

AURORA

AURORA Research and Innovation

A digital collection of best practices, guidelines and experiential learning on engagement of citizens and public authorities

Deliverable 7.4

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As universities increasingly recognize the importance of engaging with society, the need for structured and sustainable approaches to citizen and societal engagement (CSE) has become more pressing. CSE offers a way for academic institutions to collaborate with external stakeholders, addressing societal challenges and fostering greater public trust in science. However, integrating engagement into the fabric of university research, teaching, and operations can be complex and requires thoughtful planning, resources, and support.

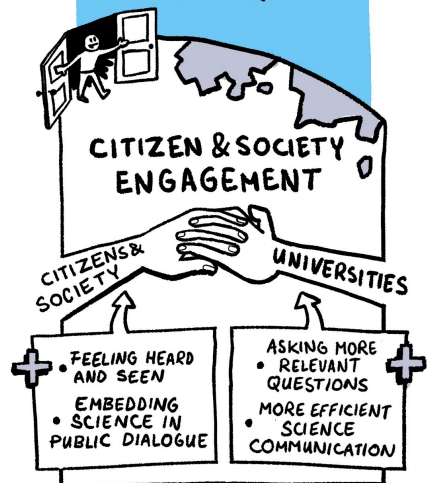
This document presents key building blocks for designing a facility dedicated to CSE, drawing on insights from the Aurora Universities Network and experiences from various partner institutions. Throughout the Aurora Universities project, we have encountered and documented numerous examples of initiatives focused on citizen and societal engagement. Each of these examples employs a unique combination of methods, theories, tools, guidelines, people, and structures to effectively engage the public in scientific research and education. In this deliverable, we have gathered the best of these examples, linking them together and presenting them in a way that positions them as building blocks. These can serve as foundations for universities to further develop their own practices in societal engagement.

These ‘building blocks’ in this document aim to provide a flexible, modular approach to help universities develop their own engagement strategies, tailored to their specific contexts. Each component—from fostering internal dialogue to building long-term partnerships—offers a pathway to strengthening the connection between academia and society. By focusing on areas such as training, intermediary support, and creating dedicated spaces for engagement, universities can build the infrastructure needed to sustain meaningful and impactful societal interactions.

DESIGN FOR AN ENGAGEMENT FACILITY

WHY?

TO PROPERLY ADDRESS SOCIETAL CHALLENGES UNIVERSITIES OPEN UP



HOW?

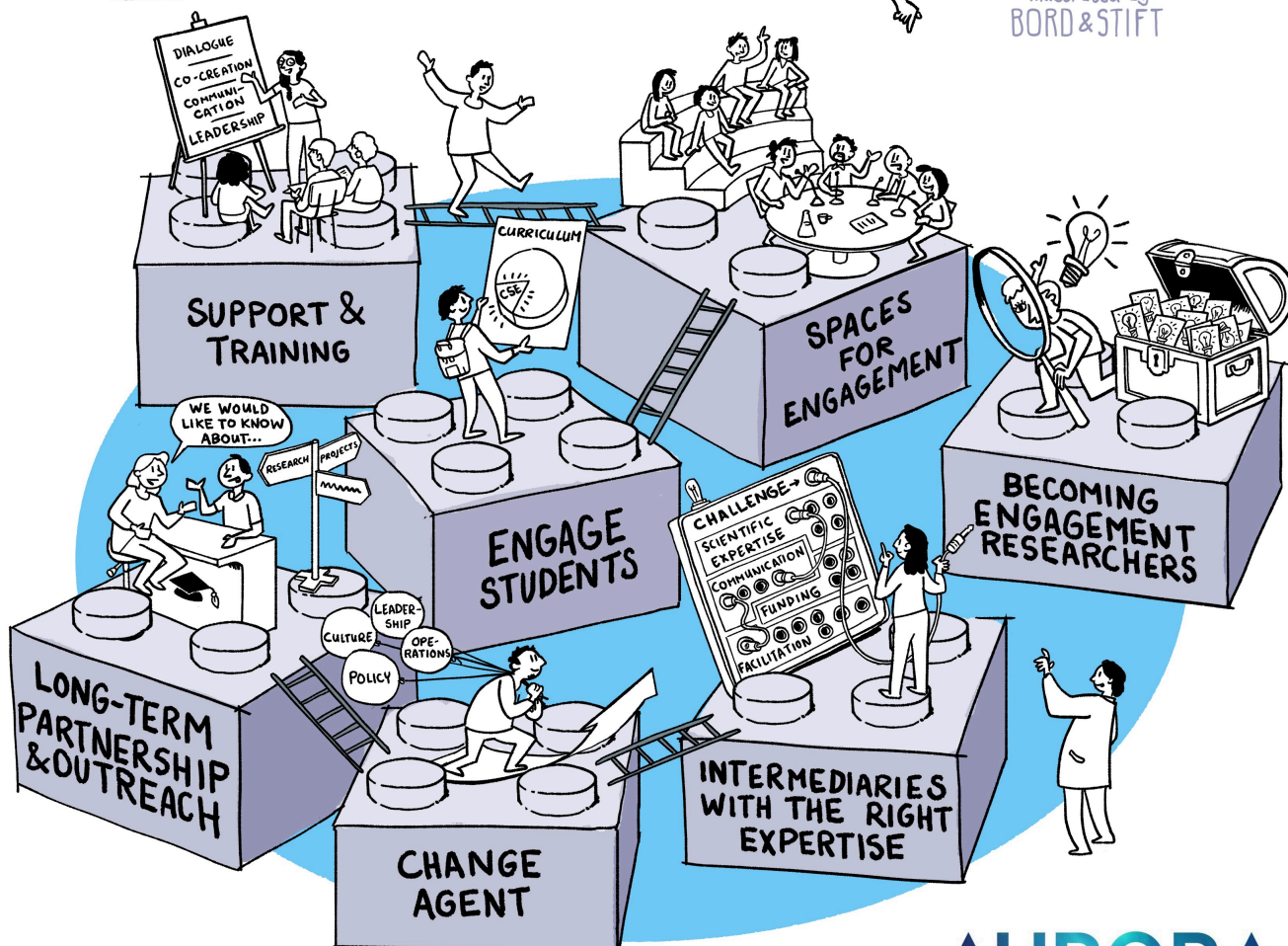
I. OPEN, INTERNAL DIALOGUE



II. STRATEGIC PLAN & MODULAR APPROACH



Illustrated by BORD & STIFT



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DESIGN FOR AN ENGAGEMENT FACILITY



Step 1: Open, internal dialogue

Effective citizen and societal engagement (CSE) within universities often begins by fostering internal dialogue among researchers, students, staff, and leadership. These conversations are vital in uncovering internal challenges, aligning goals, and understanding how different parts of the institution can contribute to engagement efforts. By facilitating structured discussions, universities can create a shared vision for engagement and explore how to better connect academic work with societal needs. This type of internal dialogue not only opens up communication channels but also encourages the entire academic community to reflect on their roles in engagement and how they can collaboratively enhance these efforts. For instance, at the University of Innsbruck, our engagement workshops revealed that many participants had never previously engaged in structured conversations about CSE with their colleagues. This process of dialogue helped initiate ideas such as university-wide events and interdisciplinary training programs that could foster stronger science-society interactions.

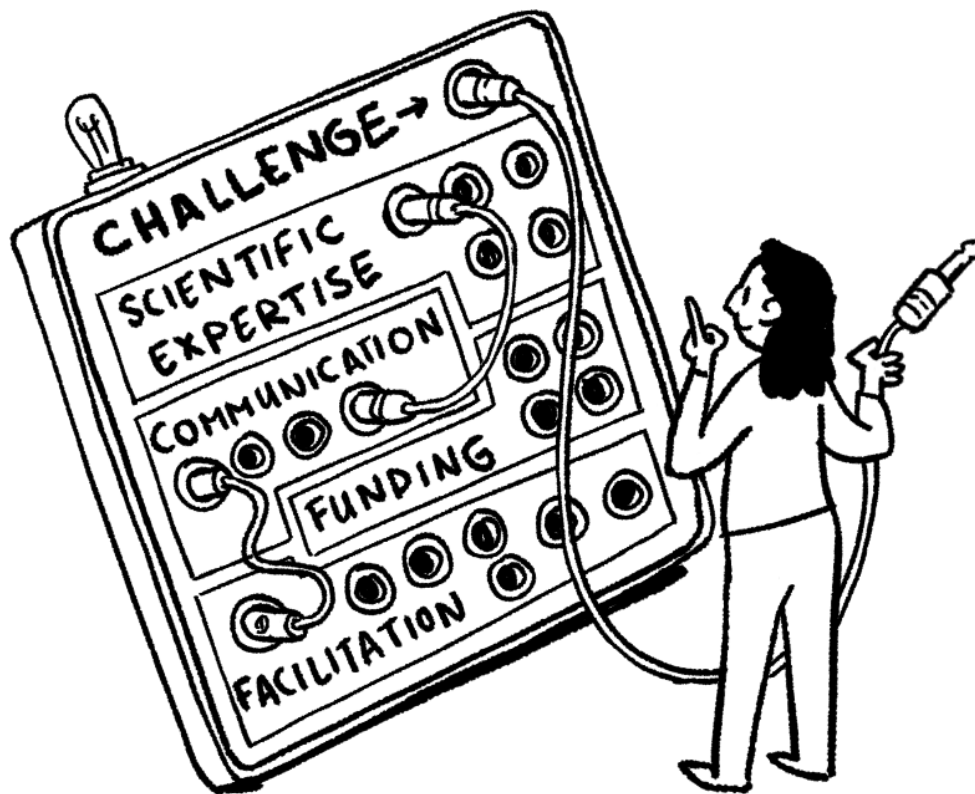
Step 2: Strategic plan and modular approach

Developing a strategic plan for embedding CSE into a university's structure often benefits from a modular approach. This method allows institutions to gradually implement engagement practices in a way that fits their specific context, adapting over time as needed. A modular approach offers flexibility, where universities can prioritize different components of engagement—such as building partnerships, offering training, or supporting policy development—depending on their immediate goals. For example, Palacký University in Olomouc applied a modular strategy during its Academia Film Olomouc festival, integrating science communication workshops and panel discussions to engage both the academic community and the broader public. The success of these tailored sessions eventually led to institutional support for a new science communicator role, demonstrating how flexible planning can lead to meaningful, long-term engagement.



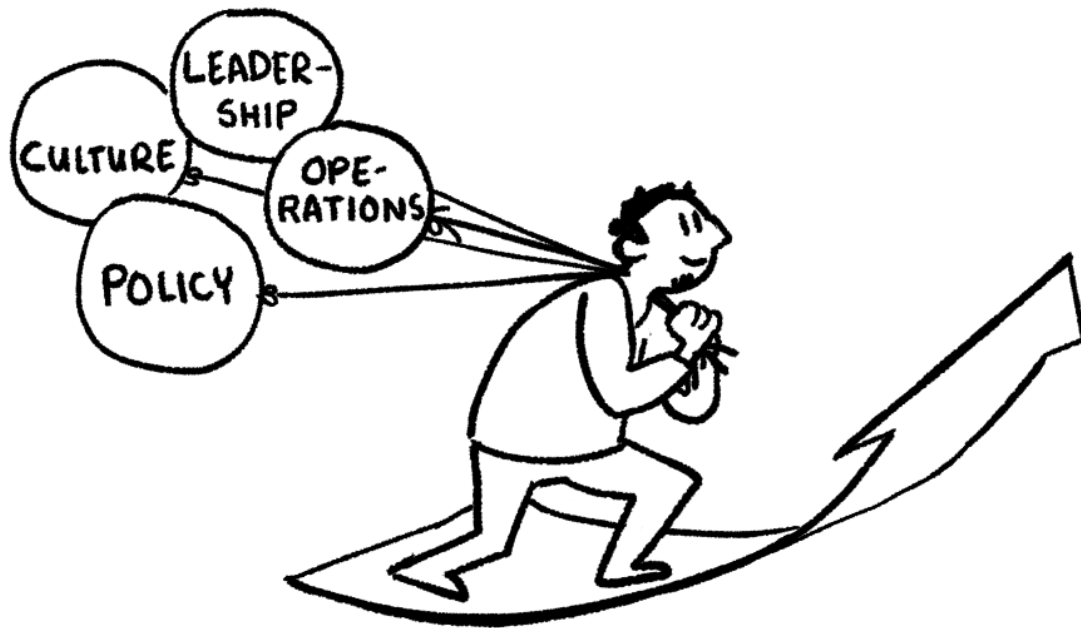
Long-term partnerships and outreach

Building and maintaining long-term partnerships is essential for meaningful CSE. These partnerships involve sustained collaboration between universities and societal stakeholders, including community organizations, government agencies, and industries. By establishing these connections, universities can co-create research projects that address real-world challenges while enhancing their role as a key societal actor. These partnerships also promote continuous knowledge exchange, helping both the university and its partners achieve their goals more effectively. At Groningen University's Science Shop, for example, long-term partnerships with local agricultural organizations resulted in collaborative research projects that tackled regional issues such as sustainable food production. This ongoing relationship not only contributed to positive societal impact but also offered students and researchers valuable hands-on experience.



Intermediaries with the right expertise

Intermediaries play a crucial role in connecting academic researchers with societal stakeholders, ensuring that engagement efforts are well-coordinated and impactful. These individuals or teams have specialized expertise in facilitating collaboration, communication, and project management, making them essential for successful citizen and societal engagement (CSE). For example, at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE), the UNIAKTIV team acts as an intermediary between faculty, students, and community organizations. By facilitating service-learning projects, they connect students and researchers with external partners to address local societal challenges. Their expertise ensures that academic and community needs are aligned, leading to effective, mutually beneficial collaborations. This intermediary role allows researchers to focus on their work while knowing that their engagement efforts are supported and strategically managed.



Change agent role

A CSE facility can play the role of a change agent, driving both cultural and systemic shifts within the university. By advocating for institutional policies that recognize and reward societal engagement, such a facility can help integrate engagement work into the core functions of research and teaching. This can involve influencing policies around promotions, funding, and resource allocation to ensure that engagement is supported at every level. During our workshops at the University of Innsbruck, participants discussed ways to institutionalize dialogue and engagement, proposing ideas like creating policy support for researchers dedicated to CSE. These conversations demonstrated how a CSE facility can lead to tangible changes that embed engagement more deeply within academic structures.



Support and training in engagement

Support and training are fundamental to preparing researchers and students for effective engagement with societal partners. Many academics are unfamiliar with the tools and techniques required to communicate their research to the public or engage with external stakeholders in co-creation processes. At the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VUA), the Network Science in Dialogue initiative offers training programs aimed at equipping researchers with the necessary skills for effective engagement. One of the training sessions, focused on handling polarization in public discourse, provided researchers with strategies for navigating difficult conversations with skeptical or critical audiences. This training helped academics become more comfortable and confident in engaging with controversial topics, ensuring that their societal interactions remain productive and constructive.



Student-focused engagement

Engaging students in societal issues as part of their academic training can be a powerful way to cultivate a culture of engagement within the university. By integrating community service learning and real-world projects into the curriculum, students are given the opportunity to apply their academic knowledge to societal challenges, fostering both their education and their sense of civic responsibility. This model is seen at the University of Duisburg-Essen's UNIAKTIV program, where students work alongside community partners to address local issues such as social inequality and environmental sustainability. By engaging students in this way, universities can create a new generation of socially engaged scholars while simultaneously strengthening ties with the community.



Spaces for engagement

Dedicated spaces within universities provide the physical environment necessary for fostering collaboration between researchers and societal partners. These spaces act as hubs for co-creation, public discussions, and workshops, enabling more direct and meaningful interactions between academia and the community. At the University of Groningen, the Science Shop serves as both a physical and conceptual space where researchers and societal organizations come together to work on projects addressing community-specific issues. This space facilitates open dialogue between students, researchers, and citizens, allowing them to jointly define research questions and collaborate on solutions. The accessibility and inclusivity of such spaces encourage sustained engagement and help create a sense of shared ownership over the outcomes of the research.



Becoming engagement researchers

Becoming an engagement researcher often involves a transformation in how academics view their role in society. Moving from traditional research to co-creation with societal stakeholders requires a different mindset, one that embraces collaboration and public involvement as part of the research process. This transformation is supported by opportunities for reflective practice, training, and mentorship that enable researchers to develop the necessary skills and confidence to engage effectively. For example, at the University of Iceland, the 'Festival of Failure' initiative created a safe space where researchers could experiment with public outreach, make mistakes, and learn from each other. This process of reflection and learning helped researchers build stronger connections with the public, evolving into more engaged academics.