

# SHEFCE PEER LEARNING VISIT: UNIVERSITY OF GIRONA (12-13 JULY 2021)

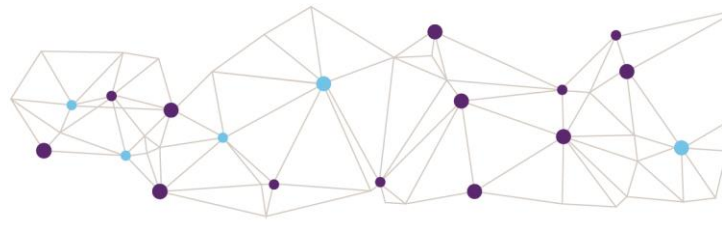
## Peer reflection by visiting team

### *1. Reflection on the institutional and local/national context*

- Based on the report and the discussions during the peer learning, the visiting team concludes that the University of Girona (UDG) is a university that has an institutional mission that is intimately connected to its surrounding region, due to a combination of historical, cultural and geographical factors. This means that engaging with external partners is an integral and 'normal' part of the university's institutional culture – it is virtually a part of the UDG's 'institutional DNA' – and that partners are eager to engage with the university.
- The linguistic, Catalan context of UDG also influences how community engagement is framed in a context-specific way. With no direct equivalent to the term 'community engagement' (with the term 'community' having a narrower meaning), UDG was creative in adapting the term to its local context and identified that the term 'territorial mission' and 'social commitment' were much closer to the meaning intended in the TEFCE project.

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

- UDG's commitment to engaging with external partners in the region is evident in virtually all seven dimensions of community engagement defined in the TEFCE Toolbox, with the report providing a wealth of inspiring good practices.
- Some of the examples of community engagement that most struck the visiting team are highlighted below – noting that these are only for illustrative purposes, rather than as an assessment of being the 'best practices' of UDG.
  - **Teaching & learning; students:** UDG has incorporated community-based learning (service-learning) in many study programmes and has a well-developed system to not only connect students to external communities, but to evaluate the outcomes of such learning (involving assessment by academic staff, students and community partners). UDG also has a separate, large-scale student volunteering scheme. Another inspiring practice in this area is the existence of networks for innovative teaching practice that allow teachers interested in service learning to have a bottom-up peer-support structure in this area. The fact that the participating student representative expressed their strong support for UDG's work in this area was notable.

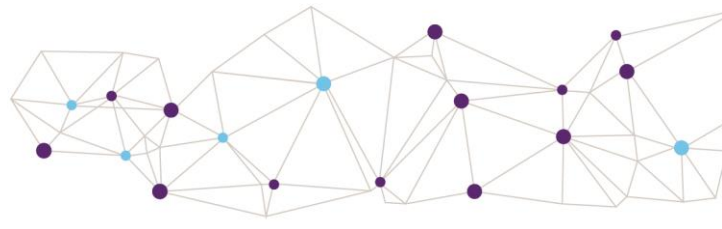


- **Research; Service and Knowledge Exchange:** The university has a proven track record of engaging in research that addresses societal needs with a range of community partners. The experiences in research-action for the co-construction of knowledge between professionals and researchers, for instance, highlights UDG's efforts at promoting co-participative research among its external communities.
- **University management: partnerships and policies:** The fact that UDG has a management staff position dedicated to the Territorial Mission and Social Commitment, and who is highly committed to community engagement, provides a strong institutional framework to support this agenda. The existence of over 40 UDG chairs that systematically link academics and community partners to develop joint initiatives was also seen as both an innovative approach, and another example of the strong institutionalisation of community engagement across UDG's academic departments.
- In short, as accurately assessed in UDG's institutional heatmap levels in the report, UDG is a university that has a high level of authentic community engagement in many dimensions, that engages with a broad range of external partners (ranging from business and local authorities to community groups and citizens) on a range of community issues. At the same time, UDG openly identified challenges and areas for further improvement in the report.

### 3. Reflection on identified challenges and potential opportunities

In addition to the challenges and areas for improvement defined in the UDG report, the peer reflection team would like to add the following points for consideration:

- **Strategic framing:** Although community engagement is clearly internalised by the university and reflected in many existing strategies and structures, could developing a *specific strategy* for community engagement be a way to 'connect the dots' and provide an overarching structure for activities that are for now dispersed and that do not neatly fit into a specific university structure?
- **Structures and resources:** Similarly to the point above, the team takes note that the UDG report itself identifies the lack of a central office or structure with the necessary human resources to coordinate activities related to community engagement, such as being a contact point for community partners, brokering partnerships between academics, students and external partner, outreach and communication activities, etc.
- **Communication / visibility and approachability:** The UDG report and discussions with UDG staff confirmed that although the university is highly engaged and open to the community, there is still insufficient communication and there is still a perception, among some, of the university as an ivory tower, that is bureaucratic and difficult to approach. Since the university already has in place a wide range of community engagement activities, a 'quick win' in this area would be for the university to increase the visibility of its community engagement and of its impact. Examples can include



increased web and social media communication on such initiatives, publishing a thematic report on UDG engagement or creating an award for community engagement.

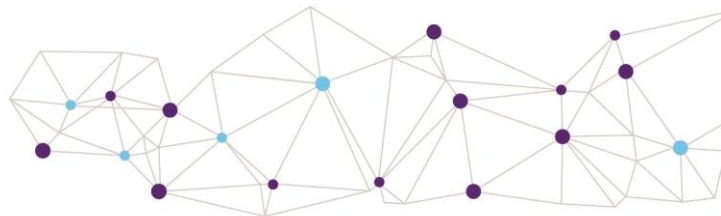
- **Engagement vs excellence; the local vs the global:** External factors that are outside the influence of UDG have a major impact on how UDG can further improve its community engagement. This includes the predominant narrative in international higher education policy revolves around the concept of ‘world-class universities’, with a focus on a concept of ‘excellence’ that is narrowly defined in terms of bibliometrics. This is then reflected in policy, that focuses on such outcomes rather than on e.g. community engagement. Although this is a clear challenge, we believe that the current trends in higher education policies, in particular after COVID-19 and in the contexts of the SDGs, may increasingly support universities’ civic mission, community engagement and contribution to social innovation. UDG could therefore frame its understanding of excellence in such a broader context.

#### *4. Reflection on value of the TEFCE Toolbox*

- The TEFCE Toolbox was implemented independently by UDG, without any mentoring by SHEFCE project partners. The resulting UDG mapping report and SLIPDOT analysis demonstrates that the TEFCE Toolbox can be applied by universities without the need for continual support in the process.
- The feedback of the UDG team indicates that the TEFCE Toolbox process was seen as a positive experience for UDG, with the particular benefits being having a wide, interdisciplinary core team involved, and one that had the full support of the vice-rector. A conclusion was also that the Toolbox benefits from being applied intensively in a short period (3-4 months), rather than over a longer period. A challenge, however, was that the English language was a barrier to some participants.
- The outcome of the TEFCE Toolbox process was also seen as highly positive. Based on the discussions at the peer learning visit, the TEFCE Toolbox has allowed UDG to frame its activities in a new way, using a new framework, and it helped the university to gain a better understanding of the range of ways in which it engages with its external communities. The resulting report was also identified as a valuable result that can further inform the university, strategically.

#### *5. Reflection on value of the peer-learning visit*

- The peer-learning visit, especially its focus group discussions, provided the visiting team with an invaluable insight into how community engagement takes place at UDG. Both the hosting UDG team and the visiting team confirmed the value of the peer-learning visit: they concluded that it provided them with a better understanding of the context-specific ways in which community engagement can take place, and with a better understanding of the process of assessing an institution’s level of community engagement and potential for improvement.

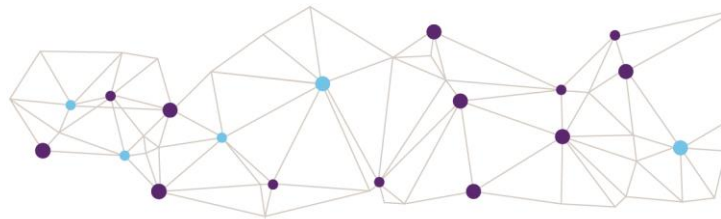


### Members of peer-reflection team

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### Members of UDG hosting team

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