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SOCIALLY ENGAGED UNIVERSITIES

There are increasing calls for universities across the globe to be more socially relevant and responsible by addressing the needs of society, both locally and globally. The Erasmus+ funded project Socially Engaged Universities (SEU) is aiming to explore different models of community university partnerships (CUPs) and to share experience and expertise of how European Universities can work with and for their local communities through “Third Mission” activities in addition to their core teaching and research tasks.

This PDF describes five pilot projects delivered by the SEU partners in partnership with their municipality or a local community. Each project has been co-designed and delivered from inception with non-academic partners, to bring about mutual benefit for all parties. The full report can be read [here](#).



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SEU is supported by the EU's ERASMUS + Programme. The views expressed are purely the authors' own and do not reflect the views of the European Commission.

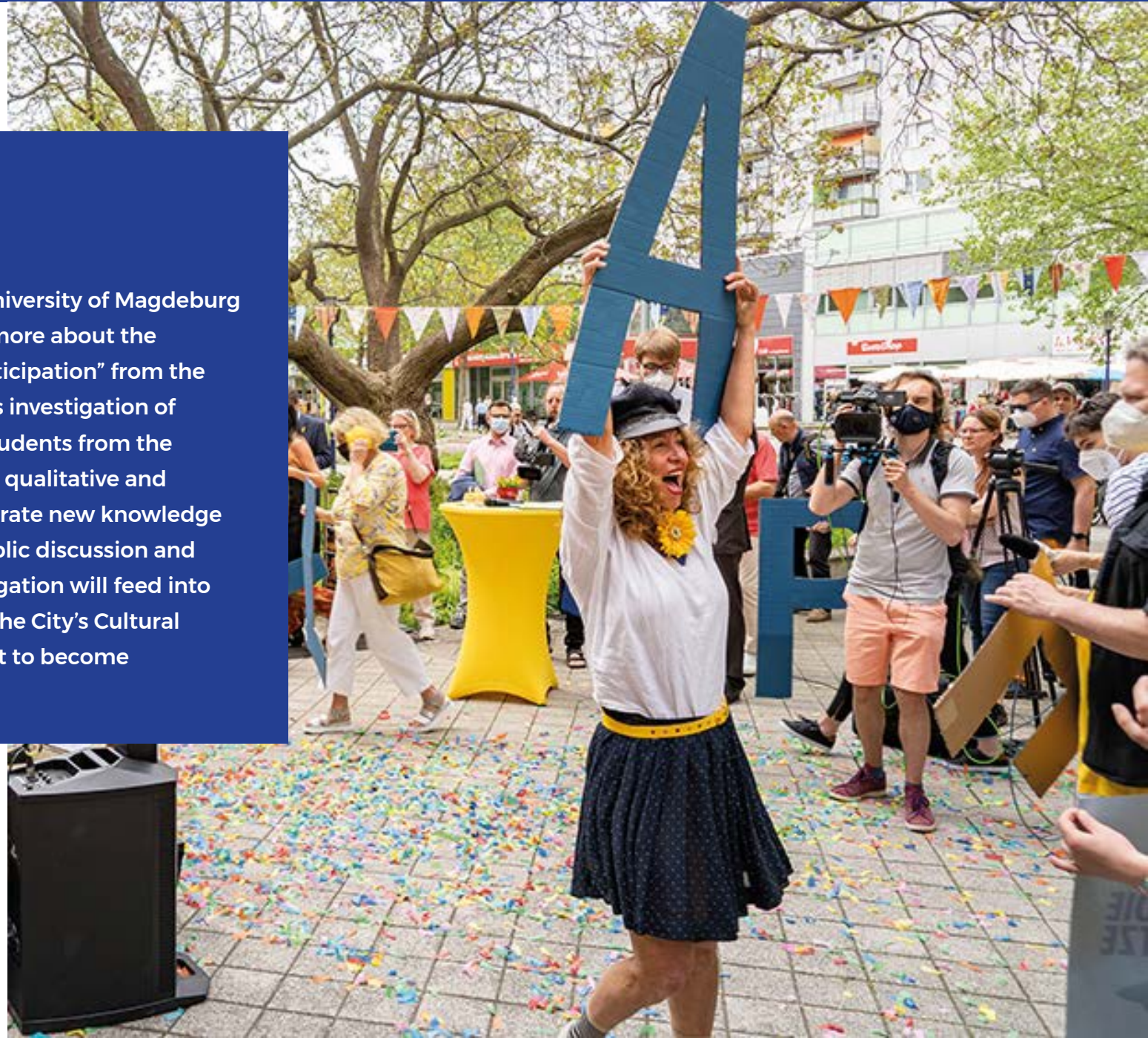


BELGIUM

In Belgium, the neutral position of Ghent University played an important facilitating role in a project which succeeded in initiating a dialogue between the key stakeholders involved in tackling the problems related to youths in the Keizerpark in Ledberg, a sub municipality of Ghent. The project produced an informative brochure which has contributed to a better understanding of the functioning of each partner organization, and a greater understanding and respect for each other's work. The project also led to an improved social connection, and a positive and open attitude between the various partners which bodes well for an improved future collaboration.

GERMANY

In Germany, a collaboration between the University of Magdeburg and the City of Magdeburg aimed to learn more about the phenomenon of “staying away” or “non-participation” from the cultural events and activities in the city. This investigation of Magdeburg’s cultural landscape involved students from the Cultural Engineering course who combined qualitative and quantitative social science research to generate new knowledge which was used as a basis for a series of public discussion and feedback events. The findings of the investigation will feed into the cultural plans of Magdeburg as well as the City’s Cultural Strategy Magdeburg 2030 after the attempt to become European Capital of Culture 2025.





ITALY

In Italy, SEU supported an existing project “Parma: mountain of quality”, a programme which aims to preserve biodiversity and reduce anthropic desertification amongst sixty family-managed farms in the Province of Parma, in the Emilia Romagna Region. The label “Parma: mountains of quality” aims to help communicate the quality of the organic products produced by farmers in this mountain area who aim to be socially and economically sustainable. The collaboration between SEU and Parma: Mountains of quality, aimed to strengthen the cooperation between the University, and the project’s stakeholders and beneficiaries, through building the knowledge base. Students from the University of Parma participated in the field research and completed their internships and theses on this subject.

NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, the SEU project also aimed to add value to an existing project. The Delft City Deal on Education consists of the municipality of Delft, The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS), Delft University of Technology (TUD) and Inholland University of Applied Sciences. The City Deal on Education in the Netherlands, provides innovative ways for cities, research universities and universities of applied sciences to collaborate on an equal basis in finding solutions for major social and urban challenges. In Delft, the position of a knowledge broker was established in the neighborhood of Tanthof, with the aim of creating connections between the community of Tanthof, the universities and the municipality, connecting them around societal issues to create new knowledge and possible (policy) solutions to societal community challenges. The SEU project reflected on the role of the knowledge broker in its first year by interviewing various stakeholders to assess the benefits and challenges that were experienced.



UK

In the UK, a formal collaboration between the University of Exeter and Tidelines, a community project which has been building relationships with local organisations, schools and environmental groups since 2018, aimed to explore creative approaches to community engagement, with a view of creating a Community Environmental Hub focused on the Exmouth and Exe Estuary environment. The purpose of the Community Environmental Hub was to enable and encourage dialogue about how the estuary works, how changes are affecting biodiversity along the estuary. The SEU Tidelines collaboration has built relationships with communities along the Exe Estuary as well as within the University of Exeter, and is facilitating students and researchers to support the communities to respond to the challenges they face.



CONCLUSIONS

In a year plagued by a global pandemic, COVID-19 impacted all of the SEU collaborations and meant that most interactions between stakeholders were conducted via online platforms such as zoom. Without doubt, COVID-19 impacted the progress of all projects, and the lack of in-person meetings hindered the development and richness of the relationships between the various actors. Difficulties in planning and scheduling also mired the ability of some projects to achieve their objectives. Nonetheless, huge steps were gained in strengthening relationships, and improving trust which have helped the project partners identify opportunities for future working better together.

A common challenge amongst the projects was a disconnection or lack of trust between the universities and their partner organisations. In some cases, an intermediary or brokerage role was seen as key to building these relationships and helping partners to build the confidence and trust required for collaboration. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the projects which were most successful in achieving their objectives were those that worked with, and added value to, established projects or relationships.

Benefit for the universities in these pilot projects was largely achieved through the involvement of students and the integration of under- or postgraduate research projects. Most projects have an ambition to continue the relationship with their community, and identifying opportunities for further embedding mutually beneficial student projects into the partnership is seen as a vehicle for some projects to achieve long term impact beyond the SEU funding.



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