



**EUNICOast**

The European University of Islands,  
Ports and Coastal Territories

# Community engagement as a core mission of the transformative university

## A policy and commitment statement of the EUNICOast Alliance



Co-funded by  
the European Union

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**POLICY AND COMMITMENT STATEMENT**

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By the EUNICOAST Community Engagement Commission  
Work Package 4

May 2026

## Preamble

EUNICOast – the European University of Islands, Ports and Coastal Territories – is an alliance of universities embedded in some of Europe's most distinctive and ecologically exposed territories, stretching from the Baltic to the Caribbean. Co-funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ programme, EUNICOast brings together institutions from Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain, united by a shared commitment to transformative higher education rooted in the specific cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic realities of coastal, island, and port communities.

This policy and commitment statement is produced by the EUNICOast Community Engagement Commission – the shared governance body responsible for Work Package 4 (WP4) – and represents the collective voice of all partner universities. It builds upon the Alliance's conceptual framework developed during Year 1 of the project ("Beyond Outreach: EUNICOast's Framework for Transformative Community Engagement") and draws on a broad array of global, European, and field-based sources, including UNESCO's landmark education documents, European research and higher education policy instruments, and empirical research on engaged scholarship.

This document serves a dual purpose. First, it articulates the Alliance's shared understanding of community engagement – what it is, why it matters, and what it demands – in a way that is both principled and actionable. Second, it communicates EUNICOast's stance to external audiences: national policymakers, European institutions, local communities, and the wider higher education sector. The policy and commitment statement does not merely restate aspirations. It identifies the structural conditions that currently inhibit genuine engagement, names the values that should guide transformative practice, and makes concrete recommendations for change – both within the Alliance and beyond it. In doing so, it provides EUNICOast and its member universities with a set of principles, commitments, and policy priorities that can serve as an operational reference for their ongoing and future work on community engagement.

Community engagement, in the sense intended here, is not a marginal or supplementary activity. It is a constitutive dimension of what universities are for – binding research, teaching, and societal responsibility into a coherent mission. This paper takes as its point of departure a shared conviction: that the defining question for universities today is no longer whether to engage with their communities, but how engagement can be made genuinely transformative, reciprocal, and enduring – and what institutional conditions make this possible.

# 1. The context: A sector under pressure, territories under strain

## 1.1 The crisis of relevance

Higher education faces a crisis that is simultaneously external and internal. Externally, the world is reorganising under conditions of compounding disruption, such as geopolitical tensions, climate emergencies, growing socioeconomic inequalities, democratic erosion, and technological upheaval. For universities, the challenge is no longer one of preparation – it is one of demonstrable relevance: the capacity to contribute meaningfully to the responses that these crises demand. Yet, at the same time, universities risk becoming precisely what their communities most need them not to be: self-referential institutions governed by competitive metrics that measure everything except what counts.

This paradox is far from new, and it is far from local. From Boyer's (1990, 1996) foundational work on the scholarship of engagement, to Goddard et al.'s (2016) comparative research on civic universities across Northern and Western Europe, to Hall and Tandon's (2021) global perspectives spanning Africa, Asia, and Latin America, a substantial body of international scholarship consistently documents the same structural tension: universities claim civic purpose while their incentive systems systematically reward its opposite. Across very different national and institutional contexts, the academics who generate the most durable and visible public value are frequently those who do so despite institutional structures rather than because of them, driven by a sense of purpose rooted in proximity to community life, not by career incentives aligned with it. Community engagement that transforms both universities and territories grows from sustained relationships, shared risk, and strategic attentiveness to the latent possibilities embedded in the texture of everyday social life.

This is not a minor tension. This touches on the core of institutional legitimacy. An institution that produces knowledge but does not share it, that trains graduates but does not help its region thrive, and that claims democratic purpose but governs itself as a competitive enterprise is vulnerable to precisely the attacks on academic freedom, public funding, and social trust that are accelerating across Europe and beyond. Transformative community engagement can help regenerate universities, making them more resilient, autonomous, and capable of defending their public value, precisely because it makes that value visible, tangible, and recognised.

## 1.2 The specific situation of coastal and island universities

The pressure is especially acute for universities in coastal, island, and port territories. The communities these institutions serve face a number of threats: rising sea levels and ecosystem collapse, demographic shrinkage and youth emigration, economic monocultures dependent on tourism or extractive industries, and social vulnerability amplified by remoteness. Such threats cannot be adequately understood, let alone addressed, through a single disciplinary lens or knowledge tradition. Dealing with them requires knowledge processes that are deeply embedded, co-produced with local actors, and attentive to the specific historical and ecological contexts of each place. More fundamentally, it requires the construction of genuine knowledge ecosystems that bring into productive dialogue not only different academic disciplines, but also different epistemologies and forms of knowing: scientific and traditional, codified and experiential, global and place-based. This, in turn, requires new institutional cultures that recognise, value, and mobilise the full multiplicity of knowledges that communities and territories hold and create the conditions in which that multiplicity becomes a generative resource rather than an obstacle to be managed.

Among the most pressing of these epistemological and institutional challenges is the climate crisis itself. Coastal and island territories are not merely affected by climate change in the abstract: they are often on its front line, experiencing in accelerated and concentrated form the sea-level rise, extreme weather events, ocean acidification, and ecological disruption. Universities embedded in these territories have both a unique vantage point and a unique obligation: to co-produce, together with local communities, the contextually grounded knowledge that generic global models cannot supply – and to do so with the urgency that communities already living with these changes rightly demand.

Simultaneously, these territories offer something that densely urbanised academic centres often lack: the conditions for genuine proximity. In island and coastal universities, students, faculty, administrators, and community members are literally neighbours. The boundaries between the campus and city and between research institutions and civic life are thinner and more permeable. This creates both an obligation and an opportunity: an obligation to act and an opportunity to experiment with forms of university-community collaboration that are generative rather than extractive, relational rather than transactional.

## 1.3 A double misalignment

This tension between institutional claims and actual practice is not incidental; it reflects a structural condition that the literature has described as double misalignment. Its existence has been well documented empirically.

At the vertical level, the comprehensive review conducted by Farnell (2020) for the European Commission confirms that national evaluation systems remain overwhelmingly oriented towards the economic dimension of university activity – commercialisation of research, technological transfer, and labour market relevance – while social, cultural, and civic contributions continue to be largely invisible.

At the horizontal level, drawing on case studies across eight European countries, O'Brien et al. (2022) document a persistent gap between what institutional strategies formally prioritise and what a significant share of faculty actually practises: participatory research, community co-production, and forms of knowledge exchange that neither institutional plans recognise nor career incentive systems reward.

This misalignment wastes public resources, demoralises committed scholars, obscures what universities actually contribute to their societies, and prevents the scaling of demonstrably effective practices.

As Boyer (1996) observed three decades ago, and as subsequent research across very different national and institutional contexts has consistently confirmed (Saltmarsh et al., 2009; Goddard et al., 2016), transformative engagement finds ways to emerge even in the least favourable institutional environments, but it does so despite systems, not because of them. Removing structural barriers and providing genuine recognition is not a luxury; it is the precondition for making engagement a normal, sustained, and systemic part of academic life.

#### **1.4 The European policy landscape**

At the European level, a growing convergence of policy signals points in a consistent direction. The European Commission's Strategy for Universities (COM 2022) explicitly identifies universities as lighthouses for diversity and inclusion, democratic practices, and fundamental rights, as well as “actors of change”, and calls for new forms of transnational cooperation in which community engagement, territorial anchoring, and democratic practice are central – not peripheral – concerns. Notably, the Commission's communication on Achieving the European Education Area (2020) specifically identifies “service to society” as a fourth mission of higher education, complementing the established third mission of innovation and knowledge transfer – a recognition that the civic and community-oriented dimensions of university work constitute a distinct and irreducible institutional responsibility.

The ERA Communication (European Commission, 2020) and its subsequent Policy Agenda 2022–2024 (European Commission, 2021) explicitly identify the open engagement of societal actors as a strategic priority for European research, calling for research to be co-designed and co-implemented with citizens and civil society, and for the development of common frameworks for public engagement capable of strengthening science-society links at the national, regional, and local levels. This commitment has been further consolidated in the ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027, which elevates citizen participation and science communication to the status of a long-term structural policy in the European Research Area.

Horizon Europe's missions architecture connects research excellence to citizen engagement and co-production. The EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters" – particularly relevant for EUNICOAST's territorial context – requires precisely the kind of locally rooted, community-engaged knowledge production that this Alliance is designed to pioneer.

Within the European Universities Initiative, EUNICOAST occupies a distinctive position: it is one of the few alliances whose territorial logic – islands, ports, coastal regions – makes community engagement not merely desirable but structurally necessary. Our communities cannot afford universities that look elsewhere for relevance. European policy increasingly recognises this: the investment pathway for European university alliances currently being developed for the period 2028–2034 explicitly aims to facilitate a comprehensive funding approach that goes beyond the core educational dimension, extending support across all alliances' missions for wider societal benefit (European Commission, 2025).

## 2. Vision towards the transformative university

### 2.1 A new social contract for education

EUNICOAST's vision for community engagement is anchored in a foundational rethinking of the relationship between higher education and society – one that draws its deepest inspiration from UNESCO's call for a new social contract for education. The 2021 report *Reimagining Our Futures Together*, developed through a global consultative process engaging over one million people, argues that the ways we currently organise education worldwide are insufficient to ensure just and peaceful societies, a healthy planet, and shared progress for all. A new social contract must affirm two foundational principles: education as a human right and education as a public and common good.

This vision demands a fundamental rethinking of the relationships between learners, educators, knowledge systems and the world. From this perspective, universities are not merely credentialing machines or innovation hubs, nor should they aspire to become them. The appropriate response to the emergence of agile, market-driven educational providers is not mimicry but differentiation. Universities derive their irreplaceable social value precisely from what they are – institutions with deep territorial roots, democratic accountability to multiple publics, and a commitment to knowledge production that is oriented towards the common good rather than private return. Community engagement, in this light, is not a compensatory strategy for institutions that have fallen behind in the competitiveness race. This is the fullest expression of what universities, and only universities, are structurally constituted to offer.

Significantly, in 2026 UNESCO became the first intergovernmental organisation to explicitly name community engagement as a core mission of higher education – a landmark recognition that places this Alliance's commitments firmly within the mainstream of global higher education policy. The 2026 UNESCO roadmap, *Transforming Higher Education: Global Collaboration on Visioning and Action*, launched in March 2026, extends this vision into a concrete agenda for higher education systems. Its central message is clear: incremental reforms are insufficient. The sector requires more ambitious transformations in systems, policies, and practices. The roadmap calls for collective action across the entire higher education ecosystem – governments, institutions, learners, and international partners – guided by seven principles that include committing resources to equity and pluralism, promoting freedom to learn, teach, and research, fostering enquiry and critical thinking, and establishing a human-centred role for digital technologies. Community engagement is not an afterthought in this vision; rather, it is a structural requirement.

## 2.2 Open science and epistemic humility

EUNICOAST's approach to community engagement is inseparable from a broader commitment to epistemic openness and justice. The UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science (2021) identifies two pillars that are especially pertinent to the EUNICOAST WP on community engagement:

- Pillar 3 – Open Engagement of Societal Actors: Science must be open, not merely in the sense of accessible publications, but in the sense of open processes of enquiry. Non-academic actors – local communities, civil society organisations, local knowledge holders, and citizens – must be genuinely engaged as co-producers of knowledge, not merely as beneficiaries or audiences.
- Pillar 4 – Open Dialogue with Other Knowledge Systems: Academic knowledge is not the only legitimate form of knowing. Communities – especially in ecologically distinct territories such as islands and coastal zones – hold irreplaceable forms of knowledge about their environments, histories, and social dynamics. Meaningful engagement requires not merely consulting communities but entering into a genuine epistemic dialogue with them.

These pillars resonate with a commitment to recognising, valuing, and mobilising diverse epistemologies and knowledge systems, and building genuine co-production processes that are pluralist and non-linear. This is knowledge democracy at work, deeply rooted in epistemic humility in the service of more robust, honest, and useful knowledge.

This commitment has structural implications that extend beyond research methodology. Opening science to a genuine dialogue with other knowledge systems ultimately means reimagining the architecture of knowledge itself – recovering what might be called a knowledge commons: a shared epistemic space in which scientific knowledge works within, rather than above, the larger ecology of knowledge systems, traditions, and curators that communities and cultures have always maintained. This is not a romantic retreat from scientific rigour; it is an expansion of what counts as rigour, and of who counts as capable of contributing to it.

## 2.3 Mutual benefit: the strategic case for engagement

Community engagement is often misunderstood as altruism. It is not. It is a practice of mutual benefit – one in which universities and their communities co-create value that neither can generate alone.

For communities, genuine engagement with universities means access to analytical capacity, research resources, and networks that can support local decision-making, strengthen civil society, and open new pathways for development grounded in local realities rather than imported templates.

The benefits for universities are equally real. Community engagement generates new research questions that cannot arise from within the academy alone. It exposes methods and findings to forms of scrutiny – the scrutiny of communities with deep, lived knowledge of the problems being studied – that increases, not decreases, scholarly rigour. It creates conditions for graduates who are not merely employable but genuinely capable of contributing to the civic sphere. It provides researchers with a sense of purpose and meaning that the competitive treadmill of publication metrics manifestly fails to supply.

In the EUNICOast's territorial context, this mutual benefit has particular strategic significance. Universities in island and coastal regions are not peripheral institutions that happen to be located in interesting places. In many cases, they are among the largest employers, the most significant cultural institutions, and the principal sources of critical expertise in their territories. Their fate and that of their communities are deeply entangled. When communities thrive, universities have students, civic partners, and the political support they need to pursue their mission. When communities decline, universities also decline. In this sense, community engagement is not a moral add-on but a matter of institutional survival and strategic intelligence.

## **2.4 The transformative university**

EUNICOast's vision centres on what we call the transformative university: an institution that integrates three inseparable dimensions.

- Transformative Education: Learning environments that cultivate critical consciousness, intercultural competence, ethical responsibility, and the capacity for active citizenship. Education that prepares students not merely for employment but for meaningful contributions to communities and democratic life.
- Transformative Research: Co-produced knowledge that emerges from genuine partnerships between academics and societal actors, attentive to plural epistemologies, guided by the principles of Responsible Research and Innovation, and oriented towards the needs of communities as much as the interests of funders.
- Transformative Engagement: Embedding engagement as a core institutional logic through policy reorientation, governance reform, and cultural change – making engagement not an individual heroic act but a systemic, supported, and recognised feature of academic life.

The transformative university is also a generative university. Generativity is not merely productivity or impact. It describes the capacity of a system, relationship, or institution to produce forms, configurations, and possibilities that could not have been fully anticipated at the outset – to create value that projects itself towards the future and transforms the conditions from which it emerged. This generative potential is not a property of individual researchers, regardless of their commitment. It is a property of situations – of the specific configurations of actors, resources, relationships, and contexts that universities and communities co-inhabit. We can understand engaged universities as institutions capable of recognising and activating latent possibilities within the social fabric of their territories: possibilities that exist but are not yet visible, reachable but not yet reached.

## The generative university: EUNICOAST's vision for transformation

A Transformative University is an institution that integrates education, research, and engagement into a single systemic logic  
This fosters generativity: the ability for institutions and communities to co-create unanticipated and future possibilities

### The three pillars of transformation



#### Transformative education

Cultivates critical consciousness and prepares students for active citizenship and democratic life



#### Transformative research

Co-produced knowledge emerging from genuine partnerships between academics and societal actors



#### Transformative engagement

Embeds engagement as a systemic, recognized, and supported feature of institutional life



### The power of generativity



#### Beyond productivity

Generativity creates future-facing value and possibilities that cannot be anticipated at the outset



#### Property of situations

Success relies on the specific configuration of actors, resources, and shared contexts



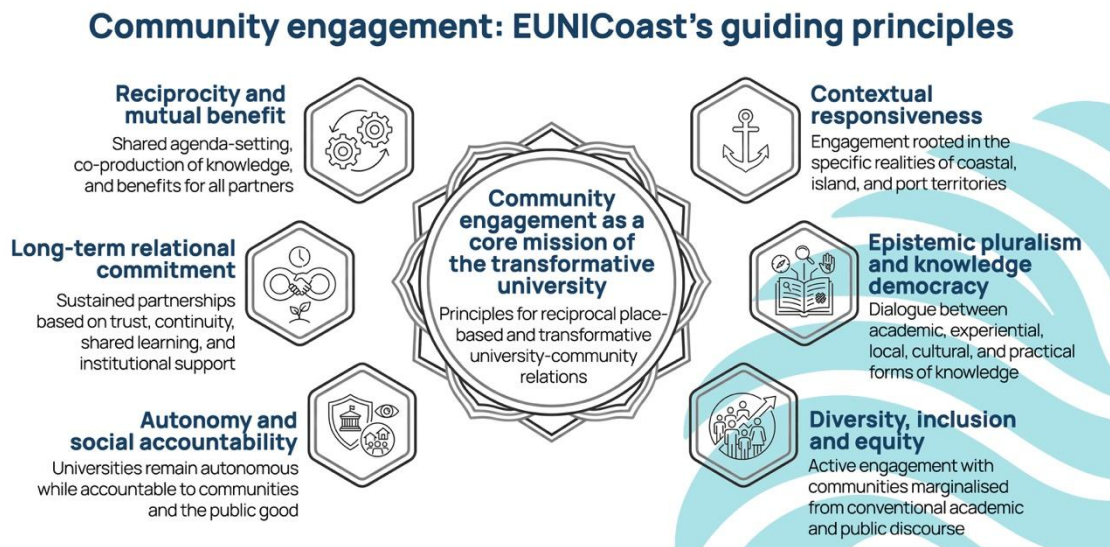
#### Activating latent potential

Universities must recognize and activate unseen possibilities within the social fabric of territories

Cultivating this generative orientation is, ultimately, the deepest form of institutional change that EUNICOAST aspires to support. This means building universities that do not wait for ideal conditions before engaging but work with what is present – the relationships, the knowledge ecosystem, the tensions, the unresolved needs – and trust that genuine collaboration will generate outcomes richer than any single actor could have imagined or designed in advance.

### 3. Guiding principles

EUNICOast's approach to community engagement is governed by six interrelated principles. These principles are not aspirational abstractions; they function as practical criteria for evaluating engagement activities, governance arrangements, and institutional choices across the Alliance.



#### 3.1 Reciprocity and mutual benefit

Community engagement must be genuinely mutual in nature. It cannot consist of universities delivering expertise to passive communities or communities providing data to academic researchers who retain sole authority over interpretation and use. Authentic engagement is characterised by shared agenda-setting, co-production of knowledge, jointly defined standards of rigour and relevance, and distribution of benefits across all parties. Institutional architectures and administrative arrangements must be designed to operationalise this principle. Reciprocity requires sustained relationships, not one-off encounters, and it requires institutional arrangements – dedicated time, recognised roles, and shared governance – that make sustained relationships possible.

Realising this principle requires a genuinely transdisciplinary orientation – one that integrates community knowledge not as contextual background but as a constitutive element of the research and teaching process itself. Transdisciplinarity, as articulated by the International Science Council, goes beyond interdisciplinarity within the academy: it opens the boundaries of disciplinary domains to include the knowledge, experience, and agency of non-academic actors as co-definers of research questions, co-producers of findings, and co-interpreters of results.

### **3.2 Contextual responsiveness and territorial anchoring**

Socially responsible higher education is locally rooted. Its curriculum, research themes, and service priorities must be responsive to the specific contexts, communities, and challenges of the places it serves. Place-based learning is not a concession to parochialism; rather, it is a precondition for effective, contextually intelligent knowledge generation and sharing. For EUNICOAST, this means that engagement strategies must be developed in dialogue with territorial realities, and that the Alliance's shared frameworks must be flexible enough to accommodate the profound diversity of its partner territories.

### **3.3 Epistemic pluralism and knowledge democracy**

However, academic knowledge, no matter how rigorous, is not self-sufficient. Communities hold forms of knowledge – ecological, historical, cultural, and practical – that are irreplaceable for understanding complex local realities. A genuinely engaged university creates conditions for dialogue among knowledge systems, challenging epistemological hierarchies that have historically privileged academic knowledge over other ways of knowing. This principle, articulated in UNESCO's Open Science Recommendation (Pillars 3 and 4), demands institutional humility, methodological pluralism, and a willingness to be changed by what communities know.

### **3.4 Diversity, inclusion and equity**

Community engagement must actively address social inequalities rather than reproduce them. This means deliberately seeking out voices and communities that are marginalised from conventional academic and public discourse – those most affected by environmental degradation, economic precarity, demographic decline, and political exclusion. Social inclusion is not merely a social charity; it is an integral component of a strategy to enhance the quality and societal relevance of higher education. Engagement that includes only the already organised and vocal segments of society is, in a meaningful sense, not genuinely engaged.

In the European context, this means actively reaching toward communities whose knowledge and experience are structurally absent from academic and policy conversations: migrants and refugees, ethnic minorities including Roma communities, coastal fishing populations whose ecological knowledge is disappearing faster than it is documented, street-involved and otherwise marginalised groups. These are not edge cases. They are precisely the communities whose inclusion would most challenge – and most enrich – the knowledge universities produce.

### **3.5 Autonomy and social accountability**

Genuine engagement requires university autonomy – the institutional freedom to set research agendas, define educational priorities, and enter into partnerships on terms that reflect academic values rather than market or political pressure. However, autonomy without accountability is indefensible. Social accountability is the necessary counterpart to institutional autonomy: forms of accountability that are anchored in civic engagement and community participation rather than in purely bureaucratic or market mechanisms. EUNICOAST endorses this articulation: our universities must be autonomous enough to engage genuinely and accountable enough to ensure that engagement serves the public good.

### **3.6 Long-term relational commitment**

Transformative engagement cannot be project-based. The most impactful forms of academic-community collaboration are those that span decades, not years – relationships in which trust has been built through shared experience, disappointment, renegotiation, and renewal. This has profound implications for institutional design: funding cycles, career incentive structures, evaluation frameworks, and governance and administrative arrangements must all be oriented towards supporting long-term relational commitment rather than incentivising short-term measurable outputs. A university that can only engage in short-term project cycles will never achieve genuine community partnership.

## 4. The commitments of the EUNICOAST Alliance

The contextual analysis, vision, and guiding principles developed in the preceding chapters are not merely descriptive. They carry institutional implications for how universities are governed, how research is conducted, how communities are engaged, and how the Alliance as a whole understands its role in its territories. This chapter translates those implications into concrete lines of commitment for all EUNICOAST partner universities: obligations that are binding, that are subject to evaluation, and that define what it means, in practice, to be a member of this Alliance.

### 4.1 A democratic commitment

We commit to positioning our universities as active participants in the renewal of democratic life in our territories. This means supporting spaces for genuine dialogue in which diverse community voices can shape the research agendas, educational priorities, and institutional decisions of our universities. This means developing governance structures and ensuring the continuous development of Institutional Community Engagement Plans that give communities real influence over how public knowledge institutions use public resources. This means resisting the retreat from civic purpose that competitive, market-oriented models of higher education systematically encourage.

### 4.2 An emancipatory commitment

We commit to ensuring that our engagement activities actively address structural inequalities and amplify the voices of those most marginalised. This means going beyond partnerships with established institutions and organised interests to build relationships with communities facing poverty, exclusion, environmental displacement, and political invisibility. This means developing research and educational programs that generate knowledge useful to these communities – knowledge that supports their capacity to understand their situations, advocate for their rights, and shape their futures. This means working to overcome, within our own institutions, the forms of epistemic and social exclusion that reproduce the inequalities we claim to address in society in academic life.

### 4.3 A generative commitment

We commit to activating processes that generate new capacities, relationships, and possibilities for our territories – not merely responding to existing needs but helping communities imagine and build futures that are not yet visible. This generative orientation means investing in long-term relationships that create the social infrastructure for collective innovation, supporting researchers who work with the patient, relational intelligence that transformative engagement requires, and building institutional cultures in which the discovery of adjacent possibles – the latent

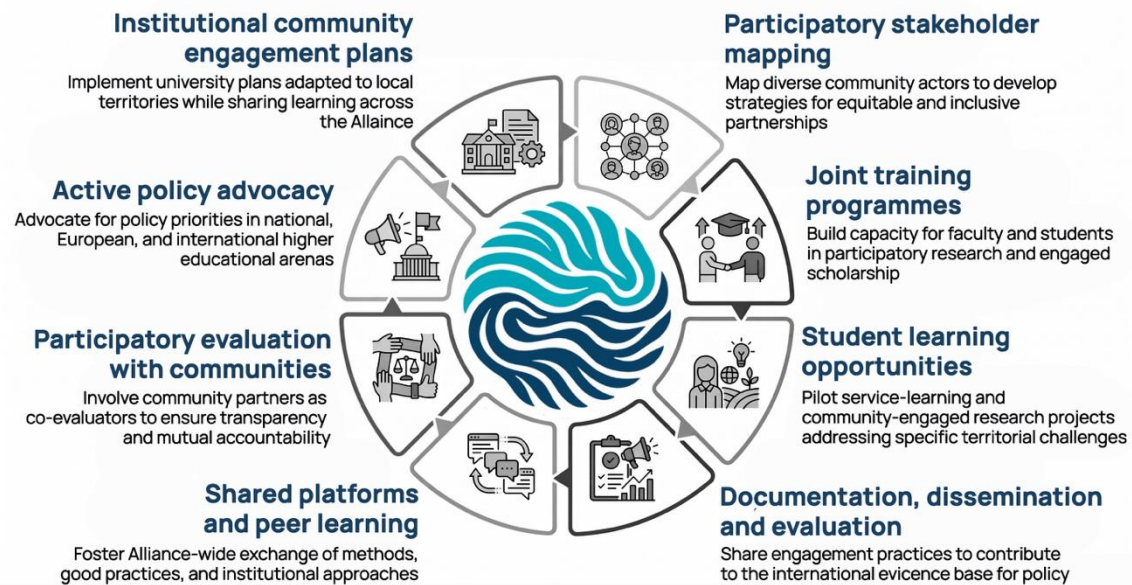
opportunities that only become visible through genuine proximity to community life – is recognised and valued as a form of scholarly contribution.

#### **4.4 Operational commitments**

Beyond these foundational commitments, EUNICOAST's partner universities specifically commit to the following operational actions during and beyond the Alliance's current programme period:

- Develop and implement Institutional Community Engagement Plans in each partner university using the Alliance's shared framework while adapting to territorial specificities and sharing learnings across the network through the Community Engagement Commission.
- Conduct systematic, participatory stakeholder mapping in each partner territory, documenting the full diversity of community actors – including those not typically engaged by universities – and developing strategies for equitable partnership.
- Develop and deliver joint training programmes for faculty, staff, and students in participatory research methods, community partnership development, and the ethics of engaged scholarship, building the human capacity that institutional commitment requires.
- Design and pilot innovative student learning opportunities – including service-learning modules, community-engaged research projects, Science Shops projects, and inter-institutional programmes oriented towards territorial challenges – that prepare graduates for active, informed citizenship as well as professional lives.
- Document, disseminate, and systematically evaluate engagement practices, contributing to the growing international evidence base on transformative university-community engagement and ensuring that EUNICOAST's experience informs European and global policy discussions.
- Create shared platforms and events within the Alliance for exchanging good practices and fostering peer learning on community engagement strategies, methods, and institutional approaches across partner universities.
- Subject our community engagement practices to regular participatory evaluation – involving community partners as co-evaluators – ensuring that our commitments remain accountable to the communities we serve rather than solely to institutional self-assessment.
- Advocate actively – within national higher education systems, European institutions, and international networks including UNESCO, international university associations, and the European University Alliance ecosystem – for the policy priorities identified in Chapter 5.

## Operational commitments for transformative community engagement across EUNICOAST



The commitments set out above define what EUNICOAST does and will do within its institutional sphere. However, the Alliance is also a collective actor in a wider policy environment – one whose structures, incentives, and governance logics currently make transformative community engagement harder than it should be and less recognised than it deserves to be. EUNICOAST does not accept these conditions as given. The following chapter identifies the fields in which the Alliance will exercise active and sustained advocacy: not as a peripheral lobbying effort but as a direct extension of the democratic, emancipatory, and generative commitments made above.

## 5. A Policy agenda for transformative engagement: EUNICOast’s advocacy priorities

The Alliance's commitment to community engagement cannot be fully realised within the boundaries of its institutions alone. The structural conditions that govern higher education – funding cycles, evaluation frameworks, career incentive systems, and European programme architectures – are themselves sites of political choice and, therefore, sites of possible transformation. EUNICOast commits to participating in these sites through its engagement with national authorities, European institutions, international networks, including UNESCO and university associations, and the growing ecosystem of European University Alliances. The fields of advocacy identified below are not external concerns that the Alliance happens to have noticed. They are the systemic corollaries of the engagement practices described throughout this document. On each of these fronts, EUNICOast will advocate, argue, and, where possible, demonstrate through its own practice that a different higher education system is both necessary and achievable.

### A policy agenda for transformative engagement

EUNICOast's advocacy priorities for a higher education system that supports community engagement



#### Towards national governments and authorities

- Reform evaluation & recognition systems**  
 Value social, cultural, and civic contributions alongside traditional academic production
- Create multi-year funding instruments**  
 Shift from short-term project cycles to renewable funding that supports long-term partnerships
- Align with international frameworks**  
 Ensure national policy coherence with UNESCO Open Science and the 2026 HE Roadmap
- Move beyond narrow rankings**  
 Supplement competitive metrics with frameworks for social accountability and place-based contributions
- Support peripheral and coastal territories**  
 Recognize the distinctive roles and needs of universities in island and coastal contexts



#### Towards the European Commission and EU policy

- Operationalize “Service to society”**  
 Establish the fourth mission through dedicated funding and concrete policy incentives
- Strengthen European Universities**  
 Evaluate Alliances based on territorial anchoring and community co-production
- Fund participatory research**
  - Recognize community-engaged methodologies as legitimate forms of research excellence
- Implement UNESCO Open Science Pillars**
  - Support open engagement with societal actors and diverse knowledge systems in research governance
- Embed engagement in EU Missions**
  - Require community engagement in Missions for Oceans, Climate, and Soil Health



#### Towards higher education institutions

- Develop institutional engagement plans**  
 Integrate engagement into core strategy with dedicated governance and resource accountability
- Reform academic career incentives**  
 Credit participatory research and community partnerships equally to publications in career progression
- Invest in engagement infrastructure**  
 Fund dedicated units, community liaisons, and specialized training for staff and students
- Embed engagement in teaching**  
 Scale service-learning, community-engaged learning, and Science Shop projects across all levels
- Conduct participatory stakeholder mapping**  
 Engage civil society and knowledge holders often excluded from traditional university partnerships

#### 5.1 Towards national governments and higher education authorities

- Reform evaluation and recognition systems to give genuine weight to social, cultural, and civic forms of knowledge production. National systems should develop robust, qualitative, and community-validated methods to recognise the full range of academic contributions to public life.

- Establish multi-year, renewable funding instruments for community-engaged research and education, creating the temporal conditions that genuine partnership requires. Three-year project cycles are structurally incompatible with transformative engagement; the funding architecture must reflect this reality.
- Foster vertical alignment between national higher education strategies and international frameworks – including UNESCO's Recommendation on Open Science, the new social contract for education, and the 2026 global roadmap for higher education – ensuring that national policies do not systematically penalise institutions and scholars who practice what international frameworks promote.
- Move beyond governance by rankings and competitive metrics as the dominant logic of higher education policy. Global university rankings tend to privilege a narrow set of research outputs, rendering invisible the broader contributions universities make to their societies. Complementary frameworks – oriented towards contextual responsiveness, social accountability, and place-based contribution – should be developed and progressively institutionalised.
- Develop specific policy frameworks for universities in island, coastal, and peripheral territories that recognise the distinctive opportunities and obligations these contexts create and provide appropriate support for territorial engagement as a strategic national and European priority.

## 5.2 Towards the European Commission and European higher education policy

- Operationalise the commitment to fostering “service to society” as the fourth mission of higher education – as identified in the Commission's *Achieving the European Education Area communication* (2020) – through earmarked funding and concrete policy incentives that support institutions in pursuing this mission systematically and sustainably.
- Strengthen the community engagement dimension of the European Universities Initiative, ensuring that alliance governance structures, performance criteria, and funding priorities support – and are evaluated against – genuine territorial anchoring and community co-production, not merely inter-institutional collaboration and student mobility.
- Develop specific funding instruments for participatory action research, science shops, and other established methodologies of community-engaged knowledge production within Horizon Europe and successor programmes – recognising these as forms of research excellence rather than marginal outreach activities.
- Operationalise Pillars 3 and 4 of the UNESCO Recommendation on Open Science within European research governance, establishing concrete mechanisms – including funding streams, career recognition pathways, and quality assessment frameworks – for the open engagement of societal actors and open dialogue with diverse knowledge systems.
- Ensure that EU Missions – especially those directly relevant to island and coastal territories, including the Mission on Oceans, the Mission on Climate Adaptation, and the Mission on Soil Health – incorporate community engagement as a fundamental methodological requirement, not merely a dissemination or formal citizen involvement activity, and fund the institutional capacity needed to pursue it seriously.

### 5.3 Towards higher education institutions

- Develop Institutional Community Engagement Plans that make community engagement a core strategic priority with dedicated governance, resources, and accountability mechanisms – not a supplementary activity competing for residual attention and funding.
- Reform career incentive structures to recognise community engagement work – including participatory research, co-designed curricula, science shop involvement, and community partnerships – as legitimate, valuable, and career-building contributions to the academic mission, on a par with publications and grant capture.
- Invest in the organisational infrastructure for engagement: dedicated units, community liaisons, training programmes, and governance bodies that provide sustained institutional support for faculty and student engagement activities.
- Embed community engagement in educational design, ensuring that students at all levels have genuine opportunities to learn in partnership with communities – through service-learning, participatory research projects, community-engaged learning, Science Shop projects, and other forms of experiential education that connect academic learning to civic life.
- Conduct continuous and participatory stakeholder mapping that goes beyond conventional economic actors to include civil society organisations, community associations, cultural bodies, indigenous knowledge holders, and other constituencies whose engagement is essential for genuinely transformative partnership.

## 6. Conclusion

This statement has set out EUNICOAST's understanding of community engagement as a core dimension of the university mission, grounded in the specific realities of coastal, island, and port territories. It has identified the structural misalignments that currently limit meaningful engagement, articulated a vision of the transformative university, established guiding principles for practice, and defined a set of institutional commitments and policy priorities.

Taken together, these elements form a coherent framework through which the Alliance seeks to embed community engagement as a sustained, systemic, and institutionally supported practice across its member universities, conceived as transformation rather than outreach, and as a process of mutual redefinition rather than unidirectional service.

By endorsing this statement, EUNICOAST places itself not simply as a network of institutions pursuing a shared project but as a laboratory for a different kind of university – one that is rooted in its territories, reflective in its practices, and profoundly engaged with the lives, challenges, and futures of the communities it serves. We believe that this is the form of higher education that the present moment demands. We are convinced that this is the form of higher education that our territories and the broader European project genuinely need.

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