
3. The research is carried out by an individual student in partnership with the organisation, or, if the project is too large, with an additional student(s).
4. On completion of the research, the student will summarise the findings of the research into a user-friendly report and finalise this in conjunction with the community partner. Discussion should focus on how the study can help the community group achieve their goals.

CAMPUS ENGAGE is a network for the promotion of civic engagement activities in Irish Higher Education and is open to all higher education institutions staff, students, community organisations and local companies in Ireland.

The network aims to strengthen the relationship between higher education and wider society, through civic engagement activities including community-based research, community-based learning, volunteering and knowledge exchange.

References and further reading

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For more information on Campus Engage and to access a database of case studies and resources go to:
www.campusengage.ie

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