Original scientific paper

THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT (UCE) IN SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABILITY TRANSFORMATION – THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED (HUNGARY)

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to reflect on the role of social justice orientated university community engagement (UCE) (Hazelkorn, 2016a, 2016b) in contributing to social justice and environmental sustainability transformations. We build on the social justice perspective to UCE (Hazelkorn, 2016a, 2016b); the transformative approaches to social justice and sustainability (Hopwood et al., 2005); and UCE models that deal with the transformative potential of UCE partnerships (e.g. Himmelman, 2001) as theoretical frameworks. We apply autoethnography to reconstruct and critically reflect on the transformative potential of a social justice orientated UCE process that we as researcher-activists are a part of. We use the UCE initiatives of the Research Centre of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at the University of Szeged (Hungary) as a case study to reflect on UCE in a Hungarian urban context in the city of Szeged (Hungary).
We analyze how power relations (partnerships) function and change within UCE; how UCE is able (or not) to change existing power relations (empower the marginalized) within a specific urban social context; and how these changes in the social power of the marginalized might (or might not) contribute to transformative changes in relation to social justice and sustainability. We conclude that (1) it is difficult to establish transformative (equal) relations among academics and communities; (2) working with community representatives might lead to unknown, unexpected and contradictory UCE impacts; (3) transformative intentions and characteristics of UCE do not imply that transformative social impacts are actually realized; and (4) transformative relationships (as understood in UCE literature) do not necessarily lead to transformative social changes (as conceptualized in the literature on social justice and sustainability).

Keywords: university community engagement (UCE), social justice, sustainability, partnership, transformation

INTRODUCTION

Numerous trends influence the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in today's societies (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017; Hazelkorn, 2018; Shek et al., 2017; Reisinger & Dános,

2021). Universities are expected to play a role in the solution of global social and environmental challenges. Global, regional and national institutions and actors (including the UN, the EU and OECD) increasingly expect that universities integrate social and environmental aspects into their operation (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017).

At the same time, higher education institutions are increasingly seen as, and expected to act like major contributors to (economic) development (Etzkowitz et al., 2000). This resulted in universities becoming "stakeholder organizations" (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007), responding to the expectations of stakeholders powerful enough to articulate their interest. HEIs have become "corporations", which take part in international competition contrary to their earlier, primarily local/national character (Hazelkorn, 2018; Shek et al., 2017). Education has become a service that is subject to international trade. All of this contributes to the emergence of transnational academic capitalism (Hazelkorn, 2018, 12). According to new public management, public intuitions need to be accountable and are supposed to compete for funding based on their performance. Hence, criteria of efficiency, accountability, and transparency have gained importance also for universities recently (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017), as a part of the accountability agenda (Hazelkorn, 2018).

Therefore, universities face the double challenge (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020) of corporate-type functioning (including the production of own revenues; cost efficiency, competitiveness; meeting labour market needs, etc.) on one hand, and being institutions that provide solutions to local, national and global social and environmental challenges on the other.

The present paper deals with this latter expectation through the concept of university community engagement (UCE). Our research question is the following: How is the social justice perspective on UCE able (or unable) to contribute to social justice and environmental sustainability as conceptualized by transformative sustainability and social justice approaches?

To answer our research question, we build on (1) the social justice perspective on UCE (Hazelkorn, 2016a, 216b); (2) the transformative approach to social justice and sustainability (Hopwood et al., 2005), and (3) UCE models that deal with the transformative potential of UCE partnerships (e.g. Himmelman, 2001) as theoretical frameworks. We apply autoethnography to reconstruct and critically (self-)reflect on the transformative potential of a social justice orientated UCE process that we ourselves as researcher-activists are a part of. Thus, we use the UCE initiatives of the Research Centre of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at the University of Szeged (Hungary) as a case study to reflect on UCE in a Hungarian urban context within the city of Szeged (Hungary).

We analyze (1) how power relations (partnerships) function and change within UCE; (2) how UCE is able (or unable) to change existing power relations (empower the marginalized) within a specific urban social context; and (3) how these changes in the social power of the marginalized might (or might not) contribute to transformative changes in relation to social justice and sustainability.

Our paper is structured as follows. First we introduce the theories that we use as analytical frames. Than we briefly describe the case study before proceeding to empirical research methods, followed by results and discussion. We finish our study with conclusions.

UCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Universities are under the influence of multiple institutional logics. This results in the co-existence of multiple, and often conflicting priorities, identities and approaches (Kraatz & Block 2008). This institutional pluralism serves as a framework condition for university community engagement as well.

The theory and practice of universities' social engagement largely focuses on business and government ties, however, several concepts also embrace relations with civil society actors and the local communities. The third (developmental) mission of universities (e.g. Laredo, 2007), the (regionally) engaged university (Gál & Zsibók, 2011), or universities as "stakeholder organizations" (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007) may embrace various forms of community engagement. However, these (umbrella) terms may denote approaches to UCE, which are very far from the logic of UCE we pursue in this paper.

A growing interest in the engagement with non-business and non-governmental actors is largely the result of the fact that the perceived importance of users, the media or the general public in the innovation processes has increased (e.g. in the quadruple helix model of Carayannis and Campbell, 2009). The concept of "third mission" also has its roots in the increased importance of university research for national (regional) competitiveness, and is strongly intertwined with the concept of "entrepreneurial university" (Laredo, 2007).

In fact, the developmental role (mission) of universities and their engagement with societal actors very often takes the dominant narratives on development (e.g. competitiveness, innovation-based economic growth) as granted and leaves hierarchies and power relations unchanged (more powerful stakeholders' expectations are more likely to be responded to). Therefore, UCE needs be understood together with the institutional logic it is embedded in.

Social transformation and university community engagement

According to one stream of thought, wicked or persistent environmental and social problems (Avelino et al., 2019) demand deep social transformation, as *"mounting problems in the environment and/or society are rooted in fundamental features of society"* (Hopwood et al., 2005, 45). From this perspective, the superficial reform of social institutions is inadequate to meet the extent of the challenge, which is *"located within the very economic and power structures of society"* (Hopwood et al., 2005, 45). Instead, political and social action is needed, with researchers emphasizing grassroots actions outside centres of power.

In a similar way, Fraser (cited by Udvarhelyi, 2013) distinguishes between affirmative and transformative remedies in relation to counteracting social injustices. Affirmative remedies aim to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them – seeking to change the outcomes but leaving processes untouched. Meanwhile, transformative remedies aim to correct inequitable outcomes by restructuring the underlying generative framework – seeking to change outcomes by changing the rules of the game (processes that generate injustices) (Udvarhelyi, 2013). For example, the welfare state can be considered as an affirmative remedy, being a system that distributes resources more evenly but does not change the political and economic structures that produce them. Conversely, initiatives that aim to transform the structures that produce injustices (e.g. social economy, participatory democracy) are transformative remedies. While the concept of affirmative remedies is in line with the reform approach to sustainability, the concept of transformative remedies is in line with the transformative approach to sustainability as conceptualized by Hopwood et al. (2005). We refer to this latter stream of thought as the transformative social justice and sustainability literature/theories/approaches.

Adopting a transformative perspective on social justice and sustainability also influences how we think about university community engagement. UCE is a *"process whereby universities engage with community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial even if each side benefits in a different way"* (Benneworth, 2018, 17). Cooperation is usually carried out within the frame of one of the major missions of universities (education and/or research). It is characterized by co-determination: both academic and non-academic participants are able to influence the cooperative process. Mutuality is thus a definitive characteristic of UCE, implying not only mutual benefits but also mutual respect and cooperative decision-making. Thus, UCE is a value-driven activity that presumes strong democratic commitment.

UCE might involve a diverse range of university activities (Ćulum, 2018), including the organization and functioning of the university (e.g. institutionalizing UCE by providing resources and people/organizational units in charge or helping marginalized, disadvantaged residents to be able to successfully participate in higher education); university facilities; dissemination of scientific results; cooperative educational and research activities; and the community engagement of staff and students.

Hazelkorn (2016a) distinguishes three approaches to UCE. On one side of the theoretical spectrum, we find the **social justice perspective** to UCE. Accordingly, UCE is an activity that aims to fight social exclusion and injustices and support and empower marginalized and excluded social groups.[22] This approach also incorporates global commitments and responsibility, including environmental sustainability initiatives. Here UCE partnerships are organized according to the aforementioned goals and such cooperation becomes a part of (is mainstreamed into) education and research.

On the other end of the theoretical spectrum, we find the **economic development perspective** (Hazelkorn, 2016a). Accordingly, the university is one of the major sources of social and economic growth, with the role of producing knowledge to support national competitiveness and success. The focus is on intellectual property, innovation, technology transfer and marketization, and entrepreneurial activities. This approach to UCE corresponds to the aforementioned conventional views on the third (developmental) mission of universities (e.g. Laredo, 2007), the (regionally) engaged university (Gál & Zsibók, 2011), or universities as "stakeholder organizations" (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007).

Finally, in-between we find the **public good perspective.** This approach considers higher education as a public good (in an economic sense). This is why public financing of higher education is desirable, even though it is increasingly difficult to maintain this public good character in the age of neoliberal globalization (where university research results are commercialized and education obtains a labour market focus). However, such processes make it important for universities to strengthen their public good character through community engagement, including cooperation that supports both economic growth and/or social justice.

Out of these three perspectives on UCE, it is the social justice perspective that directly addresses the need for fundamental social (and environmental) changes, thus this is the one that

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[22] Hazelkorn (2016a) does not provide any operational definition of "marginalization". For present study we use the definition of Tagai (2016), who refers to marginalization as a "socio-spatial process, which is a product of changing societal conditions that weaken linkages between individuals, groups and other parts of society and contributes to the decline of social groups and spaces" (Tagai, 2016, 60). Marginalized groups/residents are groups and people that are subjected to such processes.

is potentially able to meaningfully support the societal goals of social justice and sustainability according to the criteria set by transformative social justice and sustainability approaches (including challenging and changing power structures, political and social action with actors outside centres of power).

The concept of transformation within the UCE literature

Even though it is rather difficult to make any general and decisive judgment on the social impact of the social justice perspective on UCE (Benneworth et al., 2018), numerous authors emphasize the role of empowerment and transformation in relation to impactful UCE.

Himmelman (2001) distinguishes between **collaborative betterment** and **collaborative empowerment**. While the former refers to instrumental cooperation that is (1) controlled by powerful actors (in the context of UCE: university actors) and (2) does not aim to change existing power relations, the latter aims to transform existing power relations and thus to give power to the hands of powerless participants. Himmelmann (2001) emphasizes that establishing cooperation of transformative character is an essential challenge in practice as participants are embedded in their everyday power relations and social positions and these are reproduced within cooperative processes.

Collaborative betterment is usually initiated by a larger institution (financer), it is orientated towards efficiency and follows the "more from less" paradigm. It is a typical expectation that the project become self-maintaining within a relatively short period in a financially efficient manner. This clearly implies the reproduction of dominant efficiency-centred social ideology and the reinforcement of existing power relations, where economic efficiency and financial sustainability have primacy over other aspects, thus the perspective of powerful socio-economic actors has primacy over societal goals. The result of this cost-effectiveness paradigm is that too many goals and tasks are set within projects, therefore community partners undertake too many tasks and become overwhelmed and overtired. Thus, projects remain short-term, small-scale "demonstrational projects" and institutional change at a larger scale is not realized. Control within such cooperation stays with powerful (often financing) actors, while the community's role is service provision. This does not mean that such cooperation cannot be efficient in reaching certain discrete societal goals, but it does not fundamentally challenge existing power relations and inequalities within societies.

Meanwhile, processes of **collaborative empowerment** are usually initiated by the community. Goals are formulated on the basis and in line with community goals, institutional actors are involved as outsider actors, to change existing power relations. Therefore, such

collaborations aim to place power into the hands of community partners (stakeholders) and are characterized by community control. Whereas within collaborative betterment the community is an object of intervention, it is an actor fostering its own goals within collaborative empowerment. Finally, collaborative betterment and collaborative empowerment are not mutually exclusive categories but rather the two endpoints of a spectrum.

In relation to the UCE continuum, Clayton et al. (2010) determine three categories. Besides transactional and transformational relationships [that correspond to collaborative betterment and collaborative empowerment as defined by Himmelman (2001)] they also distinguish exploitative relationships: relationships that are one-sided to such an extent that they exploit either one or more parties. According to Clayton et al. (2010), the quality of relationships is important for participants for two reasons: a transformative relationship has intrinsic value for participants, and it also has an instrumental value as it might lead to better outcomes (outcomes that serve the goals of participants) in the long run. Just like Himmelman (2001), Clayton et al. (2010) emphasize that even though we tend to consider transformative relationships as the preferred form of relationships within a cooperation, transactional relationships might be just as desirable in certain contexts. Continuous expectation towards developing relationships into transformational ones (e.g. expectation of one party to develop and deepen relationships within a given cooperation) might also have a negative impact on relationships in case other partners do not have such needs.

Dorado and Giles (2004) approach university-community partnerships as dynamic relationships that might change over time. Within their model, the initial stage of partnerships is tentative engagement with the main characteristic/feature of partners learning about each other. The next stage is aligned engagement when partners look for common goals. This might turn into committed engagement, characterized by shared goals beyond the initial project. The fact that university-community partnerships evolve over time does not mean that all partnerships would attain the stage of committed engagement. Certain partnerships (relationships) do not acquire any depth as they are either terminated (as partners do not intend to cooperate after a while) or at a certain point, each party becomes satisfied with the depth of the cooperation.

As described above, there are significant similarities between models of university-community partnerships as all models distinguish between (1) more shallow, project-focused (established for and focusing on only a given project) relationships, which do not aim to change but rather strengthen existing societal power relations; and (2) deeper, long-term partnerships that go beyond given/discrete projects and focus on changing societal power relations. This

dichotomy is fundamentally related to the concept of power: whether we accept and maintain existing societal power relations within university-community partnerships or contrariwise, changing these becomes the main focus of UCE as we assume that this serves the goal of social justice and sustainability.

„Community" and „transformation" – under-conceptualized terms within UCE for social justice and sustainability

The models introduced in the previous section might be rather useful in reflecting on the usefulness and direction of UCE initiatives. However, two of the core concepts, "transformation" and "community" are used rather arbitrarily within these models. Below we reflect on a few related dilemmas before using the aforementioned models of UCE continuum to evaluate UCE's "transformative" impact on the "community".

Literature on UCE is often blamed for its homogenizing and abstract concept of "community", while in practice communities are diverse entities characterized by power, interest, value differentials, and conflicts (Dempsey, 2010). The lack of practitioners'/ researchers' reflection on this may lead to UCE reinforcing existing societal power relations instead of challenging and changing them. This critique might be valid both in relation to the (1) academic vs. non-academic relation (within UCE cooperation) and (2) within-community power relations (Málovics et al., 2021a, 2021b). In order to be able to evaluate the impacts of "working with the community", we need to abandon the homogenizing and abstract view on communities and critically reflect on the concept of "participant/involved community" within UCE.

The concept of "transformation" also constitutes a challenge for the theory and practice of UCE. Transformation within the UCE literature is related to the transformation of power relations within the cooperation process itself: the empowerment of marginalized/voiceless partners/participants. However, as we demonstrated in the previous section, the term "transformation" refers to a normative concept in case we approach it from the perspective of social justice and sustainability. It refers to radical change and changing the rules of the game in a way that supports social justice and sustainability. This is not independent of (changing) societal power relations or power relations within UCE cooperation but it cannot be conflated with these. It is reasonable to assume that changing power relations, resulting in the enhanced (political) agency/capabilities of marginalized/voiceless communities are likely to lead to a different (less unjust and unsustainable) social functioning. Hence, transformation understood as changing power relations might also imply transformation understood as changing the rules

of the game for social justice and sustainability. However, there is no guarantee that such a clear-cut causal relation actually exists.

Linking back to the literature on UCE: what happens if transformed power relations do not actually contribute to transformative social changes but have an opposite impact (see e.g. Málovics et al., 2021b)? Should we talk about transformation in such cases or not? Who should define the meaning of concepts such as "transformation" in a democratic, cooperative process? What happens in case participants have diverging views (definitions) on such concepts? These questions need to be addressed and reflected on within each and every meaningful UCE process aimed at empowerment and transformation.

THE CASE

In order to empirically investigate the social impact of UCE, we use the case of our academic group, the Research Centre of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at the University of Szeged (for a detailed description of UCE activities of the group, see Málovics et al., 2022).

UCE activities are conducted in the city of Szeged (Hungary), a regional centre in South-East Hungary with approximately 160,000 residents, home to the University of Szeged. Szeged is a controversial modern urban space (Szirmai, 2014) characterized by the concentration of an educated and qualified middle-class and members of the economic, political, and cultural elite on one hand, and a variety of social problems, social inequalities, poverty, and marginalization on the other. Similarly to the Hungarian context in general, urban policymaking in Szeged has been characterized by a halt in the democratization of planning and serious limits to consensus building (Bajmócy, 2021), so the inclusion of social groups in urban policymaking is not automatic, especially in the case of marginalized groups.

Szeged is heavily shaped by the presence of the University of Szeged (SZTE) (Bajmócy et al., 2020). It is a prestigious institution in Hungary, where study and scientific fields are represented in 12 faculties and the Teacher Training Centre. The SZTE is one of the largest domestic higher education complexes where about 22,000 university students are enrolled. It is a research university active in 700 research areas with 19 doctoral schools and 110 PhD programmes. In an international comparison, SZTE is a mid-range university located in a non-metropolitan area. Mid-range universities are generally expected to have a weaker developmental role than "first-ranked universities" (Gál & Ptaček, 2011; Gál & Zsibók, 2011). However, differences in the ability to contribute to the traditional development agenda may not

have any implications on the ability to contribute to a transformative agenda. The literature does not provide guidance on this.

Within the university, our organizational unit (the initiator of UCE activities that we, the authors explore in the present paper), the Research Centre belongs to the Faculty of Economics and Business administration and employs 6 full-time colleagues – being a small organizational unit within a large university.

UCE activities were launched in 2011 within a **participatory action research** cooperation, which involved marginalized, stigmatized, extremely poor, and segregated Roma residents besides researcher-activists. Participatory action research is a research process that directly aims to support societal change: researchers (being activists at the same time within such processes) work together with local communities in a cooperative and action-orientated process that produces both academically and locally relevant knowledge. Numerous initiatives grew out of this process during the past decade, including: community centres and afternoon schools; supporting networks; facilitation of a slum desegregation process; quality-of-life interventions in local slums; and strengthening the political voices and interest representation capabilities of local Roma political leaders (also involving significant material and non-material support for Roma issues by the municipality) (see Málovics et al., 2021a, 2021b; Méreiné et al., 2021).

Community engagement activities of the Research Centre later extended to **other cooperative and action-orientated research processes**. In 2018, we (in this chapter, "we" refers to members of the Research Centre) started to work together with the local community of deaf and hard-of-hearing youth. Besides theoretical results, actions have also been carried out. University students volunteered in the local school for deaf and hard-of-hearing students within the framework of our service learning course (see below). In collaboration with the school community, we explored the situation of deaf and hard-of-hearing youth and their communities (parents, teachers, etc.). Finally, new cooperative and action-orientated research processes have been launched alongside the approach of citizen science.

Since 2017 **community engagement has also been a part of educational activities**, most of all related to our **service learning** course (see Juhász et al., 2021). Within this course, more than 300 students have already volunteered for more than 10 local non-governmental organizations (NGOs)[23], dealing mostly with vulnerable social groups. Besides, from 2019 on we have also started to implement the **science shop concept** in our educational activities, including our courses on corporate social responsibility and local economic development.

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[23] We use the expressions of non-governmental organization (NGO) and civil society organization (CSO) as synonyms in present paper.

Students here work on research-based projects related to the concerns (research problems, objectives, and questions) raised by local NGOs and social entrepreneurs.

The aforementioned experiences also prompted us to critically reflect on the **inner functioning of the University and the Faculty**. By 2018 we had started to work on equality issues within the university. We produced a document that later served as a basis for the Student Equality Strategy of the Faculty. Later, other steps of institutionalizing equality within the Faculty followed: the Equality Committee of the Faculty was established and equality became a dedicated official task of one of the deputy deans. Initiatives related to equality and diversity took numerous forms: developing principles and protocols for a safe and non-discriminatory learning environment; rethinking the needs of special needs students; accessibility auditing of the Faculty building (in 8 accessibility categories); mental health counselling for students; and changing the internal and external communication of the Faculty in line with the idea of inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

As described in the previous section, we (the authors and other members of the Research Centre as well) are a part of a cooperative process that involves a diverse range of academic and non-academic actors with diverse goals. Our aim is to develop community engagement within our university to support transformative social change for social justice and sustainability while also producing scientific knowledge about these issues. Our non-academic partners seek to enhance their capacity to pursue their own goals (related to social justice and/or sustainability). Our (researchers') dual participant-observer (researcher-activist) role, being present as both researchers and as full participants (facilitators, activists, change agents) is related to two research approaches (methodologies).

First, we follow the principles of **participatory action research** as we aim to contribute to both scientific understanding and social change (see e.g. Málovics et al., 2021a, 2021b; Juhász et al., 2021) within a democratic, cooperative and action-orientated process. Second, our participation is also in line with analytic autoethnography: *"ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena"* (Anderson, 2006, 375).

For the present study, we used analytical autoethnography to produce and analyze data. Thus, we

- acknowledge our complete member-researcher status by making ourselves (our roles) explicitly visible and reflecting on our own impacts on the process;
- have become involved in dialogue with external informants by using our own former scientific publications that address single elements of the UCE process as data sources besides our own autobiographic texts for our analysis; and
- commit ourselves to an analytic agenda: we use our empirical data to gain insight into the broader social phenomena of UCE and social justice and sustainability transformations.

We (the authors) produced autoethnographic texts for the present paper as part of a wider self-reflexive process related to the UCE process that we are involved in. Based on the focus of the theories used within the present study we highlighted the role of:

- goals and impacts of UCE (reform vs. transformation); and
- university-community relationships within UCE (transactional vs. transformative).

Autoethnographic texts were analyzed by one of the authors, through codes created on the basis of theoretical models (literature used for the present study). To secure validity, the other two authors carried out a "reality check" on this analysis, which was followed by common reflection (discussion) of results by all authors. Several colleagues from the Research Centre may be involved in various UCE activities, but the reflection (results and discussion) is based on the autoethnographic texts of the three authors.

RESULTS

Motivation, focus

For us, UCE is related to the **improvement of the situation of marginalized communities**, including both extremely poor, segregated, stigmatized communities and disabled people. More generally, it is related to **supporting social justice**.

During the past years, we have experienced an **enhanced set of expectations towards the university related to social responsibility, inclusion, sustainability, and equality**. These expectations are also manifested in accreditation standards and project requirements. However, we (the members of the Research Centre) started to carry out UCE initiatives before the emergence of this tendency. UCE in our case is thus a bottom-up process based on inner motivation rather than a top-down process based on institutional expectations.

Bottom-up UCE initiatives have been most of all inspired by personal and professional experiences, including e.g. initial experiences in meeting marginalized communities (visiting a segregated Roma neighbourhood); introducing science shop methodologies within university courses; attending events organized by local CSOs; establishing our own NGO; or participating at international conferences dealing with UCE.

"I still remember when I first entered the segregated Roma neighbourhood. I felt that there was no way out. It is impossible to break out from such extremely poor circumstances. This feeling was reinforced when I saw how the most vulnerable families lived… Later on, I felt many times that it has been a meaningful thing that we (researchers) cooperate with this community."

Other important factors that reinforced our commitment to UCE were **actions carried out in cooperation with other academic actors and NGOs**, including e.g. photovoice projects in segregated Roma neighbourhoods; creating and using community spaces; supporting poor and disadvantaged families; establishing a service learning course and experiencing its impacts on local NGOs. These processes have also led to otherwise non-existent scientific observations and results.

"… we are within their life sphere, we also observe them in their own environment, we see them living and functioning there. This is the scientific strength of UCE (and the related participatory action research), this outstandingly high level of validity."

Another fundamental factor that also influences the character of UCE activities is the **commitment of authors (UCE initiators) to the values of democracy, equality and participation**. These serve as the moral motivational basis and background of UCE.

Participation within UCE

Ongoing UCE activities were initially **almost exclusively initiated by academic actors who also provided the frames** for these activities in the form of university courses, research processes or projects. This is not necessarily a problem (disadvantage) as "*participants have no problem with using these projects as frames of cooperation in case the cooperative process is not strictly attached to but rather extends beyond the time frame of projects*".

In case of longer run relationships, sources of initiation have become more diverse: NGOs can also initiate cooperation in a diverse range of issues (from securing infrastructural background to events to research cooperation).

"In my view it has been changing recently and they (non-academic partners) will mobilize the university besides/behind their own initiatives. A prerequisite for this was that the university

has been opened up for them during the past few years, so trust could emerge and bases for cooperation have been fixed."

Goals and types of cooperation are usually finalized by university actors. It is us researchers that usually make the final decisions on the content of UCE, even if such decisions are made on the basis of our diverse and complex interactions with community partners, inspired by their values and needs (as perceived by us). Concerning the goals of UCE, it is also important to acknowledge that

- we (the authors as academic participants) also have our agenda within UCE that we feel important to include;
- a part of the frames (e.g. the structure of university courses or academic expectations to publish) of UCE are also fixed for us academic partners, which on the one hand demands compromises regarding the values of being bottom-up, participatory, and inclusive, but on the other hand it provides resources (be it money or the time and energy of students or staff) to support the cooperation and to realize mutual benefits for participants; and
- whatever the frames that we work with within UCE, initiatives always follow our intentions to support the democratic, autonomous, and equal participation of non-university partners (based on the values of democracy, participation, and social justice).

Opportunities for participation (influencing the UCE process) **are** not only **uneven** in an academic vs. non-academic (CSO/NGO) dimension but **also within non-academic partner communities**: certain community members participate in UCE activities and represent their interests and values in an autonomous manner while others do not. **Power and capabilities are unevenly distributed within communities**. There is obviously not a single initiative where we are able to cooperate with all community members (e.g. all Roma people or all physically disabled people in the city) with the same intensity, therefore, we usually cooperate with NGOs/CSOs that (implicitly or explicitly) appear as community representatives (not a rare situation within UCE in general). However, working with representatives might mask significant inner-community hierarchies and impacts.

"I remember when we carried out our photovoice project in 2011. We analyzed photos with a group of women led by the local usurist. At that point, I was not aware that no one would share their opinion in case it contradicted the usurist. Thus, the usurist became a community representative here and dissenting voices did not find their way to the researcher… Representation is a complex situation that has to be handled with extreme caution in case we are to establish a meaningful participatory process based on equality… After a while, people

started to remark among themselves that it was not how the usurist had said it earlier… But to reach that point, you need a regular, longer term process that also includes actions that support community members so that they also benefit from it. And you also need personal face-to-face meetings with single community members instead of holding exclusively group meetings with within-community power-holders also being present."

Establishing an equal relationship with the most marginalized is probably an impossibility due to the enormous social and power differences that necessarily enter into the relationship.

"There are examples when we are able to establish relatively equal relationships. With representatives it is easier to move to this direction, mutuality works out with them. But if we are honest, with the most marginalized (e.g. the most vulnerable Roma families) it is more difficult as they have nothing to give. This is not at all a problem for me personally, but it necessarily puts a power asymmetry in such relationships and there is nothing to do against it, so we have to admit and accept it."

The **diversity of participation of non-university actors within UCE initiatives is also explained by the diversity of activities and partners' needs**.

There are NGOs that have become involved in UCE activities as partners only recently (for only a few months). Other partners entered into contact with us occasionally, related to initiatives of interest to them. Some partners are only interested in cooperating within service learning – here partners are fully autonomous in making decisions about volunteering opportunities they offer to students.

On the other hand, *"There are actors who stay with us for numerous years and started to connect to us in numerous ways, I suppose that this relationship offers them something that makes them committed."* Members of the "Common Signs" research groups are committed as we (one author and other members of the Research Centre) aim to create a supportive community within the initiative that provides help for members in these challenging times (e.g. the epidemics and the nearby war). Some partners have been with us for the past 5 to 10 years. These are often trusted, friendly relationships, we can count on each other: *"When her car broke down and she called me to look after her students as she would not make it on time… such occasions build trust."* Communication within these relationships is honest to an extent that partners can directly express their heavy critique towards our initiatives from time to time (e.g. the fact that the faculty building gained an official and popular accessibility certification does not make the Faculty more accessible for disabled people at all).

Institutional recognition of UCE

Issues of **environmental sustainability and social justice** have gained significance within the university only in the past few years. In parallel, **our research group has also become more powerful** within the faculty: two of us have become full professors, two members of the Research Centre have defended their PhDs and become associate professors and the Research Centre has also hired a new colleague. Meanwhile, **the topic of equality has become institutionalized within the Faculty,** with our research group taking the lead in the process.

Faculty members outside our research group acknowledge our UCE activities to an even greater extent. The faculty is open to organizing non-conventional (cooperative, participatory) educational and research processes and equality initiatives on-site that question the superiority of conventional academic knowledge and thus challenge existing, taken for granted power relations. Colleagues that share similar values have also started to initiate UCE-like and equality-focused activities. On the other hand, the faculty has to date appointed very few extra resources to support UCE, and there have only been rather minor steps towards the institutionalization of UCE (instead of significant ones such as making UCE a part of staff performance evaluation or establishing a Faculty CE Centre). Thus, UCE has not become a part of the faculty's mission, UCE initiatives are still mostly carried out on a voluntary basis by enthusiastic colleagues.

As our Faculty is only one of the twelve faculties of the **University**, and we are unaware of any impacts that our UCE work has produced beyond the Faculty so far, it is safe to say that we are far from any significant level of institutionalizing UCE at the level of the organization.

The social impact of UCE

Whether UCE has managed to contribute to any transformative changes or not is a complex issue. In terms of **environmental sustainability, UCE does not have a significant impact**. The main reason for that is the lack of green NGOs as partners, as such NGOs are more or less absent in the city, with the exception of one or two nature conservation organizations as potential but not yet reached partners.

Beyond that, a number of **significant changes have been underway**:
- opening up the university to NGOs while the central (state/government) rhetoric is openly anti-civic;
- the fact that we (authors and other colleagues in the Research Centre) have been in continuous cooperation with more than 10 CSOs for over 5 years indicates that *"CSOs*

have been coming for long years now, students as well, and in some cases ex-students who started volunteering for a CSO within the service learning course return as representatives of the given CSO – you can see that this is indeed good for both students and CSOs";

- interest representation capabilities of certain marginalized communities have increased, e.g. *"the segregated Roma neighbourhood has gone through significant changes, people do not ask for support anymore to receive fibre or food, housing rights have been settled, residents have legal electricity network connection and there is a bathroom in the community centre where people can take a bath… representatives have developed in a way that they have managed to solve such problems of the community by now… this makes the daily lives of people a lot easier"*.

However, **many of these changes are contradictory in nature**. The recognition and support of local Roma representatives by the city council limits opportunities for challenging the local political establishment (Málovics et al., 2021b). Even after long years (a decade) of cooperation, problems in the life of marginalized (stigmatized and extremely poor) residents are reproduced from generation to generation, new generations are not able to break out of their oppressed situation (e.g. the poverty trap). The UCE cooperation has still not managed to change local policies (e.g. housing or transportation policies) in a transformative direction (Málovics et al., 2021b; Méreiné et al., 2021). We are unable to estimate the direct community impacts of the service learning course due to a lack of information as it is not us personally but students who are present in the life of marginalized groups, through community representatives (thus we are unaware of power dynamics within these communities and service learning's impact on these). Seemingly promising steps forwards (development) in relation to faculty equality initiatives might result in false satisfaction reinforced by projects and accreditations. Hence, the majority of inner and outside structures are left untouched, even though meaningfully more equal access to educational materials and physical spaces would require fundamental changes in educational activities and also in the area of existing physical infrastructure (faculty building, classrooms, programs, etc.).

The reasons for such difficulties are related to the fact that UCE aims to solve problems (1) that are more or less impossible to address through small-scale bottom-up initiatives, even if participants dedicate considerably more time (their entire life) to these than we do (because of professional and personal reasons/duties); (2) that are difficult to solve even in the case of governmental/state commitment (and dedicated financial resources) to do so; and (3) where major social institutions are dysfunctional in supporting the most vulnerable (e.g. the education

system does not support the extremely poor and stigmatized or the physically/mentally disabled as in a neoliberal, efficiency-orientated economic environment employers are not interested in employing less productive disabled people).

DISCUSSION

UCE and transformation – partnerships

The present UCE process might be described as being somewhere in-between the ideal types of collaborative betterment and empowerment (Himmelman 2001), where both transactional and transformational kinds of relationships (Clayton et al., 2010) are present.

Cooperation in most cases is initiated by academic participants – **a situation that is characteristic of both collaborative betterment and transactional partnerships**. Though we (academic participants) do not shape and organize cooperation based on the cost efficiency paradigm and lack any exploitative intentions, still, our academic position, projects, and arrangements (e.g. courses) that provide the background for cooperation might lead to efficiency-orientated impacts. We need to comply with efficiency-orientated (indicator-orientated) project requirements; we need to regularly publish in scientific journals; we cannot transform most of our courses according to the idea of UCE; we do have other duties that are well aligned to the dominant efficiency-and quantity-orientated paradigm and do not question the prevailing power relations (e.g. administrative duties, large-scale conventional classroom courses, conventional research duties, tender applications, etc.).

Despite being against our intentions, and mostly as a result of the organic process of the development of UCE, we (academic actors) have taken numerous duties on ourselves in relation to UCE and invited our most committed partners to participate in numerous cooperative processes. The result is that initiatives often stay smaller-scale demonstration projects and participants are overloaded with tasks, a situation characteristic of collaborative betterment. This way energies that could be concentrated on supporting transformative changes in a given area (topic) might become dissipated, especially when we (academic actors) have other duties and needs (e.g. work-life balance, material security) besides UCE.

On the other hand, goals of UCE are co-defined by academic and community partners, the latter having the autonomy and power to shape the content of cooperation. Community partners

participate in UCE as subjects fostering their own goals – a situation characteristic of **collaborative empowerment**.

Thus, we agree with Himmelman (2001) that collaborative betterment and collaborative empowerment are not mutually exclusive, and the implementation of a UCE process reflecting the idea of collaborative empowerment is a significant challenge for academics. Theoretical models that deal with the nature of partnerships within UCE raise concerns that indeed imply relevant challenges for UCE practice.

Besides, **the quality and nature of partnership within UCE might change from partner to partner; activity to activity; and from time to time** as described by Dorado and Giles (2004). As a result of this diversity, the role of academic actors (being usually the powerful ones within UCE) is to go as close to (or stay as far away from) partners as they demand. This might serve as a basis of equal relations that respect the autonomy of community partners.

We must also keep in mind that **even though in theory UCE is about "working with the community", in practice it often implies that academic actors cooperate with NGOs/CSOs as explicit or implicit community representatives**. Perceiving these two as equal categories would lead to accepting the homogenizing and abstract concept of "community" instead of acknowledging that in reality communities are diverse entities characterized by power, interest, and value differentials and conflicts (Dempsey, 2010).

Establishing equal relations and common decision-making in each phase of UCE is especially challenging if we are to carry these out within whole communities (e.g. all extremely poor Roma residents, all local people living with a certain disability) as such communities are usually large in number, rather diverse and have their own inner power relations that determine their functioning.

We obviously do not have the opportunity (energy, time etc.) to cooperate with every single community member, and it might seem less challenging and more effective for academic actors to share power (cooperate with) community members (representatives) that possessed a higher level of autonomy (capability) already before entering into any UCE initiative, i.e. having the capacity for self-organization. However, this way being fully aware of and dissolving potential within-community (oppressive) power hierarchies and interest and value conflicts is an enormous challenge (if possible at all). How can we be sure that "community representatives" do not represent some particular interests instead of community interest, especially in the case of antagonistic within-community (value and/or interest) divisions/conflicts? These organizations, on one hand, indeed function as a bridge between the given community and

academic actors and thus (as we were able to experience it) play an important role in the lives of community members. However, such community representatives are also embedded in their everyday power relations that might be reproduced (reinforced) by UCE.

UCE and transformation – social impact

Based on the theoretical concepts used in the present study to operationalize transformation as social impact we can state that **numerous signs/characteristics of social transformation appear within the UCE process**. The process is in line with Hazelkorn's (2016a) social justice perspective on UCE, as its goal is to empower marginalized communities and to support social justice and environmental sustainability, and these goals are manifested in numerous activities related to education and research.

We have also reflected on the transformative nature of activities (or its absence) embedded within the UCE process. We also emphasize the need for supporting grassroots initiatives and almost exclusively work with communities and NGOs/CSOs outside power centres – in line with Avelino et al.'s (2019) and Hopwood et al.'s (2005) approach to social justice and sustainability transformation.

However, **transformative changes are extremely difficult to realize in practice**. Moral and practical expectations of "being transformative" often imply that we have to fight (work against) dominant interests, structures, institutions, solutions, and existing inequalities in power. Any UCE initiative of transformative intentions faces the enormous inertia of dominant political and economic structures (including rules, interests, and institutions) and cultural habits that are only possible to change (start to transform) to a limited extent in rather small steps through single UCE initiatives.

All the more so since **the concepts of "change" and "transformation" might have diverse meanings for different UCE participants**. Even though all UCE participants work for social justice and empowering the marginalized, this does not mean that all actors aim to radically change current structures. Empowering marginalized communities without affecting existing socio-economic structures might be just as attractive to numerous UCE participants: *"It is possible that not all our partners want to put an end to capitalism."*

Equal relations within UCE vs. social transformations: process vs. impact

Enhanced (political) power of NGOs/CSO as representatives of marginalized communities might lead to significant social changes (in the life of the community).

However, this does not necessarily generate significant change in relation to structures, institutions, and solutions: processes that (re)generate social injustice and a lack of environmental sustainability. The fact that some of our partners are better able to materially support the local poor and disabled might indicate a significant improvement in the life of numerous people on one hand, but it does not imply that we have managed to change neoliberal economic policy and efficiency-orientated labour markets.

Here, the **distinction between procedural and distributive justice** (see e.g. Tyler, 2000) **may prove valuable in supporting critical (self-)reflection concerning the (lack of) transformative impact of social-justice orientated UCE**. While procedural justice is about the fairness/just character of decision-making procedures, distributive justice refers to fair outcomes, e.g. the distribution of resources. In relation to UCE, procedural justice is related to the quality of cooperation (e.g. which parties were actually able to influence decisions), while distributive justice is related to outcomes (e.g. whose welfare/well-being was supported by UCE).

Procedural justice is clearly related to the transformation concept of UCE, focusing on the quality of relationships within UCE. The presence of (a higher level of) procedural justice indicates a more transformative process according to UCE as the concept of transformation here relates to the quality of relationships and eliminating hierarchies and uneven power relations within UCE. Our observations show that enhanced procedural justice within (the transformative character of) UCE might indeed frequently lead to increased distributive justice in case UCE partners use their increased capacities to support their communities (as is usually observed in our case). However, such a change in itself clearly stays within system boundaries – it cannot be evaluated as social transformation from the perspective of social justice and sustainability thinking as it does not question and challenge the "rules of the game" (existing hierarchies, power relations, etc.).

A more difficult question is whether increased procedural justice within (the transformative character of) UCE, i.e. the emergence of empowered community partners (CSOs, NGOs, representatives) leads to (1) increased procedural justice within the communities represented by UCE partners (whether UCE participant community partners share their power within the community or not); or (2) increased procedural justice on a wider societal scale (e.g. more just macro level decision-making processes). Our results provide scant evidence on these happening. All this indicates that transformation (procedural justice) within UCE, even if it contributes to societal reform (distributive justice), does not automatically indicate a step

towards societal transformation (changing the rules of the game beyond the UCE cooperation itself).

Finally, **there might be a trade-off between the environmental and social dimensions of transformation.** We have seen how global crises (including the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russian war in Ukraine) tend to overshadow the challenge of global climate change, while resource utilization trade-offs might also appear on the local level. *"Does the city council really not allow us (the extremely poor) to collect fallen twigs and branches from the local forest as they want to leave those there for insects? Are insects really more important than people*?" Any decision on such issues supports one particular aspect (social justice vs. environmental sustainability) at the expense of the other.

CONCLUSIONS

Within our paper, we have shown that UCE initiatives carried out according to the social justice perspective on UCE might conform to transformative social justice and sustainability theories by emphasizing the need to support grassroots initiatives and work with communities and NGOs/CSOs outside power centres. However, even though the social justice perspective on UCE might be promising in supporting significant positive changes in the life of marginalized communities, there are still numerous factors that challenge its transformative potential.

First, it is difficult to establish transformative (equal) relations among academics and communities, as everyday power relations necessarily also enter into UCE and academic frames (expectations, functioning) are often organized according to the efficiency-paradigm that undermines the values of participation, democracy and equality in UCE (while also providing valuable resources). Furthermore, the quality and nature of partnership within UCE might change from partner to partner; activity to activity; and from time to time – not all partners demonstrate the need for too close (transformative) relationships. The role of relatively powerful academic actors here is to go as close to (or stay as far away from) partners as they demand. Such an attitude serves as a basis of equal relations that respect the autonomy of community partners.

Second, establishing equal relations and common decision-making in UCE with whole communities is extremely challenging as communities are usually large in number and rather diverse. As such, it might seem less challenging and more effective for academics to share power (cooperate) with those community members that possessed a higher level of autonomy

(capability) already before entering into UCE initiatives: to work with implicit or explicit community representatives (CSOs/NGOs). However, this way being fully aware of and dissolving potential within-community (oppressive) power hierarchies and interest and value conflicts is an enormous challenge (if possible at all) and the community impacts of UCE might even be contradictory as in reality communities are diverse entities characterized by power, interest and value differentials and conflicts.

Third, transformative intentions and characteristics (e.g. working bottom-up, outside power centres, etc.) do not necessarily imply that transformative social impacts are realized. The reason for this lies in the inertia of dominant social/economic/political structures and institutions on one hand, and the potentially divergent conceptualization of "change" and "transformation" of UCE participants on the other.

Finally, the enhanced (political) power of NGOs/CSOs as representatives of marginalized communities might lead to significant social changes (in the life of the community), but it does not necessarily generate significant changes in relation to structures, institutions, solutions, i.e. processes that (re)generate social injustice and a lack of environmental sustainability. Thus, transformative relationships (as understood in the UCE literature) do not necessarily lead to transformative changes (as conceptualized in the transformative social justice and sustainability literature), especially given the possible trade-off between the environmental and social dimensions of transformation.

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