

An Introductory  
Guide for Higher  
Education Staff

CampusEngage

Network for the Promotion  
of Civic Engagement  
in Irish Higher Education

# Ethics of Community -Higher Education Engagement



# Ethics of Community-Higher Education Engagement

Collaboration of higher education institutions with community organisations is often described as an ethically motivated endeavour. Yet, the successful realisation of such projects is characterised by a number of ethical challenges. This guide aims to provide a brief outline of some concerns that need to be kept in mind when setting up projects with a community engagement focus, be they service learning projects or community based research projects.

## Characteristics

Relevant stakeholders include:

- **Community organisations, their members and users;**
- **Higher education institutions, their staff and students.**

Ethically significant principles and concerns for community based projects include:

- **Respect: The views and interests of all stakeholders should be taken seriously;**
- **Collaborative autonomy: The community organisation and higher education organisation should share decision-making authority in the realisation of the project;**
- **Transparency: Stakeholders should be kept informed about the project, its progress and impact;**
- **Consent: Informed agreement to participate in the project should be obtained from participants;**
- **Benefit: The project should not cause harm to stakeholders and benefit the community;**

- **Fairness: There needs to be a fair balance between project-related benefits and burdens for stakeholders;**
- **Accountability: Professional stakeholders are accountable for their actions towards other stakeholders.**

## Practice

In planning community engagement projects, ethical concerns should inform their design and implementation from the outset.

### *Respect:*

Participation in a community based project requires that all stakeholders encounter each other on an equal footing, regardless of differences in knowledge, experience or social background. The realisation of professional and academic goals should not be given priority over the interests of the community organisations and their members. Projects should be set up in a way that gives expression to this respect.

### *Collaborative autonomy:*

The relationship between community organisation and higher education institution should be one of active collaboration and shared decision-making between partners. Project goals should be defined through a process of mutual exploration and balancing of stakeholders' needs, expertise, and expectations.

### *Transparency:*

Project partners should communicate openly about all aspects of the project that might have an effect on each other's participation. Communication to the community organisation should include a realistic assessment of students' competence and support needs, the degree of disruptiveness and resource implications of project participation (e.g. timeframe, extent of paperwork, staff or client involvement), envisaged challenges and limitations of project implementation and likely results. Communication to the higher education organisation should include the community organisation's values and mission, organisational needs, work processes that might be impacted by project participation (positively or negatively), and resources realistically available for project participation.

Communication about previous positive and negative experiences with community-higher education partnerships should inform this reflection.

#### *Consent:*

Consent to participate should not just be negotiated between representatives of the organisation. All participants, especially service users who will be involved in the project, should be given the opportunity to provide informed consent. There should be no service related repercussions to users who prefer not to be involved or who withdraw from project participation at a later stage. For vulnerable or marginalised service users, particular care should be taken to create appropriate information and consent processes.

#### *Benefit:*

A realistic assessment of what benefits are achievable during the project should be shared between partners. Benefits should not be overstated to avoid later disappointment. Academic partners should be aware that their contribution may pose potential harms or burdens on the community organisation or their service users, and proactively seek their opinion on the impact of project participation. Any potential child protection concerns need to be included in the planning from the outset.

#### *Fairness:*

Academic partners should acknowledge how they benefit personally or professionally from project participation, but also whether students might experience harm or distress due to project participation. Appropriate measures need to put in place to address such concerns. Community partners should assess the impact of project participation on service users and the organisation. Stakeholders should be consulted about whether they feel an appropriate balance of benefits and burdens has been reached. Any concerns that affect more vulnerable participants on both sides need to be addressed promptly.

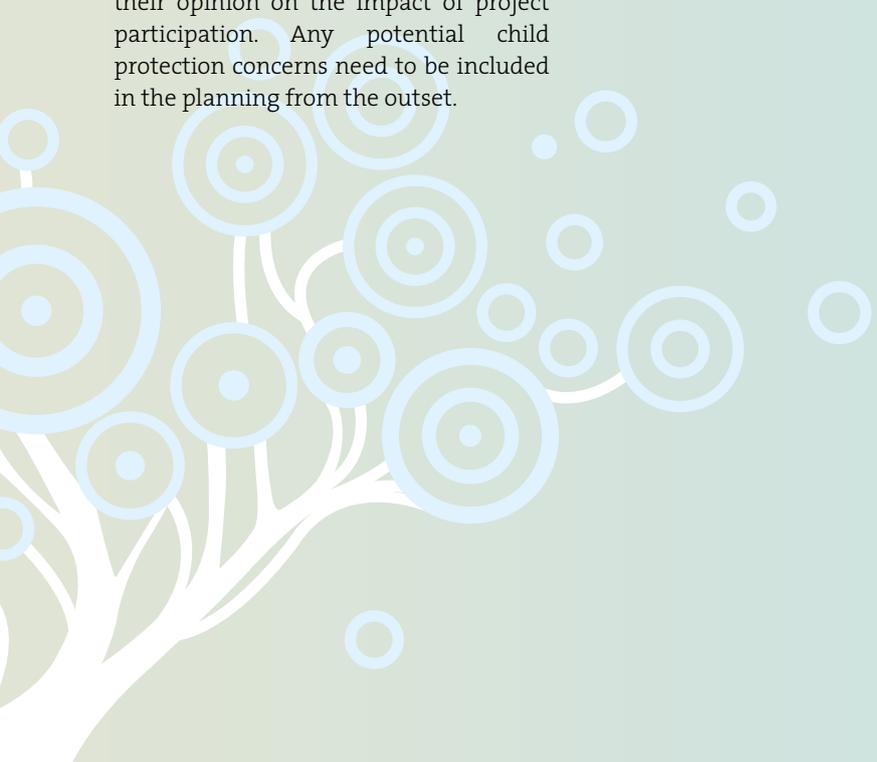
#### *Accountability:*

All stakeholders take responsibility for their actions. Particular responsibility accrues to the participating organisations' representatives who design and implement the project.

#### **Process**

Realising ethical practice remains a significant challenge throughout all stages of the project. Particular care needs to be taken during the set-up phase. Especially in substantially participatory projects, ongoing attention to most of the ethical concerns outlined above is required.

For community engaged research projects, researchers need to take into account their local research ethics committee (REC) review requirements. Achieving ethical clearance for community engaged research is often considered to be particularly challenging, due to the complexity and unpredictability of participatory research processes and the particularly stringent research ethical protection requirements for groups that are considered marginalised or vulnerable. Close communication with the local ethics committee is advisable at an early stage of project planning.



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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