

SHEFCE PEER LEARNING VISIT: UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA (11-13 JULY 2022)

Peer reflection by visiting team

1. Reflection on the national, local and institutional context

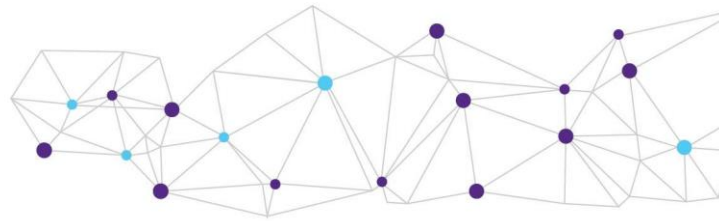
Local context

- The history and geography of the city of Rijeka and its surrounding region clearly impacts the spirit of cooperation and innovation present at the university, with the age of the university contributing to this. There is a very open mindset and a spirit of open cooperation and experimentation with the city, the broader region and within European networks (such as the SHEFCE project group and the YUFE network).
- The demographic context of emigration also potentially contributes to the awareness of areas where the university, city or region might need to improve or change. This context might also be a driver for change and willingness to improve the local context.
- The recency of the centralised campus could also add to this idea of having to create and rethink the identity of the university and the city. The location of the campus also places UNIRI in a position that overlooks the city, stimulating thought about future possibilities in cooperation and improvement.

Local embedding

- We notice a very supportive local environment, with UNIRI working together successfully with local government and NGO's. A very good network of local partners and local government seems to be in place, facilitating the fantastic engagement projects presented during the visit.
- The limited size of the city is played out as an advantage rather than a limitation. There is a network of local partners in place that is manageable in size yet diverse enough to facilitate a broad variety of projects.

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- The visiting team noted many great examples that show UNIRI leading by example, by being a responsible citizen/institution/partner within the local environment (e.g. gender equality plans, my place under the sun)
- Several times during the visit we heard of the strong cooperation between the University and the City of Rijeka. Despite this, the visiting team saw relatively few examples of such cooperation (although we understand that this was due to conflicting schedules). We therefore wonder about the nature of the support from the city itself and the support from local or national governments for engagement projects. Is the responsibility for societal issues carried by the right set of shoulders?
- During our guided tour through the city, the host team and guide referenced the many empty (industrial) buildings present in the city. Could the connection to these spaces be intensified and could they be used? Could alternative movements (occupation) be used to approach these spaces?

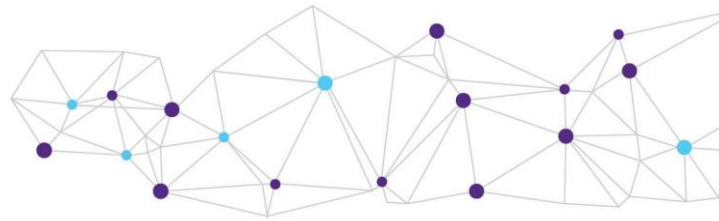
International and national context

- The impact of the work the university has been doing is obvious and on a European level, it seems like there is recognition for the work that UNIRI has been doing – with the university recently receiving an international award for community engagement. The presence of UNIRI within the YUFE network seems to be a perfect match in facilitating further leadership in community engagement.
- The visiting team wonders if this leadership role could be exploited more in a national context, by seeking increased collaboration between Croatian universities.

Bottom-up processes

- UNIRI places a lot of importance on the local context, wholly independent from national support. On the contrary, UNIRI is or could be a bastion of change and an originator of a different identity that fights existing politics, corruption, etc.
- The University does not seem to be afraid of piloting local programmes that are then adopted or seen as example by other institutions on a national/international level. There are some instances of strategy by university leadership that go beyond the local scope (e.g. engaging with rating systems, the YUFE network), but it seems like most initiatives grow from the local, bottom-up approach.

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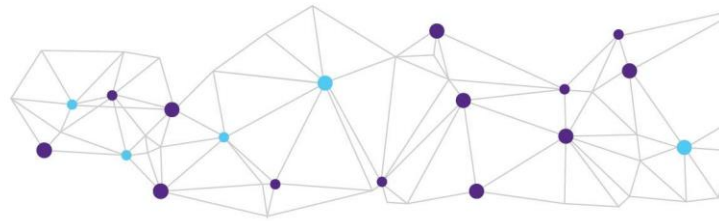
Sustainability of practices

- In the TEFCE report – two years old at this point – the sustainability of community engagement efforts at UNIRI is put into question, but it would seem that a part of this concern has been addressed. Of course, with a change of leadership the existing programmes could be threatened (e.g. by funding decisions) and the role of the rector remains paramount, but it would seem that community engagement has indeed been institutionalised to some degree.
- Compared to the TEFCE piloting visit in 2019, there is a much larger number of institutionalised practices (through committees, personnel, structures, networks). There are also many examples of concrete engagements (e.g. My Place Under The Sun) where partnerships and infrastructure has been put in place for the long run. Another example are existing long-running projects (e.g. School & Community).
- Despite a rather decentralised structure, it would seem that community engagement is ingrained in a whole host of (independent) centres and personnel.
- Despite all the progress on institutionalising individual practices, the visiting team wonders if there is enough centralised support for community engagement? E.g. a centralised event/project to show the engagement of the university as a whole to community engagement. We saw evidence of an existing award and the online database of practices, but the project visit seemed incredibly useful also to UNIRI people who got to get in touch with each other's projects. Another example would be quality criteria for personnel evaluation: is enough support in place for this and is UNIRI able to implement these changes?
- In the report, interdisciplinarity between centres and faculties was mentioned as a possible shortcoming of community engagement work at UNIRI. Throughout the visit, the project team felt that this remained a concern, given the decentralized nature of the university and a limited number of interdisciplinary examples of community engagement practices.
- We witnessed a number of practices taking place at schools. Are these projects connected or coordinated within or outside the university? Could coordination be improved?

Third Mission

- In the report and during the visit, it was clear that UNIRI makes limited distinction between the third mission elements of entrepreneurship/tech transfer/valorisation and community engagement. This is a clear match with the YUFE approach.

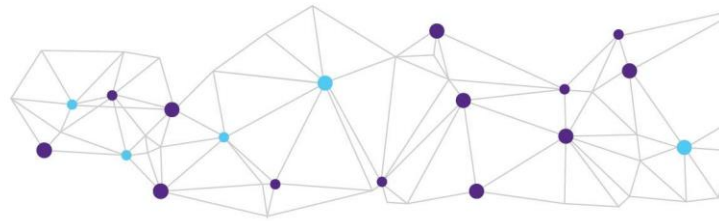
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2. Reflection on the level of community engagement and on good practices

- The level of engagement we could detect and witness throughout our visit is definitely high and so is the level, and number, of (good) practices the university promotes, engages in, and supports/sustains. Notably, the members of the visiting team who were also involved in the TEFCE project (2018-2021), and took part in the previous visit, unanimously agreed that the level of engagement of the university, the quality of the presented practices as well as the spreading of community engagement in the institution is clearly improved in comparison to some years ago. This certainly enhances the potential sustainability of community engagement initiatives and practices at University of Rijeka in the long term. However, some concerns remain regarding community engagement being strongly linked to pivotal figures within the university. (What would happen without those people? What if they leave their position or the university?). Again, and this is relevant not only when it comes to community engagement, should we aim for, or favor, a university governance scattered and lean or structured and depending on leadership?
- Furthermore, the visiting team could clearly see how the application of the toolbox and the engagement of the university opened up new perspectives as well as led to new ideas throughout the years. However, the team “fears” the emergence of a trend based on the replication of good projects. What about the exploration of new projects - perhaps even outside one’s comfort zone? What about the improvement and re-proposition of “less good” projects (even if a project failed it might succeed once reworked)?
- On a more general level, the visiting team has the feeling that although good practices of community engagement are coordinated through discussions within specific bodies of the university, there seems to be a lack of a general plan to govern community engagement activities, to measure and track them as well as to carry them out strategically. Community engagement activities/practices are also often not connected to each other. Improving the connection among community engagement practitioners and the knowledge/awareness of all those involved in said practices regarding all that is going on at University of Rijeka is certainly recommended.
- Also, community engagement practices seemed to be often connected to specific fields/disciplines, such as social sciences, cultural studies, the arts. Is there a scope to expand more community engagement towards the hard-sciences? Is there perhaps still a dominant culture according to which community engagement is not for “A-league” researchers/disciplines? This trend clearly also depends on time and resources specific disciplines/faculties/research groups are willing to dedicate to community engagement vis-à-vis the benefits/advantages they get in return.

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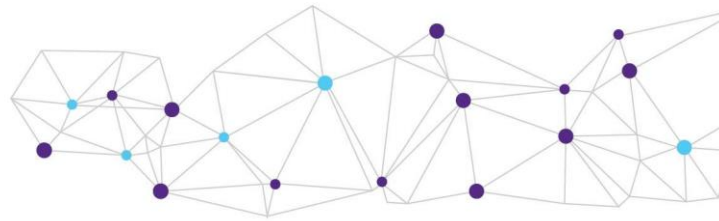


- The visiting team got the strong impression that the community engagement practices were aimed at addressing important societal challenges at the local level in partnership with communities, especially disadvantaged communities. It would be interesting so see to what extent the community engagement agenda of the university could also connect to initiatives related to other aspects of the 'third mission' (e.g. innovation, engaging with businesses) – although this is a challenge faced by many universities internationally, that separately approach e.g. community engagement and business engagement.
- Last but not least, the visiting team was very pleased to see how the involved students perceive community engagement as empowerment and engage in specific activities as part of a long term commitment to community engagement. In other words, they are not aiming to be only good as students but to be good citizens and stay that way beyond and after their university journey. Finally, the team was also impressed by their relationship with, and how they perceive, the university; namely as a flexible partner open not only to work but also to negotiate with them regarding the development and implementation of community engagement initiatives.

3. Reflection on identified challenges and potential opportunities

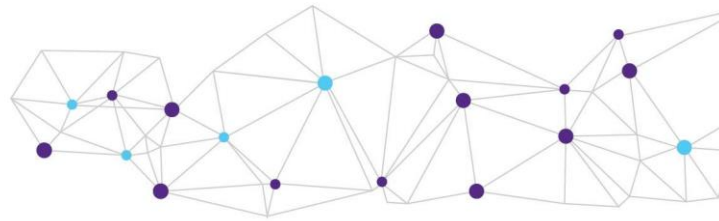
- **Communication of and support for community engagement efforts:** We believe there are great opportunities to enhance communication of and support for community engagement at UNIRI. There is a need to coordinate academics and research groups internally so that initiatives across thematic areas (e.g., medical sciences, social sciences) can be better supported, resourced and strengthened. With resources permitting, perhaps a centralised unit or hub for community engagement could be developed. Or consider a yearly event, to communicate community engagement efforts to internal and external stakeholders, or a training programme that can support those staff who currently are or want to be community engaged.
- **Engagement with external communities:** UNIRI have formed fantastic partnerships with external communities - *My Place Under the Sun* to name only one! We see opportunities to expand collaborations with other institutions in the community. There could be a more proactive approach to engaging external groups e.g., for one of the projects that partnered with local primary schools, the university was approached by the schools and not the other way around.
- **Engaged research:** As identified in the TEFCE report, engaged research is an area of lower intensity at UNIRI. There is an opportunity to increase research output that is about, with and for those communities that are low resourced and hard to reach.

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- **Impact of community engagement initiatives:** Clearly the current range of community engagement initiatives at UNIRI are having a substantial impact on the communities and region of Rijeka and beyond. However, the long-term or accumulative impact or effects of these initiatives could be better captured and communicated.
- **Institutional spread:** As noted above (and in the institutional report), the institutional spread of community engagement activities at UNIRI is a challenge. Current activities appear to be primarily concentrated in the social sciences. There is an opportunity to find ways for community engagement to be championed in less engaged departments and faculties. There could also be an opportunity to facilitate greater collaboration between faculties/departments for the development of community engagement.
- **Institutional sustainability:** The current rector is hugely supportive of community engagement, which offers an excellent opportunity for its development at the university. However, if a change of leadership were to occur would the sustainability of community engagement at the university be in jeopardy?
- **Interdisciplinarity:** The interdisciplinarity that is seen across community engagement initiatives, research projects and centres at the university (e.g., SyllAssist and University Speech and Language Therapy Centre) is a real strength. Are there opportunities to further enhance this area by leveraging existing capacity (e.g., expertise, funding, resources)?
- **Recognition for being an Engaged University at a national level:** UNIRI is certainly known for being engaged at a regional and European level (i.e. YUFE, SHEFCE). But is this known or recognised at a national level?
- **STEPRI:** There is a perception that STEP RI (tech and incubation centre) is isolated from the rest of the university. There is an opportunity to facilitate better linkages between the academic community and STEP RI. There are also opportunities to link entrepreneurship and tech transfer with community engagement i.e. social enterprise.
- **YUFE:** The university's membership of the YUFE alliance provides a fantastic opportunity for the *international* exchange of best practices and ideas that can be tailored to address local and context specific issues i.e. adopting a "Glocal" mindset.

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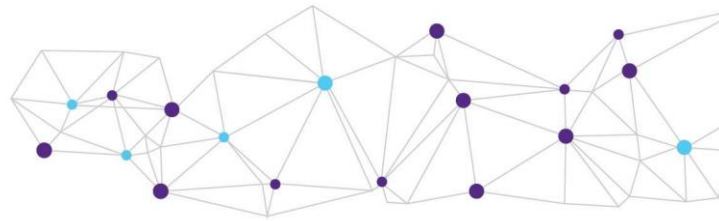


- **Validation of community engagement for Academic staff:** This is a challenge that is evident at many universities, but we can see this being a particular issue for UNIRI given that career progression criteria are set at a national level. Need to perhaps think of alternative incentives to encourage community engagement among staff at UNIRI (e.g., workload allocation model).
- **Reflection space for community engagement:** There is an opportunity to provide a space for critical reflection of community engagement practices at UNIRI. These critical reflections may help to assess risks or allow early detection of any problems with ongoing initiatives (e.g., the example of setting up a community playground that did not have the expected outcome). A yearly review of community engagement could become an institutionalized practice and even non-community engagement engaged academics and staff could be invited to provide an external evaluation and review.
- **Student Council:** The commitment of the student council to community engagement is impressive. This needs to be continually fostered and supported into the future.
- **University – Industry Engagement in relation to Student Internships:** During the Service and Knowledge Exchange peer-learning session, the group heard from the Career Center about the student internship programme in place at UNIRI. We recognize this programme as a highly valued and important one for fostering the employability of students and of cultivating a positive and valued relationship between the university and Croatian enterprises and industries. However, our discussion raised some concerns over student welfare, specifically that such internships are taken as unpaid (any such arrangements for pay are at the discretion of the company), that the duration of such internships has increased from 120 hours to 450 hours, and that some students report having less valuable or meaningful internships to what was expected (according to the student rep who was present in the session). Perhaps something can be done in this area to maintain the successful relationships fostered with Croatian enterprise whilst ensuring that student concerns are heard and addressed.

4. Reflection on value of the TEFCE Toolbox

- Based on the discussions with the rector and the core UNIRI team, the TEFCE Toolbox was seen as an invaluable tool in furthering the community engagement agenda at the University. Although the University was clearly engaged before applying the tool, its implementation brought a number of benefits:

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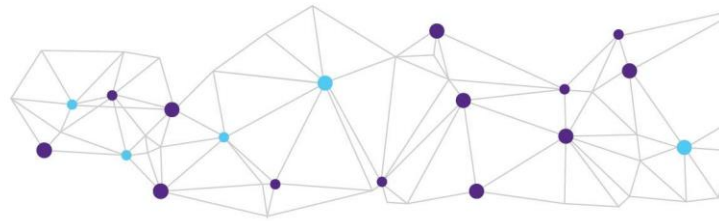


- It raised awareness at the management level of the range of community engagement initiatives spread across the university
- It resulted in building an informal network of university practitioners.
- It acted as a catalyst for strengthening the community engagement agenda of the university and for launching concrete initiatives (setting up a community engagement award; linking community engagement to the YUFE network; receiving an the ACEEU award for community-engaged university)

5. Reflection on value of the peer-learning visit

- The peer-learning visit further confirmed that, compared to the learning experience of reviewing the institutional report, the level of learning increases significantly through an on-site visit, by allowing space for more context-specific information (national, local, institutional) and for more in-depth understanding of both practices and broader issues through interactive discussions with local teams.
- All participants were particularly impressed by the rich programme and the fact that the University managed to mobilise 20 participants to present their community engaged practices. The structure of the visit was also successful, combining presentations for the entire group, smaller break out sessions and an valuable in-depth discussion with the Rector of the university.
- In terms of lessons learnt for the final visit in Dublin, the peer-learning team felt that more time should have been devoted to the topic of action-planning itself, in order for the participants to also learn from context-specific ways in which universities approach institutional action-planning.
- The host team at UNIRI confirmed that having an international peer-learning visit was a highly valuable learning experience for them too, leading to increased awareness about positive aspects of their work (that they may have taken for granted), to a confirmation of challenges that they had themselves identified, as well as to the discovery of new perspectives and ideas that they had not previously considered.

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Members of peer-reflection team

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3. Thomas Farnell, Institute for the Development of Education, Croatia
4. Magdalena Fellner, University for Continuing Education Krems, Austria
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6. Anna Planas Llado, University of Girona, Spain
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9. Edgar Iglesias Vidal, University of Girona, Spain
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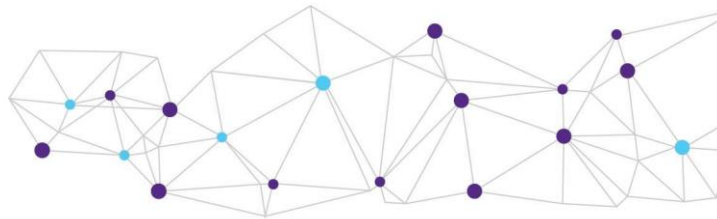
Members of UNIRI hosting team

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2. Bojana Ćulum Ilić
3. Daria Glavan Šćulac
4. Ivana Klarin
5. Sandra Nuždić

Local participants/presenters

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2. Jana Ažić, University of Rijeka
3. Lana Par, Student – University of Rijeka
4. Emily Sabolek, Student – University of Rijeka
5. Marija Špoljarić, Student – University of Rijeka
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19. Morana Matković, DeltaLab - Center for Urban Transition, Architecture and Urbanism Rijeka
20. Boris Golob. Science and Technology Park STEP RI

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