



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Quality Assurance Measures

Evaluation of Centers of Social and Civic Involvement

Written by Prof. Alan Bainbridge, Canterbury Christ Church University

April 2020

The Centres of Social and Civic Involvement (CSCI) provided the focus for encouraging and developing students to become thoughtful and active citizens. This aspect of the CURE project was not beholden to curricula content or programme directives and instead was placed firmly in the control of the student body. One of the most enjoyable and insightful aspects of the CURE project was the presence of students at the regular consortium meetings and then, of course, during the EU partner Field Monitoring. Providing students with this central role has enabled the CURE project to have an impact outside of the HEIs and into the wider community. Equally, by involving students – our future teachers, members of faculty, community leaders etc., – the project is gifted with a route towards long term sustainability and legacies that will out-live the defined project period.

It is an impossible task to evaluate each of the 104 activities within the CSCI aspect of the CURE project and the impact on around 4000 people who either took part or experienced these activities. These numbers are large but also no doubt a considerable underestimate – certainly, there will have been many activities that time simply did not allow to be recorded and the estimation of those impacted can only ever be an under-representation of the many individuals who may not have been counted, filled in a 'register', or completed an evaluation form. It must be made clear at the outset that the CURE CSCI activities have been an enormous success and look set to continue engaging HEI students, faculty members, teachers, schools, pupils, the local and wider community. What I offer here can only be a 'taster menu' of the smorgasbord of activities initiated and supported within the CURE project. More detail can be found within the Field Monitoring reports.

It is not my intention to identify and separate out individual nations or HEIs, particular activities or even degree of impact, this seems entirely in conflict with the values and

principles of the CURE project. Instead, my approach will be to be guided by those individuals and groups who have benefited from CSCI activities, this is after all the rationale behind engaging in civic activism. The report shall focus on the types of activities within the following groups: Early Year settings (pupils and staff); school pupils; HEI students; HEI faculty; local communities to include religious and cultural groups as well as those who are often less well represented (ie homeless and poor). The report will then consider the nature of the impact on individuals groups and institutions, and then the possibility for long term sustainability. All the activities have been student initiated and led.

Early Years Settings

Examples of civic activism in Early Years settings, or Kindergartens, range from very broad support projects, such as setting up Kindergartens or providing discrete input on accessibility issues and public health campaigns. HEI students engaged with their local community by campaigning for Kindergartens to be set up, including lobbying for buildings to be made available and books and toys to be provided. In some examples members of the civic community, 'encouraged' by students, were involved in these activities. On a broader scale there were examples of HEI settings offering opportunities to help young children appreciate the experiences of living with particular accessibility needs. For example, young children from a range of settings were invited onto HEI campuses to interact with 'dark rooms' to experience living with reduced vision. Students also visited Early Year settings, and in one particular example led a workshop of the importance of effective hand-washing, the potential life-saving impact, which in the current Covid-19 pandemic can only be guessed at.

School pupils

Children in local schools were often the focus of CSCI activity, the result of which meant many schools also set up their own groups to encourage active citizenship, these were often led by HEI students and in some cases covered very similar ground to that of the groups in HEIs. Pupils in schools set up groups to discuss issues such as religious and cultural differences, in one case holding a 'summer camp' to take time to share cultural and religious stories with each other. In one example the school pupils were supported to set up a 'radio station' to facilitate discussions on a wider and more global scale. The mechanics of local

and national democracy was also discussed and often role play exercises were used to frame thinking about the various purposes of politicians within local and national government – including inviting public officials and holding mock elections. The school-based groups also led school assemblies to share their ideas and encourage others in to active citizenship.

HEI Students

It will be of no surprise that a very large number and variety of civic activism projects were focused on HEI students. A variety of lectures and workshops were provided to highlight why civic activism can be a significant driving force for positive change. Lectures by internal faculty members or visiting staff discussed Human Rights, Workers Rights, and the role of an active citizen in a community. Many of these led to specific outcomes such as, the production of video clips and video blogs and wider debates on the role of civic education, including how HEI's might respond to this. Aligned to this students were also provided with leadership training to facilitate working with their peers and others outside of the wider HEI community. As a result many students initiated (and Faculty supported) CSCI groups were set up leading to the range of activities to be discussed next.

Georgia and Israel both represent very diverse social, cultural and religious groups and the possibility of tension between these groups became an important focus for many of the CSCI groups. Opportunities were provided to hear about contrasting religious and cultural world views and practices through specialist lectures and brief programmes of study, also religious communities shared their important and foundational stories. One group even made a short film to encourage wider discussion beyond those in HEI. The Arts also provided many opportunities to share experiences and to encourage mutual understanding of the foundation of each other's faith. Visual art was used to communicate religious and cultural stories, as were dance and songs. I was made very aware of the powerful potential of this type of activity during one of the consortium meetings when the students, who represented very diverse cultural and religious groups, exchanged songs and dances encouraging others to join in. This represented a powerful moment that is very hard to quantify or put into words, but to be part of, and observe young people take time to share stories and teach to others songs and dances that meant so much to them is just the sort of

careful and joyful activity that the CURE project wishes to promote. Indeed song and dance features highly in many of the examples of active citizenship.

Another very prominent feature in the CSCI groups was the desire to set up numerous types of group where young people from diverse backgrounds could come together and to share their world views. Noticeably 'world-cafes' became a central feature in many CSCIs with these open and democratic spaces being used, for example, to discuss and move towards understanding difference and what might have to be done to live peace-ably with one another. Or, how local lives can have a global influence and vice-versa, with particular emphasis being placed on the disadvantaged and those whose experience is to feel like an outsider in a community. These are not simple 'cause and effect' problems to solve – indeed they have challenged most civic leaders for many centuries – but what is hopeful to witness is the CURE project facilitating the kind of thoughtful spaces where very difficult questions can be asked of each other. The need to understand your own identity and the potential of your role in the place you live, and therefore to be engaged in 'place-making' has become a vital and central tenet in many of the CSCI groups.

Another regular outcome of the CSCI groups to encourage more students to become active citizens has been the focus on community projects and the opportunities these provide for volunteering. The details of these examples shall be provided in the section on local communities.

HEI Faculty Members

Many members of faculty have been either directly or indirectly influenced by the CURE CSCI groups, at times this will be due to the groups needing (and receiving) faculty support. Staff would have been involved in many of the activities mentioned above, for example, the world-cafes would have engaged with and had a similar impact of staff and students. There were examples when students organised events in the HEI that also had faculty members as their 'target'. For example the experience of differing levels of accessibility and the hosting of (sometimes leading) debates would also have had an impact on the thoughts and practices of faculty members. Just as the impact of the SMS training cascaded through the institutions so to has the activity of the CSCIs.

Local Community

Central to being an active citizen is the focus on considering your role in the community you live and work in and many of the activities mentioned in the HEI Students section involved action in and with the community and as such will be repeated here. Student volunteering was not an isolated action but often involved members of the local community alongside HEI students. Activities such as, setting up a toybank and foodbank were shared with the local community, as was the need to care for the immediate local environment. There were also many examples of members of the local community being involved in world-café style discussions on religious and cultural world views and practices. Although not widespread, the CSCI activities that were linked to existing settings (ie Kindergartens and schools) these also involved the activity of members of the wider community. Many of the arts-based projects also engaged with the local community and in some cases led to community wide sharing of songs and dances – even so far as to set up local festivals of culture.

Impact and Sustainability

Just as this evaluation concluded early on that the setting up of CSCI groups to be a significant success within the CURE project, so too at this early stage I wish to confirm my confidence in the long-term viability of many of these groups. To offer a wide-sweeping judgement would be difficult as projects such as this involve very many diverse individuals and groups in often very different and ever changing contexts. As an extreme example, the current pandemic will have caused many, if not all of the civic activism projects to be cancelled and there are unanswerable questions to be asked about whether or not these can be revived in the future. It is important to mention however, that the increased awareness of the responsibility of higher educational institutions to be responsible and involved in the community is reflected by the fact that some institutions have moved to “virtual” community programs by offering “hot-line” psychological support service, free of charge to help support the community during this pandemic situation. So although their regular activities have been put on “hold”, new initiatives have been created. I do wish to reiterate that the CSCI groups have been an enormous success and in usual times would be looking at long-term healthy futures. The impact and sustainability will be considered at an individual, group and institutional level. All evidence has been taken from the EU partner Field monitoring reports and individual Israeli and Georgian HEI evaluations and reports.

Individual

There is considerable evidence that at an individual level, being part of a CSCI group has improved individual's sense of place in the environment and context in which they find themselves. This is supported by better understanding of the 'other' and their particular world view and the need to build supportive relationships with those who share our lives. It was not uncommon to encounter sentiments that confirmed a desire to identify with 'my people' and to be able to 'give something back'. The result has been that individuals are more likely to self-initiate active citizen activities and to be part of or lead these.

Interestingly, it is also noticeable that many express an increased knowledge of civic principles and are therefore now in a position to use this knowledge to their advantage, while not being afraid to approach 'power' and ask difficult questions. The conclusion must be that many of those students who have engaged with the CURE CSCI programme have developed into committed active citizens.

Group

The importance of group/community responses and action has been highlighted on a large number of occasions, in one HEI the importance of community involvement was now the group's number one concern. It had previously been reported as the sixth most important issue to students. The increased individual awareness of the importance of understanding your own role in relationship with others has also been recognised, particularly when dealing with issues of religious, cultural and political difference. There is an awareness that individuals are part of a group and all have a particular role in caring for their physical and relational world.

Institution

It might be argued that the sustainability of projects such as the CSCI groups will be grounded in institutional support. The impact of the CSCI groups on institutions has been significant and widespread – again, this suggests a hopeful outcome for the long-term project goals. The activity of the students has had an impact on the groups they are part of and in turn this has also had an impact on their institutions. Many members of faculty took part in CSCI activities, both as participants and leaders and have supported the students requests for activism to be a greater part of their HEI experience. In some cases there is

evidence of volunteering being a worthwhile activity, whereas in the past it was perceived of as a secondary importance. Indeed, there were examples of civic activism being negatively perceived until the CURE project. Examples of this important shift can be evidenced in the provision of spaces, funds and sometimes staff to support the CSCI activities. One institution completed an almost 70 page research project on the CSCI activities, while another has now committed to all Teaching Diploma students being required to undertake 60 hours of civic engagement.

It is acknowledged that the impact of the CSCI groups will be varied but at this early stage it must be recognised that the impressive change in individual, group and institutional thinking and behaviour has been such that it will continue long after the project comes to an end.