How to embed Community Engaged Research & Learning challenges, opportunities, guidelines & tools
This report summarizes the activities and outcomes of UNIVER.CITY, a three-years strategic project that ran at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (2018-2020). The project aimed at developing a framework for delivering innovative and impactful engaged practices. This final report was written by Linde Moriau, Julie Bertone, Floor Keersmaekers, Minne Huysmans and Brecht Van der Schueren. It was validated by the project’s steering committee and introduced to VUB’s strategic board in December 2020.
INTRODUCTION

With UNIVER.CITY, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) aimed at tailoring its offer to the opportunities, challenges and needs of today’s globalized and urbanized societies. The potential of community engaged research and learning (CERL) strategies was explored, as a means to embed urban partnerships, challenges and dynamics into our teaching and research programs, as to connect the academic fabric more purposefully with its immediate surroundings and gather diverse stakeholders to learn with and from each other while contributing to positive societal change.

UNIVER.CITY ran between 2018 and 2020, with a goal to develop an authentic and ambitious framework for designing and delivering CERL strategies. A university-wide learning community was set up in order to explore relevant tools, practices, models and networks allowing us to develop quality CERL in a variety of disciplinary fields and societal contexts. A series of learning circles was organized for sharing recent research findings, hopes and fears, failures and successes and for supporting CERL practitioners in (re)designing their CERL initiatives.

The question we were trying to answer is what it means to be an authentic urban university given the drastic reorganizations both cities and universities are facing today. This report summarizes the project activities, outcomes and lessons learned. It brings forward a VUB proof framework for CERL and formulates recommendations as to support further steps in developing a targeted and responsible engaged offer.

All project outputs were developed through critical review of academic and grey literature on the one hand, the shared experiences and ambitions in the learning community on the other. Rather than a blueprint or standardized recipe, this document outlines a number of generic design principles and guidelines that seem to be important for developing impactful engaged initiatives.

For any comment or question about this document and its content, please contact the UNIVER.CITY project team via: info.cerl@vub.be
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VUB is a locally anchored and internationally oriented institution. Our research contributes to societal progress and transition. Our education trains students to become responsible world citizens and professionals. Our hometown, Brussels, serves as an important inspiration and barometer for designing and evaluating core activities.
DEFINING CERL

Since the late 20th century, there has been a re-emergence of interest in the societal responsibility of universities. As a result of the global dynamics and urgencies we are facing today, universities are prompted to interact more closely with their immediate surroundings and take more targeted and responsible actions for tackling the so-called ‘grand societal challenges’. Terms such as ‘open universities’ (Miller and Sabapathy 2011), the new ‘public university’ (Burawoy 2011), ‘ecological universities’ (Goddard 2011) and ‘permeable universities’ (Preece 2017) witness of these ambitions. A connecting principle is the notion that universities have a duty to engage — at local, national and international levels — on issues of public and environmental importance (Farnell 2020).

There is a large variation in language, conceptualization and practice of campus-community engagement, drawing on a rich history and broad theoretical foundations. The aim of UNIVER.CITY was to explore global trends and local opportunities as broadly as possible, navigating some competing dynamics characterizing the academic landscape today: the demand for broad personal and civic development (the call for ‘responsible academia’) versus increased attention to entrepreneurship and employability (the call for ‘entrepreneurial academia’), the ambition of local anchoring and valorisation (‘place-based universities’) versus aspiration for maximizing internationalisation and mobility (a trend towards ‘global universities’), the need for more specialised research (‘hyper-specialization’) on the one hand, recognition and development of transdisciplinary knowledge on the other (brought forward as an antidote to ‘blind intelligence’).

The term ‘community engaged research & learning’ (CERL) was used as an umbrella concept for: ‘Knowledge creation and transfer activities in which real-life contexts and collaborative strategies are applied as building blocks for powerful learning environments, responsible and responsive teaching and research programs, where academic and extra-academic actors are brought together to work around societal challenges and contribute to sustainable transitions.’ This is a wide definition, in which the notion of learning as an interactional process, based on dialogue is central, the value-driven and value-promoting character of engaged practices is highlighted and knowledge is brought to the forefront as a crucial building block for driving positive social transformation.

In practice, CERL can take a variety of forms, ranging from place and challenge based teaching and learning, over community-based research, citizen science projects to student-led engagement activities. According to Wafa (2017) the most important characteristic is that “it envisages integrative links across a variety of disciplines and stakeholders, getting impacted in a multitude of ways”. Students get an opportunity to learn experientially; while lecturers can take up socially relevant research as part of the curriculum, communities benefit by way of empowerment and sustainable livelihoods, while universities get a chance to present themselves as engaged institutions (Chupp and Joseph, 2010). Goals can thus be pursued on three levels: the personal, institutional and societal level.

In the past 20 years, engaged strategies have come to the forefront as ‘high impact pedagogies’ (Kuh, 2009). Recent research literature confirms that CERL initiatives are important mechanisms for enhancing learning experiences and outcomes (Bringle, 2017). The emphasis on critical reflection for linking theory and practice and the collaborative characteristics of engaged pedagogies ensure that course content is processed in a more meaningful and sustainable manner. Students acquire more knowledge about and appreciation for their own discipline, show more motivation and concern, and take more responsibility for their own learning process (Prentice, 2010). Besides discipline-specific competences, CERL allows students to acquire more generic - transversal - skills: opinion making,
diversity thinking, competences that contribute to lifelong learning, self-awareness and self-regulation, transdisciplinary collaboration, networking and intercultural communication skills, active citizenship, the ability to analyze complex problems, leadership and perseverance (Carlisle et al., 2017; Gregorová et al., 2016).

For lecturers and community partners, CERL can contribute to personal growth, civic participation, continued professionalization, professional satisfaction and innovation. Engaged practices allow university staff members to broaden their (professional) networks, keep course content up to date, apply scientific expertise to real-life contexts and develop research projects that are attuned to local needs and assets. They allow to embed societal knowledge and actors in academic curricula and research projects, enhancing relevance and responsiveness of university programs and increasing their attractiveness for students, staff and societal stakeholders (Chupp and Joseph, 2010).

CERL is a means to foster pedagogical innovation and institutional renewal. It is an incentive for shaping pedagogies that make intentional use of interactive techniques, developing knowledge that is context specific and recognizes multiple sources of knowledge as well as multiple methods of discovery and dissemination (Preece, 2017). Engaged practices help developing more fair and inclusive procedures and can contribute to more transparent and democratic policy and decision-making (Bringle, 2017). Whiting et al. (2018) argue that bringing in a critical dimension transforms CERL from being reactive strategies into proactive ones, capable of creating creative thinkers that are able to foresee forms of socio-environmental degradation, socio-economic injustice as well as socio-political points of resistance and friction.

Being transformation-centered, engaged practices allow participants to collaboratively develop actions that are needed both within societies’ current social, economic, and political structures, while at the same time stimulating them to think beyond established practices and realities. They shape on democratic learning spaces where curricula and research problems are collaboratively constructed with specific attention to incorporate diverse perspectives and foster critical attitudes. Students, professionals, citizens and policy makers take part in a collective learning process tailored to socio-ecological challenges specific to the local environment, allowing them to contribute to positive societal change (Baccarne et al, 2016).

Linking the term ‘community’ to ‘engagement’ serves to broaden the scope from traditional forms of research and learning to more creative, interactional and transdisciplinary modes of inquiry: “processes that involve multiple perspectives and multiple parties, founded on ‘dialogue’ between different minds expressing multitudes of multi-voiced meanings” (Bakhtin, 1986). The concept of ‘community’ highlights the situated or contextualized nature of the targeted knowledge creation and transfer processes. The ‘engaged’ dimension stresses their interactional, dialogical nature, moving community engagement away from unidirectional dynamics where universities act as an enlightened ‘problem-solver’ serving their communities. Instead, communities are valued as partners whose experience and expertise enrich the knowledge process (whether in field of teaching or research). The university, meanwhile, becomes a partner to the community in responding to the specific challenges or needs they encounter (Benneworth, 2018).
Sustainability, and Interdisciplinary Approach was a new optional course to be set up at the beginning of UNIVERCITY’s first trajectory. During this trajectory, the working methods and evaluation strategies were developed and coordinated with other courses/programs and the VUB policy. This course provides students with a systemic view of today’s sustainability challenges. They are introduced to the state-of-the-art in various disciplines and bring that knowledge together by committing to a concrete challenge, in close collaboration with non-academic community partners.

The Mobile Learning Lab **Maebär** (Arabic for ‘crossroads’) contains an educational toolbox that is used by the Education Department as an active learning space in the city. Thanks to the mobile learning lab, students can apply theoretical knowledge about various educational themes and methodologies around community development, empowerment, co-ownership, citizenship... to everyday practice. Participatory research, co-design processes, self- and co-regulation are made accessible to the city and its inhabitants.

In collaboration with our university’s department of Student Affairs, clinical psychology student Lima van den Steen, supervised by prof. dr. Veerle Soyez, asked 191 students about their mental well-being as part of a Science Shop research project. More than one in three students (36.65%) indicated that they felt lonely. By appointing a ‘Kotcoach’ and introducing a buddy project, VUB is already taking concrete measures to tackle the issue this academic year.
Another Science Shop research project worth mentioning was carried out by Business Administration student Nathalie Durmus and supervised by prof. dr. Cathy Macharis and dr. Jesse Pappers. The research focused on the mobility behavior of parents of children at the GO! school and the childcare facility on VUB’s campus in Jette. By a better understanding of this behavior and its underlying motivations, targeted solutions could be formulated to solve problems that occur on the campus which will in future be made car-free.

The penological course ‘Learning Together in Detention’ wants to link theory and practice. Master students in criminology visit the prison of Beveren to follow courses on punishment in Belgium together with the prisoners and the staff. In addition to guest lecturers, people from the practice of the prison system explain their work, such as the Psychosocial Service and the Penal Administration Court and discuss penological themes in mixed groups.

In the Sustainable Materials course, master students in engineering get acquainted with the environmental impact of materials, technological products and processes. They learn to apply the technical principles of engineering to sustainability issues, which are raised by community partners who want to know which materials to use best. For example, in 2019 the students supported the VUB Sports Service, who wanted to renew its floor covering, and an event organizer who wanted to switch to sustainable balloons for events. Both partnerships were facilitated by VUB’s Science Shop, as is the partnership set up for 2020, with an organization working on an European sustainability label for mining.

These are just a few examples of CERL practices being developed at VUB. More cases can be found in the CERL toolkit and handbook.
Never before was humankind so much responsible for its own future. This raises an unprecedented and very urgent question. What will we do with all that power?

Yuval Harari
OUTPUT & OUTCOMES

10 Learning Circles
30 Learning Community Participants
50 Individual Support Meetings
5 new CERL modules
10 redesigned CERL courses
20 CERL certificates
37 CERL dissertations
50 CERL projects
750 participating students
50 participating partner organizations
CERL impact studies
10 (inter)national CERL events
60 CANVAS cursists
4500 website reads
250 Youtube views
open source CERL handbook & toolkit
academic papers in review
glocal network of CERL experts & partners
diverse CERL-community at VUB
VUB-CERL dissemination tools & platforms
VUB proof CERL framework & recognition tool
CLIPS & PODCAST
A series of testimonials was produced in order to collect experiences and ambitions from a variety of stakeholders: students, researchers, lecturers, academic leads and community partners. All testimonials are being made available on YouTube.
(RE)DESIGN TOOLKIT

The intro section introduces the concept of Community Engaged Research and Learning and provides some general background information on CERL.

The quick scan allows individual lecturers and teams to evaluate the CERL-characteristics of their course(s) and/or program(s) and formulate targeted (re)design actions.

The first module will provide some general design and learning principles to put CERL strategies into practice. We will have a look at their outcomes and put forward some considerations that might be helpful to balance personal, institutional and societal goals.

The second module puts forward some guidelines for mapping, selecting and preparing CERL partnerships, help preparing participants, assignments, project and process descriptions and explores the (blended) learning environment for CERL activities.

The third module discusses the importance of purposefully designed reflection strategies and puts forward some ethical and practical considerations within this regard.

In the fourth module we put forward guidelines for looking back on CERL strategies, evaluating and celebrating its outcomes and making purposeful considerations for quality improvement and sustaining developed CERL strategies.
The UNIVER.CITY project team developed an online CERL course and handbook. The course is available for VUB staff members and PhD students in CANVAS. It consists of four (re)design modules, a series of tools, resources, examples and testimonials. Participants that complete all (re)design modules can apply for a certificate, worth 2 ECTS. The handbook was developed in collaboration with the Erasmus+ ENTRANCE consortium. It can be consulted freely on the project’s website: entrance-project.eu.

In this section you can navigate through a series of knowledge clips about CERL strategies.

Useful design and teaching instruments can be found in this section.

Here you can find suggestions for additional readings.

In this section you can scroll through some concrete examples of CERL strategies being implemented at VUB.

In this last section you will find inspirational testimonials of students, partners and academics having participated in CERL strategies.

If you have completed the (re)design modules, you can apply for a certificate.
Throughout the project, the UNIVER.CITY team actively explored the international and local CERL landscape. The project team and learning community participants reached out to a variety of academic and societal actors. Through these interactions the VUB CERL community was embedded in a diverse ecosystem of civil society actors, academic networks, policy and social profit organizations.
Connections are collaborative and creative. It’s about moving back for the pulse that is present, has always been present and will always be present to be heard.

Kae Tempest
PROJECT ACTIVITIES

CONTINUOUS

- team meetings
- follow-up of & support for CERL-pilots

2018

- FEB-APR: call for project proposals
- FEB: poster session at E+ event ‘The curriculum in Higher education challenged’
- MAR: key note at UNICA congress on social responsibility in Higher Education
- FEB-MAY: base-line measurement CERL@VUB
- FEB-MAY: Needs Study CSOs
- MAY-JUN: Focus Groups students
- JUN: Kick-Off UNIVER.CITY-community 2018-2029
- SEPT: three days Training @ Wageningen University
- OCT: first Learning Circle event 2018-2029
- DEC: second Learning Circle event 2018-2029
- JAN-DEC: ENtRANCE consortium Meetings

2019

- FEB: third Learning Circle event 2018-2029
- FEB: Workshop at Dag van de Onderwijsinnovatie VUB
- FEB: Meeting Flemish Service -Learning Network
- MAR: Leerlab Service Learning (VELOV)
- APR: fourth Learning Circle event 2018-2029
- FEB-APR: call for project proposals
- APR: Meeting Flemish Service -Learning Network
- MAY: steering committee
- JUN: Kick-Off UNIVER.CITY-community 2019-2020
- JUN: Food For Thought event ‘Community Engaged Research at VUB’
- JUN: Key Note & poster session at Trial and Error conference
- JUN: BROL meeting at Usquare
- JUL: Poster session at EdMedia 2019
- SEPT: Workshops and poster session at European Conference for Service-Learning in Higher Education
- SEPT: Key Note at ECER conference ‘Education in an Era of Risk – the Role of Educational Research for the Future’
- OCT: workshop at Social Erasmus conference
- OCT: first Learning Circle event 2019-2020
- NOV: plenary session at ECOOM congress ‘Investigating the Societal Impact of Research’
- NOV: second Learning Circle event 2019-2020
- NOV-DEC: impact studies CERL@VUB
- DEC: key note at Socially Engaged Universities conference UGent
- DEC: workshop at Engage 2019 conference NCCPE
- DEC: steering committee
- JAN-DEC: ENtRANCE consortium Meetings

2020

- JAN: workshop at VUB ZAP training
- FEB: third Learning Circle event 2019-2020
- FEB-MAY: call for participants CIRCLET
- MAR-MAY: benchmark survey ‘institutionalization of CERL in Flemish HEIs’
- MAY: fourth Learning Circle event 2019-2020
- MAY-JUN: impact studies CERL@VUB
- JUL: key note at EUTOPIA conference on Sustainable Campuses
- AUG: intake interviews with CIRCLET participants
- SEPT: online webinar Flemish Service-Learning network
- SEPT: Meeting Flemish Service-Learning Network
- OCT: first CIRCLET Learning Circle event
- NOV: second CIRCLET Learning Circle event
- NOV: steering committee
- NOV: third CIRCLET Learning Circle event
- DEC: ENtRANCE multiplier event
- DEC: workshop at Engage 2020 Conference NCCPE
- SEPT-DEC: CIRCLET Learning Circles & consortium meetings
- JAN-DEC: ENtRANCE consortium Meetings
NEEDS & IMPACT STUDIES

A series of baseline measurements were performed as to scrutinize support for and ambitions with CERL amongst students, university staff and relevant community partners. Follow-up studies were carried out as to harvest experiences and indications of both short and longer term impact of CERL projects. The studies were performed between December 2018 and June 2020. A total of 236 students, 284 university staff members and 131 community partners were scrutinized. We applied a mixed method approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

The baseline measurements consisted of online surveys. The follow-up studies combined focus group interviews following a semi-structured interview guideline derived and analysis of reflective papers. Additionally, a number of available documents were analyzed: policy notes, departmental action plans and student satisfaction surveys. Data from our baseline studies, follow-up measurements in a number of CERL-pilots, consultations with CERL-participants and document analysis were analyzed using the described framework and aligned with literature findings on optimizing CERL strategies.

The results of the baseline survey amongst university staff, showed a clear recognition of the relevance of CERL for academic teaching and research. CERL seemed to be appreciated as a means to meet the society service objectives of our institution; shape present-day education; offer education that motivates students; make academic expertise accessible to societal partners and gear education and research activities to societal developments. The post surveys and interviews brought some additional drivers to the forefront for implementing CERL strategies.

Lecturers reported to value the community partnerships and CE learning approaches for their positive impact on student motivation, satisfaction, involvement and performances. They were positive about the CERL experience because it allowed them to have constructive interactions with their immediate surroundings and to make a concrete contribution to societal challenges. They looked back on the CERL experience as a meaningful source of inspiration for continued educational innovation and professionalization.

Our studies show that students expect to learn about current societal challenges and developments, in real-world situations and in interaction with professionals, fellow-students (and to a lesser degree citizens). They recognized the importance of vocational and personal training, but they estimated that the opportunities to learn from real-world situations and in interaction with professionals were too scarce. They also thought that a clear societal orientation was often lacking. The motivations of the students who had registered for the existing CERL courses were to support/help society and its citizens; to achieve personal fulfilment; to work on their personal development; to build a network and to gain experience.

Students indicated CERL to be meaningful because of its societal relevance and positive learning impact. The added value for their personal development, self-knowledge and understanding of societal developments and needs were advanced as important assets. They reported the CERL experiences had offered them meaningful opportunities to communicate about their disciplinary specializations and had been valuable stimuli for their vocational training. Both lecturers and students highlighted the diverse and international character of Brussels as an asset for putting CERL into practice.
Community partners appreciate CERL because it offers valued the inspirational input of students, the academic expertise and additional resources and capacities, helping them to take more targeted action. They mostly seek (research) support or collaboration for awareness raising reasons (74%), improvement of organizational operations (56%), policy influencing (32%) and development of a certain product or service (29%).

Most partners were satisfied about the outcomes of the CERL processes, leading to a better understanding of the research topic, helping to improve internal communication and operations. The latter is the most frequent direct benefit mentioned by the participating partner organizations (64%). 44% used the project results for policy documents/actions, 31% stated that they used the project outcomes or deliverables for external communication. Less popular actions are starting a working group, doing follow-up research and sending a press release.

One fifth of the partners confirmed that the collaborations extended their academic network, with researchers who were involved as supervisors and course coordinators. During the interviews, almost all community partners expressed that, even if the collaboration outcome is not what they had hoped for, they take personal satisfaction from the interaction with the student and/or see it as part of their mission. 76% of the SPO’s confirm that an intermediary structure like the Science Shop has an added value, because of the structured process, coordination and administrative support they offer.

Our follow-up studies highlighted some important hurdles and concerns that need to be considered when implementing CERL. Students pointed at the dense structure of their study programs and the heavy workload they experience. They stressed the importance of transparency about the purpose of the proposed CERL activities and programs and the expectations of and added value for the societal partners. They also expressed their need for clear (learning) goals, adequate support and practical organization, appropriate project and process design, preventing free riders and allowing self-directed learning.

Lecturers pointed out that CERL is labor-intensive and they emphasized that importance of adequate infrastructure, resources and support of the administration, for maintaining partner relationships and providing adequate student coaching. They added that central coordination is key, with a clear contact point and a clear strategy to make CERL strategies meaningful for all involved stakeholders. The societal partners were concerned about their lack of time for providing adequate supervision of students and pointed at the need for being assisted in translating their needs to the academic context. Generally, the outcomes indicated that lecturers and students should take care not to (mis)use community partners for their network and expertise and neglect them afterwards.

A number of partner organizations reported having invested more effort in the collaboration than justified by the results. For most of the interviewed partners however, this unbalanced cost effectiveness is partly compensated by the fact that they take personal satisfaction from the interaction with the student and/or see it as part of their mission of raising awareness.
Our students are tomorrow’s changemakers. This kind of teaching and learning encourages active citizenship and fosters student agency and responsibility.

This collaboration provides us with new insights that will strengthen our offer.

Great opportunity to make our work more evidence-based.

It’s been a great collaboration, keeping us sharp and making us reflect on things we might not focus on usually.

Interdisciplinary and humanistic. Freedom and engagement. That’s what this course stands for and what makes it really relevant.

LECTURERS

CERL allows you to bring positive societal change.

STUDENTS

Through collaborative learning, you really get to know yourself better, but it also stimulates you to look beyond your own frames of reference, individual needs and merits. It helps you to grow from I to we.

The fact that we were working on a real-life case, based on real needs and ambitions, was really motivating us to make the best of it.

This experience made me think differently about my role as an instructional designer and student mentor.

I’ve practiced a more inclusive way of teaching, aligned with the diversity of our student body.
Better understanding, learning and mastering of course content, disciplinary skills and responsibilities in relation to real life problems and situations.

Better understanding of the public purposes of the discipline and how it relates to courses and careers.

Increased understanding of professional reality and career pathways.

Enabled self-reflection and awareness about career ambitions and possibilities.

Increased ability to deal with unpredictable situations, creativity, leadership skills, complex problem solving skills, inter/trans cultural and disciplinary communication and collaboration skills, etc.

Expanded social networks - getting to know potential employers, associates, partners, clients.

Enhanced awareness, sensitivity for and sense of responsibility towards community partners and societal issues, with special emphasis on marginalized or minority groups.

More constructive ways of dealing with stress, frustration, failure, conflicts, misunderstandings, misinterpretations etc.

Increased awareness of coordination of team members, community responsibility, deadlines, commitments and completion of planned commitments in accordance with agreed criteria.

Enhanced understanding of the need for proactive and responsible action in society.

Increased understanding of academic roles, possibilities and constraints.

Community partners play increasingly important leadership roles in the academia.

Community partners teach/co-teach/mentor/guest lecture more.

Community partners are increasingly aware that they are helping train the next generation of community leaders, and potentially new staff.

Build professional networks, mutual respect.

Community partners recognize that partnership work has increased and provides critical value to departmental faculty and students in the major.

Community partners assist in the development of program-wide and course learning outcomes to increase relevancy.

Community partners feel more welcome, comfortable, confident.

Community partners experience longer-term commitment to partnered projects.

Community partners move from a passive to active role in departmental affairs.

Increased understanding of new knowledge and skills that students possess.

Increased understanding of current academic evidences that could thrive social innovation.

Increased quality and relevance of teaching content.

Increased creativity and interactivity of the teaching process.

More innovative approaches to problem solving.

Strengthened contacts with community partners.

Closer relationship with students.

Enhanced opportunities for testing models, concepts and methodologies, linking different disciplines.

Increased reputation of engaged academics in the higher education community.

Enhanced trust in the university as an institution with which is useful, wise and socially desirable to cooperate.

Increased satisfaction of students and staff.
Community Engaged Research & Learning =

Knowledge creation and dissemination activities in which real-life contexts and collaborative strategies are applied as building blocks for powerful learning environments, responsible and responsive teaching and research programs, where academic and extra-academic actors are brought together to work around societal challenges and contribute to sustainable transition.'

CERL working definition - VUB
THREE-PHASED DEVELOPMENTAL PATH FOR CERL

Based upon our observations we propose a three-phased development path for CERL strategies, moving from a first phase targeted at personal transformation, through a second phase focusing on institutional transformation to a third phase of CERL strategies targeted at societal transformation.

Community engaged research and learning activities are future and change-oriented initiatives, engaging diverse stakeholders in a collective learning process, stimulating them to look at research problems and societal challenges from a variety of perspectives, integrate various forms of knowledge, collaborate across disciplinary, institutional, cultural and socio-ecological boundaries and build capacities for taking targeted and responsible action. Research and learning in that sense become spaces of critical dialogue and inquiry, allowing participants to re-negotiate the boundaries of individual and collective responsibilities and work towards collective impact.

At a minimum, adopted strategies must provide in relevant and academically rich learning experiences for all involved stakeholders (students, lecturers and community partners). They have to be ‘impactful’ at the personal level. For students, the engagement activities need to contribute to their academic and vocational training and success, their civic awareness and involvement. For lecturers and partners, CERL can contribute to personal growth, civic participation, continued professionalization, professional fulfilment and innovation. In order to achieve positive personal transformation, CERLs must explicitly integrate critical reflection on goals, values and power relations amongst its participants providing them in concrete opportunities to revisit the perspectives through which they interpret their experiences. Misiaszek (2020) highlights engaged pedagogies and research projects need to allow participants to actively explore forms of injustice and unsustainability and help them build capacity to take targeted and responsible actions to shape alternative practices.

More mature initiatives may lead to institutional transformation, creating novel synergies and collaborations, changes in attitudes towards multi-stakeholders projects, more inclusive and democratic institutional policies and practices. To reach this level of impact, engagement practices must be provided active support and coordination. Engaged campus-community partnerships must be acknowledged as a value added for achieving core institutional missions and activities. By intensely focusing on reciprocal and transformational partnerships, campus and community organizations can establish longer-term shared visions, test different approaches, and make necessary adjustments, enabling them to stay connected and engaged even when they encounter moments of disagreement or friction. In order to do so, CERL practitioners must be able and willing to critically assess and deconstruct institutionalized forms of privilege, exploitation and work towards more inclusive, democratic participatory spaces and practices. Fitzgerald and Zientek (2017) stressed the need of building practices based upon the principles of dynamic, nonlinear open systems within this regard, emphasizing forecasting models, scenario planning, and data-driven decision making rather than rules and routines that threaten innovation and create impermeable boundaries.

When CERLs are strategically developed, in accordance with both university-specific expertise as well as local policy agendas or community-defined community needs, campus-community initiatives can be developed in which diverse stakeholders are brought together to tackle complex problems, address long-term issues and provide sustainable solutions, tailored to the local environment, stimulating positive societal transformation or renewal. This longer-term societal change requires active navigation and dismantling of stereotypes, structural forms of inequality, discrimination or abuse and exploration of strategies for building collective responsibility and agency.
PHASE 1
CERL initiatives aiming at enhanced civic awareness and responsibility amongst students, faculty members and community partners. Main focus is the added value of the learning process on personal development of the participants.

QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS
• process and project design take assets and needs of diverse participants into account
• purposeful integration of critical reflection on goals, values and power relations
• providing apt strategies for building boundary crossing competences
• mutual respect and trust, integrity and shared responsibility are core values
• explicit consideration of forms of inertia, friction or conflict at micro-level
• thoughtful evolution from pre-described to open-ended initiatives

KEY OUTCOMES
• increased self- and situational awareness and understanding
• increased boundary crossing competences
• increased career and life opportunities
• enhanced learning experiences and outcomes
• strengthened problem solving capacities and change agency

PHASE 2
CERL programs aiming at developing responsive and responsible curricula and research programs. In addition to their personal benefits, the institutional impact of the adopted CERL strategies is a major point of attention.

QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS
• engaged practices are embedded as key pillars in strategic plans
• engaged initiatives are actively promoted and rewarded
• inclination towards collective responsibility and agency for developing CERL initiatives
• explicit consideration of forms of inertia, friction or conflict at meso-level
• providing apt boundary crossing approaches
• gradual evolution from diversified engaged offer towards integrated CERL initiatives

KEY OUTCOMES
• increased responsiveness of engaged offer
• increased sustainability and impact of engaged initiatives
• more diversified and rewarding inter- and intra-institutional synergies
• intensified cross-disciplinary and -sectorial interactions
• increased inclination towards (self)critical practices, shared ownership and responsibilities

PHASE 3
System level integration of CERL programs, aligned with both academic as well as regional research / policy agenda’s, aiming at long-term societal impact. CERL is applied as a means for questioning and deconstructing outdated or unsustainable status-quos at systemic level.

QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS
• policies and funding are promoting quality design and delivery of engaged practices
• CERL partnerships are strategically chosen and involve diverse academic and extra-academic participants
• explicit consideration of forms of inertia, friction or conflict at macro-level
• targeted approach for building longer term boundary crossing dynamics
• initiatives targeting at continuous societal innovation and renewal

KEY OUTCOMES
• resource development serving interests of both the university as well as the community
• more safe, healthy, prosperous and respectful living and work environments
• agile and resilient communities
• more inclusive and democratic modes of participation and representation
• increased orientation towards identification and deconstruction of injustices and unsustainabilities
CERL DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Engaged practices offer concrete opportunities for realizing VUB’s core mission and ambitions. Conversely, VUB’s societal and educational values and strategic pillars demand a number of specific points of attention. To express both the specificities of CERLs as well as VUB’s unique interpretation of and ambition with engaged pedagogies, a set of nine design principles have been formulated.

The proposed design principles are partly overlapping and strongly intertwined. The concept of the ‘networked curriculum’ (Fung, 2017) runs through them as a red thread: research and learning at the intersection of disciplines, of theory and practice, of lifelong and broad training, of the university and the wider community, of local and global dynamics.

A first set highlights the AUTHENTIC character of CERL strategies. They occur in real-life contexts. Design and evaluation have to meet academic standards. They need to be rigorous and robust and have to be developed in accordance with both our institution’s expertise as well as glocal policy or community agenda’s. Engaged practices are both research driven and promoting.

The second set highlights the COLLABORATIVE character of CERL strategies. They are active and collaborative teaching, learning and research activities. In order to allow participation of diverse stakeholders, engaged practices need to be inclusive and democratic. Knowledge sharing and examination take place free from dogma and encourage critical and reflexive attitudes.

A last set highlights the TRANSFORMATIVE character of CERL strategies. They aim at individual and collective benefits. Engaged practices are future and change oriented and do focus on learning as a process rather than merely taking final achievements or results into account.

It must be stressed that there is no one, fixed recipe or blueprint for engaged practices. Campus-community engagement is a broad domain. Through targeted monitoring and adjustment, the impact of a CERL initiative can gradually increase. This will require time and patience, creativity and endurance, generosity and – most importantly – an inclination towards reflective practice. In order to facilitate shared reflection and negotiation regarding the proposed design principles, a series of (re)design questions are presented.
Community engaged research and learning occurs in authentic environments. Participants apply theoretical concepts and frameworks to real-life contexts. The experiences they gain enable them to broaden their understanding of societal challenges, academic evidences, concepts and methods and allow them to build capacities for taking targeted and responsible action. Authentic learning is a process of meaning construction that has both personal as well as social relevance. It is aimed at the development of an authentic person, competent and willing to contribute to a variety of social practices and challenges. CERLs often target ‘glocal’ contexts: issues that arise both locally and globally.

Community engaged research and learning initiatives are embedded in the curriculum. Students gain credits for achieving learning outcomes and not - exclusively - for showing civic engagement. Goals, activities and evaluation criteria are well aligned. Cross-pollination between theory and practice ensure that learning experiences and insights are processed in a meaningful and sustainable manner. Typically, learning outcomes extend beyond discipline-specific competences. CERLs are a perfect means to develop transferable skills and lifelong learning competences. Assessment meets both academic standards as well as societal relevance / responsiveness. Learning activities and support aim at maximising learning opportunities. They take into account diverse learning needs and assets.

Community engaged research and learning are natural partners. Pedagogy is enhanced as a result of the diverse networks, forms of knowledge and modes of knowledge creation mobilized in engaged research practices. Community engaged teaching and learning activities allow students to explore recent scientific developments, shortcomings and needs. They also create concrete opportunities for making students more actively involved in the research process, thereby allowing them to develop research skills and attitudes. Conversely, do engaged pedagogies foster new research opportunities. They are a means to explore new forms of knowledge production, transfer and valorisation.

au·then·tic
(adjective)
of undisputed origin, not a copy, genuine
Community engaged research and learning strategies build on active dialogue between diverse stakeholders: students, lecturers, researchers, professionals, (active) citizens, policymakers, etc. All participants are provided active voice and agency in order to co-design and co-assess learning activities and learning outcomes. CERLs are a concrete exercise in diversity thinking, free thought and examination. Research problems are approached from a variety of perspectives. All participants have an active role and clearly defined responsibilities. CERLs emphasize transdisciplinarity. Participants are allowed to draw on disciplinary expertise and everyday knowledge. CERL dynamics help develop collective learning skills and work towards shared goals and realizations.

CERLs require cross-functional individuals bringing in diverse knowledge, skills, and experiences. They can be considered acts of ‘everyday politics’: activities wherein people work together for tackling complex problems by naming and framing shared issues; expressing and examining values, interests, desired ends and goals; considering what can and should be done for tackling the defined issues by building and exercising power. Quality CERL requires intentional design and leadership, taking into account heterogeneous learning needs and capacities. CERL participants actively look for minority voices and opinions and challenge each other to question and help overcome abusive forms of participation and representation.

Through CERL, the learning environment and experiences extend well beyond the university walls. Without sacrificing academic rigour, CERLs allow to broaden the scope from traditional - unidirectional - forms of research and learning to more creative, multi-sided, interactional and innovative types of inquiry. They stimulate participants to combine ingredients from diverse contexts, diverging practices, experiences, values, methods, concepts, theories and frameworks and help shape new – hybrid – forms of knowledge and modes of knowledge creation. Knowledge sharing, examination and creation take place free from dogma and encourage critical and reflexive attitudes. CERL is an exercise in modesty, where boundaries between learning and teaching, experts and novices blur. Participants are allowed to build on individual skills, experiences and aspirations, but at the same time are invited to create a space of commonality and collectively decide on what actions to take / goals to strive for.
Community engaged research and learning strategies aim at stimulating both individual as well as collective change capacities, agility and transformation. It’s about learning to know, learning to be, learning to live and work together, beyond dominant and established practices and frameworks. Academic expertise is deployed to enhance the civic awareness, responsibility and engagement of its participants. CERL partnerships are developed with respect for everyone’s contribution and individuality. They challenge participants to critically assess established norms, narratives and practices, dismantle any form of injustice or unsustainability, and build capacities for shaping desirable futures.

Community engaged research and learning strategies provide concrete opportunities for putting the humanistic vision that people and society can be improved into practice. CERL incites critical-creative attitudes, provides an opportunity to stimulate compassion, a sense of responsibility, curiosity and imagination. CERL creates hybrid learning environments where cognitive learning, physical learning and affective learning go hand in hand; formal, informal and non-formal ways of teaching merge; real life and virtual learning experiences meet; diverse learners - young and old, generation students and lifelong learners, novices and experts – are brought together to learn with, from and for each other. Power relations are actively scrutinized, de- and reconstructed, as to empower participants for autonomous and responsible action.

Community engaged research and learning aims to foster personal, civic, academic and professional development of its participants. Equality and reciprocity serve as baseline. Engaged practices require participants to enter territories in which they are unfamiliar and to some extend unqualified. Guidance and assistance focus on possibilities and opportunities, rather than shortcomings or failure. CERL partnerships regularly review outcomes and strategies as to ensure that actions are moving toward the desired impact and increase the likelihood that learning will occur not just at the task level but at the level of goals and their underlying values as well. Learning is considered a transformative rather than an informative process. Evaluation not only relies on final outcomes and deliverables but do take the evolution and participation throughout the entire process into account.

trans·for.ma.tive (adjective) causing a change in someone or something
(RE)DESIGN QUESTIONS

Who will/should be participating?
What expertise and/or perspectives will they bring?
In what way are they complementary / contradictory?
In what way will participation be beneficial to them?
How will they be involved in the design of the adopted strategy?
What means of engagement will there be for them?
How will minority voices and opinions be brought in?
How will different learning needs be acknowledged?
What will be done to ensure safe and trustful relationships?
Who will monitor the process dynamics?
In what way will tasks and roles be attributed?
How are participants prepared to meet responsibilities?
How will diversity in skills and expectations be handled?
How will shared ownership and responsibilities be fostered?
In what way will diverse learning spaces and experiences be bridged?
How will integration of various practices and perspectives be facilitated?
How will inclusive spaces for shared meaning making be guaranteed?
How will conditions for handling conflicts constructively be favored?
What values will be guiding CERL efforts and activities?
How do the goals of the CERL project fit in the institutional agenda’s?
Do they match with our institutional culture?
Will we be able to rely on competent people and resources?
What support could be provided by our management staff?
In what way could they benefit from the CERL partnership?
In how far will they be able to take leadership?
How will we monitor and work away participation barriers?
How will we deal with inequal distribution of power or hierarchies?
What principles will be central to our relationship?
What strategies will we use to monitor safety and ownership?
How do we avoid exploitation and harm?
How do we work towards redistribution of power and integration of knowledge?
How will we ensure equal voice and participation?
What strategies will we employ to work towards shared responsible and agency?
How will we handle conflicting interests and expectations?
What form of threat or abuse could we encounter?
How could we dismantle institutionalized practices of privilege or exploitation?
What impact are we targeting at?
How will we align our efforts to local research and policy agenda’s?
Who do we involve in articulating these goals?
How to create trust among diverse actors?
What are the main characteristics and principles your strategy will be built on?
How will forms of power and privilege, stereotypes and prejudices be treated?
How do we manage deontological and ethical questions?
How will we evaluate the success of the adopted CERL strategy?
What evidence will we collect?
What forms of power abuse or exploitation could we encounter?
How will we build capacity for bridging divergent practices and action spheres?
What forms of resistance or inertia could we encounter?
How will we create shared spaces for critical reflection and action?
How will we deal with antagonistic interests?
How will ensure inclusive decision-making?
How do we foster openness towards various forms of knowledge?
In what way will the process of reciprocal knowledge translation be facilitated?
How will local assets and possibilities be explored and brought together?
Universities can be considered ‘fundamentally societal institutions’, generating impact both at the individual as well as the collective level. Therefore the societal role, relevance and impact of universities is neither a new concern nor a new phenomenon. However, due to the disruptive trends of the 21st century environment, calls for a re-engagement of the university have come to the forefront. In order to help tackling the grand societal challenges, universities are urged to assess their core activities. There is a need to mobilize knowledge resources more broadly, develop new forms of knowledge and new modes of knowledge production and sharing. New approaches are to be developed, enabling students, staff and societal actors to deal with accelerating change, increasing complexity, ambiguities and uncertainties. Having a dual purpose of benefiting both academia and society at large, engaged practices are advanced as a meaningful method to do so.

Community engagement is not a single activity that should be carried out as an ‘add-on’ to the university’s core activities. Instead, it is to be approached as a complex phenomenon that is at the same time a method (involving collaborative research and learning in and about real-life contexts), a principle (with shared ownership and mutual benefits at its core) and an objective (of contributing to positive societal change). Defined in this way, community engagement can be considered a transversal pillar, applying to all university-based activities, from the core missions of teaching and research, over staff recruitment and promotion policies, marketing and communication strategies, facility and stakeholders management and strategic partnership building, to more peripheral activities and projects.

Engaged universities ask what kind of education they are providing, what kind of knowledge they produce and how it can contribute to societal development and problem-solving. They engage in ongoing self-reflection regarding epistemic horizons and the repercussions of both tasks as well as acts. Being engaged is about trying to understand otherness, becoming more conscious about the contextual factors shaping other people’s realities and being committed for working towards space(s) fostering shared meaning making and collaborative action. An engaged university cares for its people and environment, aspires to academic diversity, rejects monopolies and the standardization of knowledge production, and encourages inclusive and equitable learning and research in communities of knowledge. Being an engaged university is about the need to strengthen active citizenship; promoting ecological, social and political commitment for local and global justice and sustainable development.

At the end of this three-years project, we (the project team) do believe that community engaged research and learning activities are an indispensable ingredient for making our university a change and future-proof institution. We think of them as places of hope and wonder, spaces where commonality begins, where people can act in concert and work towards desirable futures. Engaged practises are processes through which markers of difference and sameness can be created, requiring participants to enter territories in which they are unfamiliar. This is not always an easy endeavor, a path that is never straightforward, but almost always holds meaningful learning surprises and potentialities.

Amor Mundi, the time is now!
The responsible university is anchored in its territory, open to dialogue, concerned with its social-ecological footprint and promotes science as a non-commodified public good.

Francois Vallaeys
UNIVER.CITY wants to develop a high-quality, future-proof community-based & engaged educational offer at the VUB. Lecturer, programme coordinators, researchers, policy and administrative staff with an interest in Community Engaged Research and Learning can be supported by joining a university-wide learning community. Within the learning community, possibilities and properties of community engaged teaching and learning are considered from a broad and heterogeneous perspective: what is the place of CERL strategies in the VUB curriculum, which partnerships can be implemented for this, which learning goals can be formulated, which work and evaluation forms are applicable, how does one establish a sustainable link with research and policy agendas, should one take into account various backgrounds and learning needs, etc.?

Experiences and questions from those involved are tested against research data, policy frameworks and examples of good practice. Guiding focus is the impact of the deployed strategies on all stakeholders involved. The goal is to set up synergies, exchange knowledge, networks, information, tools and methodologies and to compile them into a toolkit. The UNIVER.CITY project team also offers customised support. You can contact us for:

• administrative-logistical support (drawing up cooperation agreements, insurance)
• inspiring examples
• mapping and facilitating partnerships
• support for communicating (project) realisations
• assistance in student coaching
• help with the organising of networking events
• pedagogical support (fine-tuning ECTS tokens, elaborating didactic methods and tools, preparing online learning environment)
• training and support at course or department level
• exploring financing options
• assistance with monitoring / quality assurance of CERL strategies

Do you want to find out how societal engagement can contribute to academic learning or how partnerships could be integrated into more sustainably into your teaching or research activities? Do you want to increase the societal knowledge base and responsibility of your students, teach your students social skills and a sense of responsibility, in combination with your theoretical training? Are you interested in getting started with CERL and do you want to be supported? Are you already involved in community engaged research and / or learning projects and do you want to share your experiences, instruments and / or networks? Would you wish to disseminate your project realisations more broadly?

Contact us at info.cerl@vub.be.

www.univercity.be