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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

An Introductory Guide for Higher Education Teaching Staff

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

Community-based Learning and Research Agreements



Community-based research (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)

"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.

Community-based Learning and Research Agreements

This guide on learning and research agreements should be read in conjunction with the Campus Engage guides on community-based research and community-based learning.

Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the Higher Education Authority in Ireland are endorsing and encouraging greater student and staff engagement with civil society organisations. This is being achieved, for example, through community-based-learning (CBL) and community-based research (CBR).

Community-based learning and research are forms of experiential education with a community/public engagement underpinning. Students gain academic credit for a project or piece of research they derive from engaging with a community organisation. This allows students to explore 'real life' problem solving; their future role as a professional, and how they can contribute to address Irish, EU H2020 and international social challenges.

An essential element of CBL and CBR activities is the creation of a 'Learning Agreement' that is collaboratively negotiated between the community and voluntary group, students, and HEI staff member. Civic and community engagement initiatives within HEIs emphasise participatory methods, which is why such documents are called agreements rather than contracts.

Learning Agreements seek to make explicit the expectations, duties and responsibilities of all parties (student, HEI, supervisor/lecturer, community and voluntary group). Agreements should also take into account the legal, ethical and policy environment of the HEI. The primary goal of an Agreement should be to foster and promote the conditions for mutual learning, engagement and reciprocity between parties.

Who writes the Learning Agreement and when should it be completed?

A HEI staff member with responsibility for the project should create a draft template Agreement that can be negotiated and completed before the CBR or CBL project or module begins. The provision of such a template is a labour saving device that also ensures uniformity. However, it should be clear to those negotiating the content of the Agreement what is negotiable and non-negotiable. For example, in a CBR project the submission date of a dissertation thesis is non-negotiable, but dissemination activities are negotiable. In a CBL module, some assessment dates are aligned with academic calendars, while specific activities undertaken when working with the community group, in fulfilment of the module learning outcomes, are negotiable.

It is recommended that the Agreement completion activity is placed at the three-way meeting, just after the matching of student/supervisor and community

group. In CBL the Agreement is completed following a module familiarisation meeting between HEI and community partner, allowing a short incubation period for the maximisation of ideas on how best learning objectives may be reached in the community setting. The student then meets with the community partner and module supervisor to agree the work plan.

Key components of a Learning Agreement

In this section we outline the key components of CBL and CBR Learning Agreements. At the end of this document you will find links to a selection of sample agreements that can be viewed online.

Community-based Learning Agreements should contain:

1. Names and contact details of key personnel involved;
2. Responsibilities of the HEI in regard to prior preparation of students before engaging with the community partner, and during the engagement;
3. Responsibilities of the community partner while the student is engaged in the community;
4. Module learning outcomes highlighted, to facilitate alignment of the community-based learning activities in the realisation of these;
5. Specifics on duration and intensity of the CBL experience;
6. Details on module assessment techniques, dates and the role of the community partner in student assessment;
7. A statement to ensure professional conduct, confidentiality and sensitivity of information/practice;
8. Reference to indemnification/ insurance;
9. Key dates for periodic feedback.

Community-based Research Agreements should contain

1. Names and responsibilities of all relevant parties, plus contact details;
2. A description of the scope and limitations of the project, with an emphasis on supervisors ensuring the project "fits" within the size of the research course/dissertation and professional competence of the student's training;
3. A statement of support and the participation of the community partner in activities such as sampling, data-collection and analysis;
4. Key dates, including submission dates for the student's dissertation/thesis, presentation of the report to the community and voluntary group;
5. Costs and expenses, with an emphasis on HEIs not charging for these activities. Reasonable research costs can be negotiated with the community group;
6. Ownership of research data and permission to use the data, with an emphasis on shared ownership, where possible;
7. Permissions, including: publication of research reports and academic publications, ethical reviews, limits on participation of certain vulnerable groups;
8. Statement of limitations, warranties and disclaimers;
9. Dissemination activities.

There is a presumption that a participatory, non-exploitative and reciprocal ethos should underpin CBL and CBR projects and by extension, these agreements.

Signatories to the Agreement should consider what is feasible rather than what is aspirational, to avoid unrealistic expectations and disappointment. The coordinator from the HEI's civic and community engagement initiative should play a key role in this regard and agreements should seek to avoid harm.

Agreements may help to reduce conflict; however, agreements should not seek to supress or avoid conflict/robust debate, which can be a healthy aspect of the learning process for students. If conflict does arise, for example, regarding the publication of certain negative research findings, agreements help to provide greater certainty about what was agreed.

The process of creating an Agreement can assist all parties to make an informed choice about their participation in CBL and CBR initiatives.

References and further reading

1. Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement: http://www.campusengage.ie/content/campus-engage-charter-civic-and-community-engagement
2. Campus Engage Charter – Indicative Actions of an Engaged Higher Education Institution http://www.campusengage.ie/userfiles/files/CE%20indicative%20actions%202015%281%29.pdf
3. Campus Engage introductory resources for higher education staff: http://www.campusengage.ie/content/campus-engage-resources
4. Munck, R., McIlrath, L., Hall, B. and Tandon, R (eds). (2014) *Higher Education and Community-Based Research: Creating a Global Vision.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
5. McIlrath, L., Lyons, A. and Munck, R. (Eds.), (2012). *Higher Education and Civic Engagement: Comparative Perspectives.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

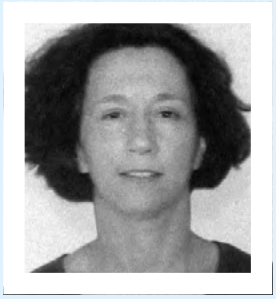
CAMPUS ENGAGE is a network for the promotion of civic engagement activities in Irish Higher Education and is open to all higher education institutions staff, students, community organisations and local companies in Ireland.

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.

Sample Agreements

1. Community-Academic Research Links, Research Agreement, University College Cork, http://www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/resources/
2. Community Leadership Initiative, Learning Agreement, ITT. http://www.ittralee.ie/en/CommunityEngagement/CLILearningAgreements/
3. Agreement Statement for New Projects, Vrije Universiteit Brusse (VUB), Brussels, http://www.livingknowledge.org/livingknowledge/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/3-VUB-02-Research-agreement-form.pdf
4. Portland Community College CBL Resources https://www.pcc.edu/resources/community-based-learning/forms.html#Agreement
5. Community Based Learning Contract Agreement, Dominican University http://www.dom.edu/sites/default/files/documents/cbl/CBL-Contract.pdf
6. Community Engagement Resources, University of Minnesota Duluth http://www.d.umn.edu/outreach/civic/index.html
7. Community Based Learning Agreement Inver Hills Community College www.inverhills.edu/ProgramsAndMajors/CommunityBasedLearning/PDFs/CBLAgreementStudentDrivenExperiencenew.pdf





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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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