







Revisiting the Civic University in Europe: Comparative Insights from Poland, Portugal, and Sweden

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Abstract

This article explores how universities enact their civic engagement within regional knowledge ecosystems in Poland, Portugal, and Sweden. Using the civic university framework, it examines cooperation patterns between higher education institutions (HEIs) and local actors and identifies challenges shaping

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these collaborations. The analysis draws on qualitative interviews with civil society organizations and public authorities engaged in partnerships with universities. Findings indicate that Polish universities often serve as cultural and educational anchors, while Portuguese universities exhibit strong territorial engagement through participatory community projects. Meanwhile, Swedish universities function as mediators, connecting local initiatives with broader sustainability agendas. Despite these differences, all three contexts share challenges, including fragmented institutional structures, discontinuity in partnerships, and reliance on short-term funding. The study argues that civic engagement is a relational and context-dependent practice rather than a uniform institutional function. Strengthening policy frameworks and institutionalizing participatory approaches may enhance universities' civic engagement and societal impact.

Keywords

civic university, knowledge ecosystems, HEIs, civic engagement, higher education, university partnerships, community engagement

Introduction

Over the past decades, higher education institutions (HEIs) have increasingly been expected to contribute to the global development of knowledge economies, the needs of competition-driven labor markets, and a plethora of societal challenges that escalate on a global scale. International reforms, such as the Bologna Process, have created a diverse landscape for higher education and intensified the expectations for universities to pursue multiple goals and missions (see Wihlborg & Teelken, 2014). This shift of focus toward internationalization, however, has raised concerns about universities' engagement in their local contexts and their civic role, particularly in addressing community needs and collaborating with non-academic actors. At the same time, the strategic value of universities as regional actors has been acknowledged as a fundamental factor in shaping local sustainability efforts, fostering innovation, and supporting societal initiatives. The idea of universities' civic engagement, in other words, may be elevated as an integral component of their academic activity in the context of regional knowledge ecosystems (Goddard et al., 2016).

A regional knowledge ecosystem is a complex system of cooperation between different actors in a specific region for the creation, flow, application, and development of knowledge and innovation (Vodă et al., 2023). Its key elements are the interdependence and interaction of scientific, business, administrative, and social institutions.

The main elements of the regional knowledge ecosystem include: (i) scientific and research institutions (universities, research institutes, and R&D centers that generate knowledge and innovation); (ii) enterprises (especially innovative and technological ones that implement new solutions and often cooperate with science); (iii) public authorities (local and regional governments that support the development of the knowledge economy through policies and support programs); (iv) business environment institutions (science and technology parks, business incubators, clusters, and investment funds); (v) local community and social organizations (including NGOs, which can be recipients of knowledge but also co-creators of social innovations); and (vi) knowledge and technology transfer systems (i.e., mechanisms and institutions that facilitate cooperation between science and business).

The characteristics of knowledge ecosystems depend on locality and regional specificity (including the scientific, economic, and cultural potential of the region), the ability to build relationships between actors and create networks (cooperation and networking), as well as the rapid and effective response of the ecosystem to the needs of local society and the labor market (dynamic and adaptive) (Valkokari, 2015). The ecosystem is meant to create knowledge but, primarily, to implement jointly developed innovations into the economy and society (Gifford et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, there is a growing need to examine how universities enact their civic engagement within diverse regional knowledge ecosystems, how local actors perceive these collaborations, and how emerging challenges shape the conditions for partnership. To address this need, the present study draws on empirical material from Poland, Portugal, and Sweden, created within the framework of the ESDEUS project (European Universities as Community Leaders of the Education for Sustainable Development), to examine the civic engagement of HEIs, to problematize tensions arising from contradictory goals, and to identify similarities and differences between distinct geographical contexts.

To pursue the aforementioned aim, we considered the following research questions:

- What cooperation patterns exist between universities and local actors in the varying geographical contexts of the study?
- What challenges emerge in enacting cooperation patterns between universities and local actors?

Although the three countries operate within the broader European higher education area, each one of them presents distinctive societal, political, historical, and economic features that shape universities' engagement in their regions. Guided by

the model of the civic university (Goddard et al., 2016), we consider that the university adapts as an organization not only in response to changes in the Higher Education (HE) environment, but also through active reciprocal engagement with a wide variety of groups and organizations. We, therefore, also try to challenge the sharp distinction between research and education, as well as the narrow conceptualization of engagement as a third pillar.

The civic university

The concept of the civic university has emerged as a response to the evolving role of HEIs in contemporary society. As articulated by Goddard et al. (2016), the civic university transcends traditional academic missions by embedding social engagement into its core purposes. This framework provides a structured approach to analyzing empirical data on universities' engagement with society, drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives within the social sciences.

This theoretical model integrates perspectives from higher education studies, political science, regional development, and adult learning (see Field et al., 2016) to examine how universities function as civic institutions. Specifically, it considers the university's role as an agent of social transformation, a knowledge producer with direct societal impact, and a bridge between global and local communities.

This framework builds on the seven dimensions of the civic university outlined in Goddard et al. (2016, pp. 10–11) while situating them within broader theoretical debates in higher education governance, institutional change, and public engagement. It provides analytical categories for evaluating universities' civic engagement strategies, the organizational mechanisms that enable or constrain such engagement, and the broader policy environments in which they operate. These dimensions build a normative model of analysis and serve as analytical categories for our study. Table 1 presents the analytical dimensions of the civic university and how these were operationalized in our research.

The civic university concept challenges the traditional dichotomy between research-oriented and teaching-oriented institutions. Goddard et al. (2016) position the civic university as an alternative to both the entrepreneurial university (Clark, 1998) and the globalized research university model (Marginson & Considine, 2000). Unlike these paradigms, which prioritize economic competitiveness and international prestige, the civic university is characterized by a commitment to place-based engagement and the public good. This framework conceptualizes civic engagement

as an institutionalized role rather than a subsidiary activity, integrating it within teaching, research, and governance.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions of the civic university framework (Goddard et al., 2016) and operationalization in the study

Dimension (Goddard et al., 2016)	Core meaning in the model	Operationalization in the study
Purpose and societal impact	The civic university articulates not only what it excels at, but also how it benefits society	Examined through stakeholders' perceptions of universities' contributions to local development and regional socio-economic ecosystems
Engagement with local, national, and global communities	Balancing global research ambitions with local and national responsibilities	Analyzed via partnerships with regional and international actors
Institutional holism	Engagement is embedded across disciplines and administrative functions, contrasting with fragmented outreach initiatives	Explored through the integration of civic engagement into curricula, research, staff appointments, and informal initiatives
Sense of place	Universities are anchor institutions that contribute to regional development, urban regeneration, and social cohesion	Investigated through territorial embeddedness and community co-management
Investment in civic engagement	Financial resources, faculty incentives, and governance structures that support engagement	Explored through funding models, project-based initiatives, shared infrastructure, and staff involvement
Accountability and transparency	Civic universities establish measurable performance indicators to assess their impact	Examined via references to evaluation systems and follow-up mechanisms
Innovative engagement methodologies	Interdisciplinary research, social innovation, and community co-production models	Identified in participatory workshops and co-creation practices

In the concept and research of Goddard et al. (2016), the question of how universities embed civic engagement in diverse governance systems is central.

In centralized higher education systems, civic engagement may be shaped by national policy frameworks, whereas in decentralized or market-driven systems, institutional autonomy plays a more significant role in shaping engagement strategies.

The civic university framework provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing the evolving role of universities in society. By integrating dimensions of civic engagement, this model enables a systematic examination of how universities navigate the tension between academic excellence (research and teaching effectiveness) and societal responsibility.

The ESDEUS research (2024) has explored these dimensions and also analyzed how civic engagement (and each university) is evolving in response to digitalization, climate change, a multi-crisis world, and shifting labor market demands. It also raises the question of what the future of higher education, with its civic mission, will be in these contexts.

Method

In order to answer the research questions related to patterns and challenges, higher education external stakeholders were mapped within the national contexts of Poland, Portugal, and Sweden. The three countries were purposefully selected to reflect diverse higher education traditions and governance contexts across Europe. Their inclusion allows for a comparative exploration of how civic engagement is articulated within different institutional and policy environments. Poland represents a post-socialist system that has undergone significant institutional transformation since 1989. Portugal represents a relatively centralized governance model that is nevertheless permeated by strong local and regional dynamics. Sweden exemplifies a decentralized, autonomy-oriented system in which civic engagement is closely linked to sustainability discourses.

The purpose was to identify local actors within regional knowledge ecosystems. Civic groups, NGOs, social movements, local activist groups, academic and non-academic institutions, galleries, botanic gardens, local governments, and cultural organizations were considered. These stakeholders were selected based on two criteria: (i) they were either civil society organizations, understood as entities made up of groups or associations of citizens who organize themselves around common objectives aimed at the collective good while remaining independent of the state (Edwards, 2010; Salamon et al., 1999), or public authorities with significant local engagement; and (ii) they reported previous collaborations with the university on

one or more cases. The universities analyzed were not intended to be statistically representative of all HEIs in their respective countries. Rather, they were selected as analytically illustrative cases that enable the problematization of the civic university model under different sociopolitical conditions. In addition, their collaboration with local stakeholders encompassed both research partnerships (e.g., research projects) and teaching-related engagement (e.g., educational programs and internships). This allowed us to examine how civic engagement was manifested in research activities, teaching practices, or integrated forms.

From the Polish context, we selected representatives from five organizations: a public university engaged in projects that promote sustainability; a technical university committed to sustainable development; a hydroponics technology company; an educational and tourist UNESCO network area; and an environmental organization.

In Portugal, we considered eight representatives from different organizations that collaborate with a HEI: a marine conservation NGO; a socio-educational intervention cooperative; a municipal community museum; and five associations with different areas of activity (arts, local development, consumer protection, mental health, and residents).

Six organizations from the Swedish context were included: an NGO described as a network for feminists; an environmental organization; a children's rights organization; a regional theatre; a botanical garden; and a municipal labor market and adult education unit.

Regarding ethical considerations, the study received approval from the Ethics Committee and the Data Protection Office in each partner country, following local regulations and guidelines. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants did not receive any form of incentive. All individuals provided free and informed consent, signing a statement detailing all study-related issues, as well as procedures for anonymity, confidentiality, and the researchers' duties and responsibilities. Acronyms were used to ensure the anonymity of participants when transcribing quotes (e.g., Por_1; Swe_1; Pol_1). Audio recordings were stored securely and were accessible only to the project's authorized researchers. The empirical material was used exclusively for academic purposes, adhering to the principles of ethical conduct in research.

To collect data, we developed an interview script based on a previous literature review. The script was translated into the national language of each partner and

tested with two individuals who were not part of the final group of participants in order to assess aspects such as clarity, appropriateness, and relevance of the questions asked. The script proved to be consistent, and no changes were made. Given the international composition of the research team, particular attention was paid to conceptual and linguistic coordination. This was achieved through regular meetings in which coding procedures and emerging interpretations were discussed. The interview was organized into three main blocks: (i) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the community: history and values of the institutions, organizations, or local authorities, and the SDGs that are included in their projects or initiatives; (ii) collaboration and involvement in the SDGs: degree of community involvement in the actions carried out, as well as collaboration with different partners, including higher education institutions; (iii) Understanding Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in local activities: how ESD was integrated into the projects, what skills and knowledge were expected to be developed, and what educational methodologies were used.

The interviews were recorded, and transcripts were completed through automatic transcription with validation by the researchers.

The data was analyzed using a qualitative approach. Since we were dealing with data collected through interviews that required interpretation, we employed qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). In line with our research questions, we focused the analysis on the following dimensions: (i) cooperation patterns and (ii) challenges in enacting cooperation. Given that the focus of our study was based on the model of the civic university (Goddard et al., 2016) and to support cross-country comparison, the coding categories were informed by the dimensions of the civic university concept: sense of purpose, active engagement, holistic approach, sense of place, willingness to invest, transparency and accountability, and innovative methodologies.

Empirical findings were first analyzed within each national context. Consequently, the study's comparative logic followed what Egetenmeyer (2020) describes as analytical interpretation. Rather than merely presenting national descriptions (descriptive juxtaposition) or listing similarities and differences across national contexts (analytical juxtaposition), the study moved toward interpretative comparison (analytical interpretation) through a cross-case synthesis that identified emergent transnational themes and context-specific variations. This structured approach enabled transparency in how comparative insights were generated.

Findings

In this section, we present our findings based on the analysis of empirical material created in the context of the ESDEUS project. As previously mentioned, the study's analytical framework builds on the model of the civic university as formulated by Goddard et al. (2016). We, therefore, focus on how local actors in the three national contexts describe cooperation with HEIs, using the idea of the university's civic engagement as a point of departure. We also identify challenges that arise in the efforts to build partnerships between HEIs and local actors. The aforementioned interactions and collaborative patterns, as well as the identified challenges, are problematized as emerging within regional knowledge ecosystems. We present each national case separately, adopting a common analytical structure to ensure clarity and comparability. We also synthesize our results to identify emergent transnational themes.

Poland

The political, economic, and cultural contexts and experiences of communities, society, and higher education seem to be important for the emergence and development of regional knowledge ecosystems. The Polish context for knowledge ecosystems has been intensively shaped since 1989. Over the past 35 years, Polish higher education institutions have undergone significant transformations that have affected their relationships with local actors and stakeholders. The key changes in higher education began with the political transformation in 1989, which increased the independence and autonomy of universities and enabled the emergence of the non-public university sector (until 1990, universities were owned exclusively by the state). Consequently, another change was the increase in the number of higher education institutions and students (from 400,000 in 1990 to 2,000,000 in 2010), as well as the introduction of the Bologna Process as a systemic solution for Polish higher education (1999). Poland's accession to the European Union (2004) enabled the integration of Polish universities in both education and research. At the same time, dynamic changes in the labor market forced Polish universities to adapt to the new realities. The need to increase the quality of education and the competitiveness of universities requires sensitizing higher education to different areas of action and influence. Thus, cooperation with local communities has become a key element in strengthening the university's competitive potential and an important part of the university's development strategy. Establishing contacts with stakeholders and communities enables better

alignment of educational offerings with the needs of students, the labor market, and regional development.

Patterns of cooperation in Poland

How do Polish universities cooperate with the local socio-economic environment? The most common forms of cooperation include consultation of curricula with representatives of the socio-economic environment, collaboration with local companies in organizing internships and apprenticeships for students, implementation of joint research and development projects, co-organization of academic events, and inclusion of practitioners in university teaching.

However, these solutions generate indirect social involvement of universities and respond to the demand for integrating the socio-economic environment into university spaces (as postulated, for example, in the entrepreneurial university model), rather than direct involvement in local needs and problems, their solutions, and the animation of civic attitudes (as in the civic model). These are only basic forms of cooperation, some even enshrined in legal documents. However, they do not constitute forms of university involvement in local community affairs.

Partnership, rather than mere cooperation, is promoted by the concept of an engaged, civic university according to Goddard et al. (2016) and requires active participation of universities in solving socio-economic problems of the region (substantively, financially, and organizationally). Universities are expected to co-create knowledge with local communities, engaging in projects of a social and economic nature. One tool that universities can provide is the activation and engagement of social research methodologies (e.g., research in action), which involve collaborative problem-solving and have the emancipatory and transformative potential for local actors, researchers, and communities.

Respondents from the Polish context acknowledge and emphasize that the university serves as a center for educational and cultural initiatives that go beyond classical academic education. What emerges from the interviews is a picture of an institution treated as a “magnet” that attracts diverse social groups to act together. The university is not only a provider of knowledge, but also an animator of networks, thanks to which local organizations and residents can take advantage of the university’s research resources and infrastructure. This perception of the university by respondents is in line with the theory of “social capital” (Putnam, 2000), where the university acts as a node of social networks, fostering information exchange and

cooperation among local actors. Its openness to different groups—from children to seniors to NGOs—strengthens social cohesion and a sense of belonging.

Cooperation with a university brings many benefits. The interviewees suggested (i) intergenerational education: “... we participate in the Children’s University program—we also have a Third Age University, where seniors can conduct workshops [...]” (Pol_2); or (ii) building spaces for open community laboratories: “... students from the Institute of Ecology conduct field research in the Landscape Park—we, in turn, provide space for measurement stations” (Pol_8); or (iii) as an opportunity to build a coordination platform for local projects: “... we have periodic meetings with the circle of geologists—the university holds seminars open to local residents [...]” (Pol_7).

The “best”, “most effective” community-university partnerships must be based on clear principles, common goals, and shared responsibilities, say some interviewees. A key role is played by projects—long-term programs that enable continuity of activities and sustainability of results. Also important is the way they are financed, and above all their flexibility, which allows the project to adapt to changing local needs. Thus, for example, well-known EU strategic programs are indicated in the interviews: “Within the framework of Erasmus+ we work with universities from nine countries—common goals clearly define roles and funding” (Pol_4). In addition, “sharing” resources between the university and the community is also a guarantee of successful partnerships and collaborations, such as projects based on shared research infrastructure: “... The urban farm—the university’s greenhouse and research station serve us all, and students learn from real data” (Pol_6); or emerging open-to-citizen learning platforms and engaging field workshops for all: “Regular outdoor workshops with the Institute of Biology engage residents—it makes people feel like co-creators of research” (Pol_8). When the university treats local organizations as equal co-implementers, innovative solutions emerge that are better adapted to social realities emphasized by the interviewees and are strengthened primarily by symmetry between partners—both in terms of resources and involvement (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012).

In the narratives of respondents, two main forms of social engagement of HEIs emerged: responding to local crises and building long-term educational and cultural relationships. The first category relates to emergency crisis response (e.g., providing support to migrants or joining relief efforts): “After the migrant crisis erupted, we opened a support program for foreign scientists, creating lab space for them and training them in new research techniques” (Pol_2).

The second category is related to educational initiatives that involve the continuation and development of ties with different groups of residents through open/public education: “We have been running the Summer University for several years—it’s a series of lectures and workshops in the urban space, available for free to everyone” (Pol_7). It also involves citizens in decision-making and creative processes regarding local and research projects: “Environmental engineering students conduct workshops where residents co-design green infrastructure systems in the city” (Pol_6). This form of partnership between the university and the community can be called “participatory laboratories”.

According to the concept of Goddard et al. (2016), a university should integrate three dimensions (intellectual engagement, practical application of knowledge, and partnership with the community). In this research, the participants describe that the most visible transition of a university in the region is from the “expert locked in an ivory tower” model to the “open laboratory” model, in which the university works together with local stakeholders.

Challenges and prospects for partnership in the Polish context

Despite numerous initiatives, the university’s partnerships and cooperation with local stakeholders face various challenges. At the university level, the main barrier is the lack of a comprehensive management system for cooperation with the surrounding environment, which hinders the effective use of the potential of partnerships. The university’s cooperation strategy must take into account the needs of local communities, their cultural and economic characteristics, resources, and labor market changes. In the Polish case, it will also be important to increase the university’s involvement in applied research projects, which enhance the university’s “attractiveness” in the community due to the post-research solutions introduced to foster local development. Other challenges in partnerships identified by the interviewees include budget constraints, legal complexities, a lack of trust between partners, academic language, and differences in goals and expectations.

Interestingly, the type of higher education institution (polytechnic, university, vocational college, natural, or medical university) and the university’s dominant fields of study significantly affect the type of university-community partnerships formed. However, each type of university is most likely to establish partnerships with local authorities and representatives of the economic sphere. This finding

should sensitize partnerships (university and community) to areas that are excluded, absent, and overlooked by the academic and/or community sides in cooperation.

Portugal

The Portuguese context combines a relatively centralized public governance architecture with intense local dynamics, in which community actors play an active role in the design and implementation of territorial policies and projects. HEIs engage with municipalities, non-governmental organizations, and local associations primarily through participatory initiatives—community diagnoses, applied research, technology transfer, and training focused on concrete problems. In this process, universities act as mediators and anchors of regional development, mobilizing human and scientific capital to co-produce knowledge, facilitate deliberative processes, and promote ESD practices rooted in the specificities of the territory.

Patterns of cooperation in Portugal

The Portuguese HEI analyzed understands its teaching and research competencies in a clear way. Its commitment to social transformation and the common good was also evident in the data, through the university's involvement in projects with a strong territorial, environmental, and community impact. Noteworthy in this context is its contribution to applied research and technical support adapted to local realities, as well as its integration into national and international cooperation networks with the capacity to influence public policies. These practices take the form of partnerships with various civil society organizations, demonstrating a collaborative and territorially rooted approach. For example, the collaboration with an NGO dedicated to ocean conservation exemplifies the university's commitment to participatory science and the co-construction of sustainable environmental policies based on community processes: "Regarding who should educate about sustainable development, I think it's all in the power of communication. People who can truly bring this sensitivity to others... I think that in this kind of matter, it must be someone who truly believes in it" (Por_1). This partnership was the basis for the creation of a community-initiated marine protected area, which represents a paradigm shift in marine conservation, in which the university acts not only as a producer of knowledge, but as a facilitator of democratic and sustainable processes in conjunction with civil society.

This commitment to collaborative, territorially grounded action is further illustrated by the university's involvement in a structured sustainable community proj-

ect developed with the residents' association of a nearby island. In this initiative, the university moved beyond a purely technical or scientific role and became an active co-developer of local solutions, sharing responsibility for the design and implementation of actions. This model reflects an understanding of citizen participation as an essential dimension of its civic mission, positioning the institution as a partner rather than an external expert. Similar patterns of cooperation emerge in other projects with territorial and environmental relevance, such as initiatives addressing ocean plastics or supporting short agri-food circuits. Across these collaborations, the university consistently emphasizes the value of the local territory as a strategic space for intervention. This territorial anchoring enables it to act in a context-sensitive manner, aligning its expertise with the specific social, environmental, and economic challenges of the region and working in close coordination with civil society organizations.

The university's active engagement is evidenced through formal collaboration protocols, but also through relationships built on trust, stability, and mutual interest. In some cases, such as that of the local development association, collaboration is described as old and continuous, with connections that have been consistently maintained, revealing a pattern of institutionalized and long-lasting cooperation. Other partnerships, such as the one described by the consumer protection association, are centered on common projects with research centers and also have characteristics of continuity, reinforcing the university's role as an agent for producing applied knowledge committed to social needs.

Particularly relevant is the reference to the relationship with an NGO as a "symbiosis", a term that points to horizontal cooperation and mutual appreciation, in which the different roles are recognized but complementary. This view is reinforced by the description of the partnership with the local development association as being bidirectional and balanced, in which both parties contribute to each other's objectives, working on co-constructed projects based on principles of co-authorship and co-responsibility. An example of this collaborative approach was the community diagnosis carried out as part of a sustainable community project, in which the university was a partner of the local residents' association. The main aim of this diagnosis was to encourage the island community to reflect on their needs and identify ways of meeting them through the development of collective projects. The process shows a dynamic of active collaboration between researchers and community members, with emphasis on the use of participatory methodologies, such as workshops, fostering involvement, and joint learning.

The analysis of the interviews also showed that the university's civic engagement follows a relational and integrated approach that spans different academic actors and is not limited to formal structures. Much of this engagement arises through informal, decentralized interactions generated by personal contacts, invitations, and ongoing collaborations with community organizations. Participants highlighted examples such as students joining classes or seminars hosted by partners and cultural initiatives like theatre projects co-created with a local cooperative and performed in public spaces. These artistic collaborations demonstrate how creative expression becomes a means for social dialogue, community reflection, and the dissemination of themes related to sustainability and citizenship. Emerging from shared commitments and personal relationships rather than institutional mandates, these initiatives reflect an academic culture that values diverse and creative forms of social involvement.

Students' voluntary participation in environmental initiatives organized by local associations reinforces this relational and community-embedded approach. These engagements reveal an informal and supportive dimension of cooperation, driven by individual initiative and a shared commitment to collective well-being. Such spontaneous involvement also connects with more structured experiences, such as internships in organizations whose missions align with students' academic fields, creating reciprocal benefits and strengthening ties with local partners. Together, these formal and informal practices show how civic engagement permeates teaching, research, and everyday academic life, allowing the university's civic mission to be enacted across the academic community and linking it to the more structured, territory-based collaborations described below.

The university's deep understanding of the role of the territory as an educational, cultural, and social space seems clear to the interviewees. The university works as an anchor for local development, promoting practices that recognize and value the specific context in which it operates, namely through ESD and community action rooted in place. The co-management of initiatives with the community is presented as a central strategy, enabling a genuine sharing of responsibilities and recognizing participants as active subjects in social transformation, rather than mere beneficiaries: "I think that for people to really change and transform, they must realize what it means for their lives. And they must realize it, and they must be involved in these processes, really involved. And when I say really involved, it's not just being consulted, it's being co-managed with these communities. If there's no co-management, it's just the consumption of receiving" (Por_5). This approach fosters a culture of

collaborative and democratic learning in which people learn by acting and deciding together. The importance attached to genuine participation, as opposed to symbolic participation, reinforces the commitment to inclusive processes in which citizens have an active voice and influence on decisions.

The interviews show that researchers support these reflective processes by mobilizing scientific knowledge in a dialogical and collaborative manner, co-constructing it with participants rather than applying it unilaterally. One of the initiatives described illustrates this staged educational dynamic within an environmental sustainability project: the process began with a collective diagnosis, progressed through concrete and visible actions, and eventually led to practical changes in local practices. Such examples of action-oriented and transformative education—rooted in the needs and knowledge of the community—appear repeatedly across the narratives. In this sense, the university understands the territory not merely as the setting for its activities, but as a shared space of learning, creation, and transformation, fostering forms of engagement that are simultaneously educational, cultural, and social.

Academic knowledge is valued by organizations as an essential contribution, especially in its technical-scientific dimension, but also for its ability to translate and adjust knowledge for wider audiences as a way of raising awareness and promoting environmental education: “People are disbelieving at a political level; with political work [...] there is discontent and discrediting here. So, if I don’t believe in it, I don’t take part because I don’t believe in what the person is doing. I think it has to do with this: that people feel the problem is theirs and want to participate in the solution” (Por_12). The university’s active presence in processes of co-production of knowledge, scientific transfer, mediation between actors, and community awareness indicates an institutional commitment to the social valorization of knowledge and its practical application for the benefit of communities.

The analysis reveals that the university provides, above all, human and scientific capital, putting its knowledge at the service of the needs of the territory, which shows an active stance and commitment to local development and the promotion of sustainable solutions in partnership with social actors.

Challenges and prospects for partnership in the Portuguese context

Although the interviews highlight a dense and dynamic network of collaborations, they also reveal challenges that constrain the sustainability and development

of these partnerships. Some organizations note that relationships that had previously been frequent and productive have become more sporadic over time. Rather than signaling a breakdown, these accounts point to fluctuations in engagement, often linked to changing project cycles, staff turnover, or shifting institutional priorities. For partners, these interruptions are experienced as a loss, underscoring the value attributed to the collaboration and the need for institutional strategies that support greater continuity through transparent communication, active listening, and long-term commitments.

Difficulties in initiating new collaborations were also mentioned. One organization explained that its initial contact with the university occurred within a project framework, but that no further developments followed. Although the organization recognizes the potential complementarity in terms of expertise and infrastructure, the absence of follow-up is perceived as a missed opportunity.

Such accounts do not contradict the existence of strong partnerships; rather, they highlight the unevenness and selective nature of civic engagement practices. They also emphasize the need to strengthen mediation structures, foster trust-building mechanisms, and create conditions that facilitate the emergence of new partnerships. Developing accessible and innovative methodologies to welcome new actors could significantly enhance and revitalize the university's civic action.

No explicit mentions of transparency and accountability practices were found in the interviews conducted. This absence suggests that existing practices in these areas may not be sufficiently visible to partner organizations. Enhancing how the university communicates and shares the outcomes of its civic initiatives would help ensure that these contributions are more clearly recognized, thereby strengthening trust and reinforcing the institution's role as a civic actor committed to the common good.

Additionally, the interviewees did not identify specific methodological approaches for co-creating knowledge or developing solutions collaboratively with community actors. While many initiatives included collaborative practices, participants did not describe these as part of a formalized or explicitly defined methodology within the university. This lack of clarity limits how these practices are understood and appropriated by partners, making it difficult for them to identify the underlying principles guiding collaboration. Consequently, the potential of the civic university model grounded in co-production becomes less visible. Strengthening the articulation, systematization, and communication of participatory methodologies would,

therefore, help consolidate partnerships and expand the transformative impact of the university's engagement in the community.

Sweden

The Swedish context presents its own unique features regarding the role of HEIs in the emergence of regional knowledge ecosystems. Although supported by state funding, the institutional autonomy of Swedish universities remains relatively high. With regard to the so-called "third mission", it can be argued that universities' societal engagement is permeated by the idea of higher education as a public good that contributes to regional development and enhanced democratic participation. Interestingly, Swedish universities' civic engagement has increasingly been related to the idea of sustainable development and investment in ESD. Therefore, HEIs often act as mediating institutions between policy demands for the implementation of ESD, local societal needs, and community initiatives. This shift in focus, facilitated by a decentralized model of public governance, encourages collaborations between universities and local actors, such as municipalities and civil society, and assigns them a significant role. Such processes create both opportunities and challenges for the emergence of cooperative patterns and innovative practices in regional knowledge ecosystems.

Patterns of cooperation in Sweden

Analysis of data from Sweden has resulted in the identification of different forms of universities' civic engagement with local actors. To begin with, many initiatives revolve around the establishment of frameworks to promote social, economic, and environmental sustainability through educational activities. In these settings, non-academic actors and universities cooperate in joint efforts to promote ESD. For example, a representative from an NGO, described as a network for feminists, mentions their collaboration with researchers from the local university "to produce educational material on water resources" (Swe_1). Another representative from a children's rights organization also highlights the importance of the university in helping them develop their own research projects and documentation strategies.

Such collaborations related to the promotion of ESD may transcend the institutional boundaries of the involved actors and may require the formulation of special employment arrangements. A principal from a municipal adult education provider describes: "We currently have a scientific leader for the education

administration who is employed by the municipality and also has her employment at the local university, which she shares her employment with. And that is a lot to connect the academy with the municipality. So, that is one way that we work with the university” (Swe_9). Another example is the collaboration of a Swedish botanical garden with the local university to establish connections with specific HE courses. The botanical garden also works together with a research center on biodiversity, involving researchers from various disciplines. Thus, the university’s civic engagement becomes an active component in the creation of educational frameworks by leveraging academic expertise and promoting ESD outside its institutional boundaries.

Another form of civic engagement in the Swedish context is related to cultural activities and sustainability initiatives at the local level. In this case, we found that the role of the university is to support organizations in their efforts to raise awareness and reduce inequalities. Bridging societal gaps through art, particularly in areas with lower education levels and higher unemployment rates compared to the national average, is outlined as a central activity by a regional theater producer: “The greatest potential of the theater to noticeably influence a larger transition is to use the platform that our activities constitute toward our surroundings. To raise questions, ideas, future visions, and good examples that we believe lead to sustainability for the climate and the environment...but if we think in a broader perspective, it is not where we as a theater make our biggest mark for sustainability, but it is through the fact that many people care about what we do.” (Swe_8). Here, emphasis is placed on the importance of collaboration with the local university to develop regional projects and promote sustainability more effectively.

Finally, the university supports and provides advocacy for the civic work of organizations interwoven in regional, national, and international networks of cooperation. For example, the children’s rights organization works toward child participation in sustainability education and collaborates with researchers from Swedish universities to enhance evidence-based advocacy. This example highlights an interesting feature of Swedish civic engagement (i.e., the blending of local and global commitments). Partnerships of this kind often link grassroots action with international initiatives, allowing Swedish universities and local actors to participate in broader European and global sustainability efforts. The civic role of the university thus extends from its local territory to an international public sphere through the activities of local actors.

In sum, our analysis of data from the Swedish context resulted in the identification of three broad collaboration patterns between universities and local actors: educational partnerships, cultural and community engagement, and advocacy-oriented cooperation. Across these patterns, collaboration is characterized by reciprocity as well as shared societal and educational initiatives. Unlike in more centralized systems, Swedish universities act as anchors within regional civic knowledge ecosystems, linking different organizations around shared educational, societal, and sustainability goals. Their civic engagement is less hierarchical and more relational, stemming from dialogue and commonly formulated projects. Thus, the university's anchoring practice emerges through both formal collaborations, such as research partnerships and shared staff appointments, and informal, trust-based networks. This reflects the fluidity of institutional boundaries, enhancing the idea of universities as mediating actors rather than isolated institutions. The result is horizontally integrated knowledge ecosystems where the civic university is not a single entity but a collaborative field of practice.

Challenges and prospects for partnership in the Swedish context

The aforementioned patterns of collaboration and civic engagement at Swedish universities are often challenged by structural, systemic, or political ambiguities and contradictions. For example, many initiatives mentioned by our interviewees depend on short-term project funding: "We are an organization that depends on funds from others... it's not so easy" (Swe_2). This project-based logic enhances the agility of initiatives but causes uncertainty and affects long-term planning and partnership. Several interviewees also raise the issue of universities' lack of systematic work with civic engagement. A representative of an NGO, for example, mentions the local university's shift of focus in its willingness to cooperate and establish partnerships: "When I was active at the university [...] I got the support of (being able to use the university) locations. We could have access to the university buildings, etc. to organize things. But they (the university) were extremely passive in their support [...] The system right now gives money to universities to teach, not to make research [...] And that leaves nothing, nothing left for involvement in society. So, the whole system is extremely perverse in that sense" (Swe_1). The university's funding framework, in this case, seems to restrict opportunities for civic engagement due to a political and economic focus on its teaching mission, reflecting a broader tension between academic performance and societal projection.

Another tension emerges when collaborating actors apply different interpretations of concepts in their common undertakings. For instance, the representative of the regional theatre argues that their partners often prioritize economic growth over ecological or social sustainability: “A sustainability like in the business world, an economic sustainability you could say. And like a different kind of circular thinking about money rather than ecological sustainability [...] so there was a deletion of the focus area of sustainability replaced with growth, which I think is quite interesting” (Swe_8). The university’s civic engagement, therefore, often unfolds at a nexus of conflicting labor-market, integration, or education policies enacted by collaborating actors, and the resulting tensions illustrate the complexity of Swedish universities’ civic engagement.

Finally, many interviewees raise the lack of systematic evaluation mechanisms as a challenge in the civic engagement of the university: “We don’t have any good follow-up systems for that” (Swe_3). Despite numerous local initiatives, there are few frameworks for measuring or communicating outcomes, leading to under-recognition of universities’ civic contributions.

Emergent transnational themes

When analyzing the patterns of cooperation, as well as the challenges identified in the three national contexts, we identify emergent transnational themes which, nevertheless, also suggest distinct socio-political contexts and local particularities shaped by the regional knowledge ecosystems.

First, in all national contexts, universities are described as local anchor institutions contributing to regional knowledge ecosystems. The identified practices present somewhat different features: cultural and educational in Poland; territorial and developmental in Portugal; relational and sustainability-driven in Sweden. Nevertheless, the expectation for the university in all contexts is that of an active and responsive societal partner, present in different expressions of civic engagement. The university’s role in co-producing knowledge with communities is raised as an essential part of this process—fieldwork, open labs, participatory workshops, and co-constructed community projects are examples of universities’ civic engagement in the three countries that need to be long-term and sustained.

The identified challenges, on the other hand, are indicative of fragmented institutional structures. Respondents from all three national contexts raise the issue of inconsistent practices related to the civic engagement of the university (e.g., lack

of coordination strategies in Poland, limited systematization and visibility of civic engagement practices in Portugal, and insufficient follow-up mechanisms in Sweden). These issues are further exacerbated by constrained resources and funding, often in the form of short-term and project-based models. Furthermore, different expectations between cooperating actors, contradictory interpretations of complex concepts (e.g., sustainability), and divergent goals are deemed as main challenges in universities' civic engagement. To synthesize the comparative findings and illustrate how the empirical results relate to the civic engagement roles identified in the study, Table 2 provides an overview of the main cooperation patterns, challenges, and characteristics of the knowledge ecosystems in each country.

Table 2. Overview of the study's main findings in a comparative perspective

Country	Dominant civic engagement role	Main cooperation patterns	Key challenges	Features of knowledge ecosystem
Poland	Magnet institution	Educational and cultural initiatives; applied research projects; crisis response; open laboratories	Lack of comprehensive management systems; budget constraints; legal complexities	Transition-oriented knowledge ecosystem, shaped by post-1989 transformation and EU integration
Portugal	Territorially engaged university	Co-managed sustainability projects; participatory community diagnoses; applied research; long-term partnerships	Fluctuating engagement; challenges in establishing new collaborations; low visibility of accountability practices; limited systematization of participatory methodologies	Territory-rooted knowledge ecosystem, combining centralized governance with strong local dynamics
Sweden	Mediating and relational actor	Educational partnerships; cultural and community engagement; advocacy-oriented cooperation	Project-based funding; lack of systematic work with civic engagement; policy contradictions; lack of systematic evaluation mechanisms	Decentralized knowledge ecosystem, linking local action to national and global sustainability agendas

Taken together, the three national cases demonstrate that universities' civic engagement is both locally grounded and influenced by broader societal, economic,

and political conditions. While collaboration patterns reveal strong regional dynamics, the challenges underscore structural and institutional tensions that are common across different contexts. These emerging transnational themes lay the groundwork for the final discussion on how the civic university model can be understood, adapted, and reexamined within diverse European settings.

Revisiting the civic university

This study examined the civic engagement of universities in the regional knowledge ecosystems of Poland, Portugal, and Sweden by problematizing the patterns of collaboration between HEIs and local actors, as well as the unfolding challenges in their enactment. Our analysis was guided by the idea of the civic university (Goddard et al., 2016), which addresses the university's third mission as an integral component of all its activities.

Based on qualitative data from interviews with local actors, we have argued that, across the three contexts, there are a plethora of ways in which universities demonstrate their commitment to civic engagement. More specifically, in the Polish case, the civic university acts as a “magnet” institution, engaging different societal groups in common activities of cultural, educational, and environmental character. The Portuguese case illustrates the image of a territorially engaged civic university, active in the co-creation of projects with civil society and other local actors under shared responsibility. Finally, the case of Sweden highlights the mediating and relational role of universities in linking different organizations around shared educational, societal, and sustainability goals. Very importantly, the identified patterns of collaboration often depend on project-based funding and are enacted within loose policy landscapes. In some cases, civic engagement is closely integrated into teaching activities (e.g., internships and participatory workshops), while in others it is primarily driven by applied research collaborations. However, these domains are not equally supported by existing funding frameworks. Particularly in Sweden, the analysis points to a relative prioritization of teaching outputs over broader civic involvement. In Poland and Portugal, project-based research funding structures generate engagement opportunities but undermine continuity. As a result, fragmented institutional practices and organizational routines frequently emerge, relying on informal networks rather than systematic strategies. These patterns also reflect broader differences in national higher education systems, including governance traditions, funding models, and policy expectations regarding the societal role of universities.

Our main conclusion is that the identified variations between the three national cases show how the idea of the civic university from Goddard et al. (2016) is selectively enacted across contexts and is based on dimensions such as universities' active engagement, their sense of purpose and place, and their contested investments in civic engagement. At the same time, our analysis suggests that the model's normative coherence may overstate institutional integration. In practice, civic engagement often appears fragmented, informal, and unevenly distributed across organizational units. It is also shaped by external governance structures, historical legacies, and funding mechanisms rather than strategic institutional choices alone. Adding to the normative model of the civic university, our findings show that universities' civic engagement is best understood as a relational and context-dependent practice rather than merely an organizational objective or policy requirement. At the same time, our analysis highlights the need for a more integrated approach to universities' civic engagement. Facilitating the formulation of policy landscapes that promote social engagement, securing stable and sustainable funding frameworks, promoting methodological innovation, and increasing the visibility of civic contributions may enhance the idea that universities constitute an indispensable component of regional knowledge ecosystems, promoting social cohesion and supporting the co-creation of knowledge. Revisiting the civic university, therefore, entails moving beyond normative models toward empirically grounded and context-sensitive understandings of how universities (struggle to) act as civic institutions.

While this study provides comparative insights into how universities' civic engagement is enacted within the regional knowledge ecosystems of Poland, Portugal, and Sweden, several limitations should be acknowledged. Our research questions focused on cooperation patterns and emerging challenges. However, this analytical emphasis on observable practices may have obscured structural power asymmetries and institutional hierarchies. Our analysis is based on a limited number of interviews with local actors, which, although rich in depth, cannot fully capture the diversity of partnerships and practices in each national context. Additionally, the study reflects interviewees' perceptions at a specific moment in time. Given the strong influence of shifting policy landscapes and project-based funding models, patterns of cooperation may change rapidly. Furthermore, the focus on external stakeholders means that internal university perspectives, such as those of leadership, academic staff, or students, remain underexplored. Future research could, therefore, broaden the empirical base by incorporating multi-actor perspectives, longitudinal

designs, and comparative analyses beyond Europe. Further investigation into the institutional mechanisms that sustain long-term partnerships, the systematization of participatory methodologies, and the development of evaluation frameworks for civic engagement would also contribute to advancing the understanding of the civic university within regional knowledge ecosystems.

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