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The Role of Boundary Spanners in Institutionalizing University–Community Engagement

Insights from a Hostile Setting

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Abstract

This study examines the role of boundary spanners in institutionalizing university–community engagement (UCE) in higher education institutions. Employing autoethnography, we gathered data via reflexive texts and dialogues produced by nine boundary spanners from four UCE units in Hungary. We explore the functions of the boundary spanners in facilitating bottom-up UCE institutionalization processes in a hostile setting not only characterized by (1) transnational academic capitalism but also (2) a general lack of knowledge of and institutional and/or policy support for UCE and (3) an illiberal political context. We highlight that, within such contexts, boundary spanners often need to undertake multifaceted roles: beyond establishing robust community contacts, they also navigate technical challenges and provide leadership. Also, certain expectations of transnational academic capitalism might also open up spaces for UCE institutionalization within illiberal political settings, although not without challenges and contradictions stemming from the core logic of transnational academic capitalism.

Keywords: *boundary spanners; illiberal political context; institutionalization; transnational academic capitalism; university–community engagement*

El papel de los líderes que innovan y traen mejores prácticas en la institucionalización de la vinculación comunitaria universitaria:

Perspectivas desde un entorno hostil

Andi Sri Wahyuni, György Málovics, András Müllner, Bori Fehér, Janka Csernák, Judit Juhász, Márta Frigyik, Réka Matolay, Rita Szerencsés y Zoltán Bajmócy

Resumen

Este estudio examina el rol de líderes que innovan y promueven el uso de prácticas externas en la institucionalización de la vinculación comunitaria universitaria (UCE). Usando autoetnografía, recolectamos datos a través de textos reflexivos y diálogos producidos por nueve líderes de cuatro unidades de vinculación comunitaria universitaria (UCE) en Hungría. Exploramos las funciones de los líderes que innovan y traen prácticas externas en el proceso de facilitación de procesos de institucionalización de (UCE) desde abajo hacia arriba en un entorno hostil no solo caracterizado por (1) el capitalismo académico transnacional sino también (2) una falta general de conocimiento y apoyo institucional y/o de políticas para (UCE) y (3) un contexto político iliberal. Destacamos que, dentro de tales contextos, los líderes que realizan estas innovaciones a menudo necesitan asumir roles multifacéticos: más allá de establecer contactos comunitarios sólidos, también abordan desafíos técnicos y brindan liderazgo. Además, ciertas expectativas del capitalismo académico transnacional también podrían abrir espacios para la institucionalización de (UCE) dentro de entornos políticos iliberales, aunque no sin desafíos y contradicciones que surgen de la lógica central del capitalismo académico transnacional.

Palabras clave: *líderes que innovan y traen mejores prácticas; contexto político iliberal; institucionalización; capitalismo académico transnacional; vinculación comunitaria universitaria*

Editors' Note: Translation provided by ***Karla Diaz***
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University–community engagement (UCE) facilitates collaboration between academia and the broader community to address social challenges and promote mutual learning (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Furthermore, UCE provides an avenue for academia to embrace an open culture, foster research collaboration intertwined with community needs, and promote transformative and sustainable local development (Koekkoek et al., 2021).

At the heart of UCE implementation lie boundary spanners, individuals who act as intermediaries between higher education actors and the community (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Research has aimed to understand the roles and functions of boundary spanners across various contexts (Corsi et al., 2021; Janke et al., 2023; Osborne et al., 2021; Petersen & Kruss, 2021). However, related discussions predominantly stem from contexts where UCE has been well institutionalized (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) and the roles of boundary spanners are placed into discrete categories (Addie, 2017; Collien, 2021; Corsi et al., 2021; Petersen & Kruss, 2021; Pilbeam & Jamieson, 2010; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). However, in other contexts, the roles of boundary spanners cannot be strictly categorized in such a manner (Burbach et al., 2023). Therefore, UCE initiatives have their own unique contexts, with an impact on the roles of boundary spanners in UCE institutionalization. Meanwhile, there is a paucity of studies that focus on boundary spanners and their role in UCE institutionalization within contexts that are similar to the one in focus in the present study (characterized by (1) transnational academic capitalism, (2) the lack of academic and policy support for UCE, and (3) an illiberal political setting).

To fill this research gap, the present study addresses the following question: What is the role of boundary spanners in the institutionalization of UCE in hostile settings, characterized by (1) transnational academic capitalism, (2) the lack of academic and policy support of UCE, and (3) an illiberal political setting?

The study examines four units with diverse characteristics in terms of their place in university structures and their disciplinary focus, all initiated by boundary spanners from the bottom up. We use an autoethnographic approach: reflexive texts and dialogues produced by boundary spanners (as co-authors of the present paper) working in the four units.

The article starts by introducing the role of boundary spanners in the institutionalization of UCE, before introducing the context and methodology of the empirical study. Results, a discussion, and conclusions are then provided.

Institutionalization of UCE

In several countries, including the USA, some African nations, and certain Asian countries, community engagement (CE) is already acknowledged and integrated as a fundamental responsibility of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Chupp et al., 2021; Saidi & Boti, 2023; Spânu et al., 2024). Nevertheless, in most regions and countries, if implemented at all, it is still sporadic, linked to single individuals or small research groups, and typically voluntary (not remunerated in monetary/performance terms) (Benneworth & Osborne, 2014). This means that it is a strategically peripheral *"Cinderella mission"* or "*orphan mission*" (Benneworth et al., 2018) within HEIs overburdened with missions and tasks. A regional specificity of Central and Eastern Europe is the fact that the third mission of universities is very strongly focused on business relations (Gál & Ptaček, 2011). By definition, institutionalizing UCE involves integrating all UCE-related processes and activities within the host institution, both at the university level and, more importantly, within the HEIs of a country (Bruning et al., 2006; Koekkoek et al., 2021). Institutionalizing UCE has become a crucial issue, particularly as UCE is not only able to bring significant changes to local communities (Bhagwan, 2020), but its benefits also extend to the academic actors involved, such as faculty, staff, and students (Benneworth et al., 2018).

The case of African universities indicates that the key factors of institutionalizing UCE include: (1) mission, vision, and policies; (2) embedding UCE within teaching and research; (3) the involvement of academics; (4) student involvement; (5) building an institutional culture; (6) institutional support; (7) community partnerships; and (8) rewarding engagement (Bhagwan, 2020). Others suggest that the key indicators of institutionalizing UCE include administrative and academic leadership, internal resource allocation, boundary spanner roles and rewards, and community voice (Hollander et al., 2002). Meanwhile,

besides CE being integral to research and teaching, becoming more intentionally integrated into academic programming, becoming immersed in the work, and creating mutually beneficial partnerships and interdisciplinary approaches, another critical factor of institutionalizing UCE is time (Furco, 2014): institutionalization of UCE is a long-term process that can last over a decade.

The Boundary Spanner

In the context of UCE, the term *boundary spanner* refers to an individual who serves as a mediator, establishing connections and fostering collaboration between the academic institution and the surrounding community (Petersen & Kruss, 2021; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Research has been conducted to explore the concept of UCE boundary spanners and their functions in facilitating the successful implementation of UCE (Corsi et al., 2021; Pilbeam & Jamieson, 2010; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Weerts and Sandmann (2010) offer the most widely used typology and theoretical background to assess the role of UCE boundary spanners (Table 1).

Here, community-based problem-solvers have the closest ties to the community and focus on technical and practical tasks in UCE. They are usually members of professional academic staff and often come from community organizing or practitioner backgrounds that equip them to be responsive to community demands. Technical experts focus on technical tasks within the university, have deep disciplinary knowledge, and contribute to the collaboration as subject specialists and researchers. Internal engagement advocates, like technical experts, are closer to the university than communities. They focus on creating engagement-friendly structures, budgets, reward systems, and promotion and tenure guidelines and are usually academic deans or provost executives (managers). Finally, the work of engagement champions has a stronger external dimension: they focus on creating alliances and organizational networks to support engagement (including fund-raising and political action). Meanwhile, they also play a symbolic role by acting as a sign of campus commitment to both internal and external stakeholders.

Table 1.

UCE Boundary-Spanning Roles

	Community-focused	Institutionally focused
Technical, practical tasks	**Community-based problem-solver:** focus on site-based problem support, resource acquisition, and partnership development	**Technical expert:** emphasis on knowledge creation for applied purposes (disciplinary or multidisciplinary)
Socio-emotional leadership tasks	**Engagement champion:** focus on building external, political, and intra-organizational support; roles may be symbolic	**Internal engagement advocate:** builds campus capacity for engagement (rewards, promotions, tenure, budget, and hiring)

Source: Adapted from Weerts & Sandmann (2010)

Although this typology is widely used and reinforced by scholars (Addie, 2017; Collien, 2021; Petersen & Kruss, 2021), some have indicated that the roles of UCE boundary spanners cannot be rigidly categorized into distinct types (Burbach et al., 2023), as the fluctuating nature of their tasks leads them to shift from one role to another and their roles may be unpredictable.

Besides being the most widely used typology of boundary spanner roles in relation to implementing UCE, the typology developed by Weerts and Sandmann (2010) (Table 1) provides clear and distinct analytical categories to assess the roles boundary spanners play in UCE implementation; therefore, we

use it as an analytical framework below to facilitate the empirical analysis related to our research question.

Context, Cases, and Methods

Context

As the role of boundary spanners in UCE institutionalization is context dependent, three aspects of the context of the present study are important to emphasize here.

First, in accordance with international (global) tendencies, transnational academic capitalism (Hazelkorn, 2018) also strongly determines the academic context in Hungary. Universities increasingly need to compete for resources and prioritize effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, and transparency (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017). The provision of a suitable workforce for the labor market becomes the main task of universities, which are under general pressure to generate an increasing share of their revenues to supplement public funding, and their performance is increasingly measured by quantitative efficiency indicators (economic indicators and rankings) set by international organizations (Hazelkorn, 2018). Within such a context, competition has become an end rather than a means (Calhoun, 2006), and the tension between excellence (i.e., the ability to publish scholarship) and accessibility (i.e., making the knowledge production process accessible to external, including marginalized, stakeholders) is becoming increasingly intense, with the former being supported at the expense of the latter. Such a "marketization" of universities has resulted in a shift from community- to customer-based university funding (Goddard et al., 2016): the community discourse of universities has been replaced by market, labor market, and commercial discourse, and the focus has shifted to attracting international talent (and money) rather than on moving toward CE.

Second, besides such global tendencies, there are also local (regional) specificities, including the historical general lack of academic and policy support for UCE. National policymaking in Hungary in relation to UCE can be evaluated as hostile (Málovics, 2024a), and there is lack of knowledge of UCE within academia (Málovics, 2024b).

Third, the illiberal transformation (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018) of the Hungarian state has created unique conditions in relation to UCE. Illiberal democracy refers to regimes that combine certain democratic procedures (e.g., a multi-party system and general elections) with a lack of constitutional limits to power and protection of citizens' individual rights. Principles of illiberalism include populism (organizational), anti-pluralism, and ideological monism (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). Illiberal contexts pose a variety of challenges for civil society organizations (CSOs): the legal and political environment is increasingly hostile as the state aims to control civil society rather than enable citizen participation (Gerő et al., 2022). This means (1) radical cuts in state (and also international) funding for "non-loyal" CSOs or non-governmental organizations (NGOs); (2) creating a hostile public attitude toward them by stigmatizing them as "foreign agents" working against "the nation"; and (3) using state power (e.g., authorities) to economically and administratively hinder their work (Ágh, 2016; Batory, 2016; Gerő et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the Hungarian government regime is based on a "politics of revenge" (Udvarhelyi, 2014): it has become a political strategy to blame "enemies" of "Hungarians" for all the problems of Hungarian society. Such "enemies" include people and groups that are different compared to white middle-class Hungarians; for example, homeless people (Udvarhelyi, 2014), refugees/migrants (Kallius et al., 2016), or Roma (Bartha et al., 2020). Finally, almost all Hungarian state universities were placed under the control of so-called public interest foundations by 2022. Newly created "boards" gained considerable power and authority over the institutions (Kováts et al., 2024). This constitutes a process of power centralization (Éltető & Martin, 2024), as there is a high proportion of politicians among board members with lifetime employment (membership) (Kováts et al., 2024), all of whom were appointed by the present illiberal political regime, not independently of their perceived political loyalty.

All these add up to a hostile context in relation to UCE, where:

- The academy (HEIs) is focused on competitiveness, efficiency, growth, business relations, and training for the labor market: aspects that often contradict the core goals and values (cooperation, empowerment of the marginalized, social justice, and environmental sustainability) of UCE (on the nature of these contradictions see, e.g., Gould et al., 2015; Piketty & Saez, 2014; Richardson et al., 2023; Spash, 2020);
- UCE is a neglected area of academic life on the parts of both policymakers and academic institutions; and
- The illiberal political context means resource-poor and stigmatized CSOs; "undeserving" (Gans, 1994), marginalized minorities who are stigmatized and discriminated against by the state and increasing xenophobia (Kende & Krekó, 2020) among the general population; and increased direct state power and reduced institutional autonomy for HEIs.

The Cases (UCE Units)

The four university units in this study are relatively small (with few members, including the authors of the present study) within four large Hungarian universities. Two of them [Research Center, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Szeged (hereinafter referred to as Research Center), and Research Center for Minor Media/Culture, Faculty of Arts, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (hereinafter referred to as Minor Media)] are placed in the conventional academic structure characteristic of Hungary: they function as units at the level of/within departments. In Hungary, universities are usually divided into colleges/schools that are further divided into institutes and departments. These units and academics are responsible for activities that constitute the first two missions of universities: education and research. Meanwhile, two other units [Social Design Hub, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design (hereinafter referred to as Social Design Hub), and Corvinus Science Shop, Corvinus University of Budapest (hereinafter referred to as Science Shop)] are parts of their universities' research and development infrastructure with a direct focus on socially impactful research and development. It is common in all four cases for fully/partly employed members to carry out socially impactful and cooperative research and/or educational activities, a rather uncommon phenomenon in a Hungarian higher education context. These four cases were selected for the purpose of this study, as they include all known institutionalized UCE units (functioning as distinct organizational units at their host universities) within Hungarian higher education.

Social Design Hub *[workplace for Bori Fehér (BF), Janka Csernák (JCs), and Rita Szerencsés (RSz)]*

Social Design Hub is an interdisciplinary social design research community. After 10 years of being a research group, it was launched in 2020 with a focus on creating a long-term social impact through internal and external partnerships. It collaborates with NGOs, municipal governments, educational institutions, research institutes, and companies. It uses practice-based design research frameworks and participatory processes in its activities. It also involves interdisciplinary and cross-departmental research, development, and innovation (RDI) courses to enhance student engagement. Major forms of partnership activities include workshops, summer courses, and intensive course weeks as well as joint research projects. Members learn about different communities while solving local problems through a shared design and creative process (Csernák et al., 2022; Fehér & Szerencsés, 2023).

Minor Media *[workplace for András Müllner (AM)]*

Established in 2017, Minor Media aims to improve the role of media education in fostering democratic media representation and socially just representation. It grew out of a Roma documentary film program and has expanded gradually since 2011, fostering Roma acceptance in social deliberations and negotiations through film screenings, events, courses, and collaborations with communities, involving numerous participants and organizations (Müllner, 2023). Minor Media engages youth and professionals through video media workshops and summer camps as participatory media projects. It uses the catalyst method (Haragonics, 2023) and offers an academic program in participatory video, action research, arts-based research, community radio, and journalism.

Research Center *[workplace for Andi Sri Wahyuni (ASW), György Málovics (GyM), Judit Juhász (JJ), and Zoltán Bajmócy (ZB)]*

In 2011, this unit began a participatory action research (PAR)-based UCE partnership. The project aimed to provide support for and was carried out in cooperation with segregated Roma communities living in extreme poverty in southern Hungary (Málovics et al., 2021). In 2017, a service-learning course was established to link students and local CSOs (Juhász et al., 2021). The course has been collaborating with 12 to 15 local CSOs each semester ever since. The unit has addressed college/school- and university-level equality strategy issues since 2018 (Málovics, Juhász, et al., 2022). Additionally, unit members have started an action-oriented research collaboration with hearing-impaired youth, visually impaired people, and supportive local stakeholders since 2021 (Mihók et al., 2023).

Science Shop *[workplace for Márta Frigyik (MF), and Réka Matolay (RM)]*

Science Shop was established in 2017 and has been designated as a competence center since 2021. Competence centers like Science Shop are university units that provide support for all academic citizens in learning languages, for example. Science Shop builds on a service-learning course with a history of more than 15 years. It facilitates mutual learning between university and community partners, focusing on impactful co-creation with responsibility as a science shop. As a competence center, the Science Shop contributes to the upskilling of faculty, staff, and students in community-engaged research and learning, supports the (re-)design and implementation of courses for CE, and matches faculty and students with community partners.

Science Shop aims to provide meaningful responses to social problems and promote community well-being through diverse partnerships with CSOs. It engages university faculty, researchers, and students in course projects, thesis work, internships, and teaching assistant positions. Since the launch, more than 50 community partners and more than 50 members of school faculty have partnered in CE, and 700–900 students per academic year have participated in responding to community questions.

Methods

This study adopts an analytical autoethnographic approach: as a qualitative research approach, it uses the personal experiences of actors to describe and interpret cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (ethno-) (Adams et al., 2017; Ellis, 2000). In using this method, researchers gain an insightful and rigorous understanding of their sociocultural experiences and issues (Ellis et al., 2011; Roy & Uekusa, 2020). “In autoethnography, your life is data” (Rothman, 2007, p. 14).

Analytical autoethnography was chosen as a research method, as the authors themselves can be considered boundary spanners, who have been successful in institutionalizing UCE at HEIs in Hungary. Consequently, they possess relevant knowledge related to the institutionalization of UCE from the perspective of boundary spanning. An approach that is both analytical and self-reflexive was therefore necessary (to support our own reflection on our own work and) to produce valid knowledge in relation to our research question. Since all the participants were involved in co-authorship roles in this study (Table 2), this explicitly indicates that ethical approval for involving human subjects is not required.

Table 2.

Units, Authors, and Data Collection Techniques

Units: authors	Issues and communities	Authors and data provided**
Social Design Hub: BF, JCs, and RSz	Interdisciplinary social design research community with NGOs, municipal governments, educational institutions, research institutes, and companies.	• BF, JCs, and RSz: Reflexive dialogues initiated (10,962 words) by GyM
Minor Media: AM	Media education for Roma community with youth and professionals.	• AM: Reflexive dialogues initiated (9,781 words) by GyM
Research Center: ASW, GyM, JJ, and ZB	PAR and student service-learning with marginalized local community.	• ASW* • GyM: Reflexive texts written (3,185 words) and reflexive dialogues initiated (7,145 words) by JJ • JJ: Reflexive texts written (4,175 words) and reflexive dialogues initiated (5,648 words) by ZB • ZB: Reflexive texts written (3,617 words) and reflexive dialogues initiated (7,632 words) by JJ
Science Shop: MF and RM	Responding to social problems and promoting community well-being through diverse partnerships with CSOs.	• MF and RM: Reflexive dialogues initiated (8,406 words) by GyM

**ASW did not join the team as the initiator of the unit, so she did not provide any reflections. Instead, she worked as a Ph.D. researcher within unit 3 under the supervision of GyM. In this regard, ASW positioned herself as both an insider and an outsider.*

***Data were collected in Hungarian and subsequently translated into English.*

Source: Authors (2024)

Two data collection instruments were used: reflexive texts and reflexive dialogues (Table 2). Reflexive texts have evolved into a fundamental element of reflective practice, facilitating the enhancement of the author's critical thinking and analytical skills (Jasper, 2005). Reflexive texts can support the emergence of fresh perspectives on one's role as a boundary spanner in the institutionalization of UCE. In this case, reflexive texts are written analytical autoethnographic self-reflections that were produced and used by members of unit 3 to reflect on their own work. An unstructured historical reflection on the process (including milestones and eye-opening moments) of this UCE work was followed by structured (analytical) reflection on common topics, including:

- the goals of UCE cooperation and how these are shaped (influenced/initiated) by different participants;
- the way local communities participate in UCE;
- boundary spanners' (our own) roles in UCE processes;
- forms and quality of engagement of different actors;
- "the community" (who is actually involved in UCE as a "community");
- power relations within the UCE process (within the university and between academic and non-academic participants) and how these influence UCE; and
- the challenges of the UCE process in relation to its initial/original goals (of meaningfully supporting the empowerment of the marginalized, social justice, and sustainability).

Meanwhile, reflexive dialogues provide researchers with the flexibility to incorporate essential questions related to the topic while simultaneously permitting both participants to deviate from the

established structure to delve deeper into the issue (Braun & Clarke, 2021), as interviewers provide some key questions based on predetermined interview topics and the interviewee has the opportunity to elaborate on their views freely. The main themes (topics) explored in the process of reflexive dialogues were related to the units that boundary spanners work for, including:

- their (our) personal and professional background and personal histories of boundary spanning;
- non-academic communities involved, forms of cooperation, and activities;
- the impact of UCE on the actors involved and the wider society;
- their (our) UCE-related success and failure stories and challenges, including initiating, popularizing, and institutionalizing UCE in their (our) own institutions; and
- the status of UCE within Hungary.

In order to maintain a degree of distance from the data, we included outsider and insider perspectives (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). First, all the co-authors play active boundary-spanning roles in the cases analyzed, with the exception of ASW. While the primary data collection process was carried out by nine boundary spanners involved in this study, ASW was responsible for the data processing. As a Ph.D. researcher within the Research Center under the supervision of GyM, ASW positioned herself as both an insider and an outsider. Second, besides reflexive texts, certain authors carried out deep and reflexive dialogues with co-author boundary spanners. Finally, all the authors read the initial analysis by ASW and engaged in related critical reflection (debate).

This study used thematic analysis (TA), which is appropriate for qualitative analysis of both reflexive texts (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and semistructured interviews (Evans & Lewis, 2018). Data were manually coded and synthesized by ASW using Microsoft Excel.

First, the transcripts were divided into columns in Excel by boundary-spanner participants. ASW then grouped the themes into categories: (1) the initiation of UCE; (2) the motivation of boundary spanners; (3) target communities and the impact of activities on these communities; (4) the role of boundary spanners in the institutionalization process of their units; and (5) success and failure stories in UCE programs. The primary analysis focused on coding theme 4, as it is the theme that directly addresses the research question; meanwhile, the other four themes supported the data analysis process. All reflexive texts and interview transcripts were used in the analysis. ASW selected the quotes that were included in this paper to serve as "representative" evidence. All the means above were used by ASW to carry out the initial analysis (including identifying and categorizing themes) and write an initial draft on her own. This document was later sent to all the co-authors to check the trustworthiness of ASW's interpretations. Discrepancies were reconciled through personal and online discussions among all the co-authors, with discussions continued until a consensus was reached. These discussions led to some modifications in the final text, for example, related to the context of the study and to the factors that influence UCE institutionalization within this context.

Results

Below, we present our results in a descriptive manner in relation to our research question.

Within Social Design Hub, BF holds the leadership role, with JCs and RSz actively contributing as researchers. The initiative to establish a UCE unit was rooted in an interest in exploring the role of design within the context of social sustainability, meaning that the genesis of this unit can be attributed to the enthusiastic involvement of these three boundary spanners, who had been actively engaged as designers working on a wide array of sustainability-related topics.

This unit was first conceived to bring the discipline of design to the community and to make design address societal issues more effectively. In addition, this initiative brings a new dimension to design education and research at the university by fostering a collaborative model that closely aligns with the needs of the surrounding community. As BF stated,

> the way we operate now, because the university is always evolving, is related to the change of the university model. A research and innovation center has been established within the university,

> where there are these different research hubs, dealing with horizontal knowledge, which operate independently of graduate education but in cooperation with it. So, we also teach, but a significant part of our time is spent on implementing research projects. . . . It is practice-based design research that we do.

In its initial stages, during the 2010s, pilot projects were undertaken.

> . . . we experimented with different formats as regards how design can be used for creativity development, seeking new perspectives, and so we implemented various summer courses, research projects, and especially design projects. (BF)

As the university aims to be the leading university in the region in the area of design, it is greatly interested in showing (communicating) its commitment to social design processes as part of a state-of-the-art sustainability agenda—this motivation on the part of university management significantly contributed to (legitimized) the establishment of Social Design Hub. Social Design Hub also initiated the creation of its own international social design network: an international community of social design educators, researchers, and practitioners. By being connected to this international group, Social Design Hub participates in knowledge exchange, contributes to the production of common publications, and engages in large-scale, UCE-related research projects.

Minor Media is led by AM. His experience in avant-garde art forms sensitized him to the role experimentalism can play in subverting powerful visual conventions. Later, he became involved in a documentary film program that engaged university students, social scientists, and film professionals as post-screening roundtable guests. The program aimed to operate through non-conventional pedagogical methods that revitalized university education and has been providing an opportunity for learning from and networking with various communities and cultural institutions ever since.

In 2017, a selected volume of department staff studies was published based on AM's initiative, which encompassed the questions and challenges faced by university scholars, such as media and social researchers, related to the absence of democratic media spaces and the prevalence of hegemonic representations in the context of minority–majority relationships. It was during the publication of this book that AM proposed the establishment of Minor Media within the university department. This process was strengthened by the research group winning a significant and academically respected Hungarian research grant in relation to participatory video (an NKFIH-OTKA grant).

GyM, who initiated unit 3 together with ZB, had years of experience working with marginalized communities before.

> It started in my summers in the USA, when I worked with economically underprivileged children from the ghetto in a summer camp. . . . Later, I studied and started to work according to conventional educational and research standards, e.g., reading and writing journal articles about sustainability issues, radical approaches, etc. My volunteer work used to exist totally separated from my educational, research, and publication activities. . . . Later, I found the approach of participatory action research to merge these two. . . . It expanded with the creation of the Research Center. The colleagues have adopted similar approaches. We tried to connect university work with social impact, community engagement. (GyM)

During the process of organizing and legitimizing these approaches within their institutions, GyM and ZB worked closely together, as they shared the vision of how academia could contribute to society. Initially, GyM had more experience with marginalized communities and PAR, leading to outstanding international publication activity compared with college/school standards. Together with ZB, both can be considered successful scholars in a Hungarian context, indicated by the fact that both of them have won the scholarship granted by the Hungarian National Academy of Sciences for outstanding young researchers (below the age of 45), for example. Meanwhile, ZB's background was more oriented toward interactions with academics and scientific forums focusing on the role of universities in contributing to communities, especially marginalized ones. In the UCE institutionalization process, ZB took on more

leadership roles within the university, especially when he filled the position of vice-dean at the college/school where Research Center is located. Despite this position, during the implementation process, ZB remained actively involved as an instructor and worked directly with the community and representatives of the CSOs.

Meanwhile, in the initial stages, the arrival of JJ as a "newcomer" in Research Center facilitated technical work that bridged the gap between the university and the community. JJ's Ph.D. research focused on poverty issues and adopted a non-positivist approach, at certain points also participating in PAR initiatives. She played a pivotal role in the successful implementation of a student service-learning course held every semester, which became a significant sign of Research Center's presence both at the school and within the local community (among CSOs). She joined the group to manage student service-learning, without any obligation from any party, purely because she wanted to contribute to the social impact of education. As she stated:

> . . . education itself, even frontal classroom education, can be very, very good. But, personally, I have no added value at that level. I can't attract attention, maintain it, and pass on valuable knowledge at the same time in a conventional classroom setting. . . . I probably could have added value in the scientific part, but I don't have a team for that, as I compensate with social engagement, which I also enjoy at the same time, and I also consider it valuable, as it has many socially useful results, the ones I already listed.

This type of bottom-up motivation is also demonstrated by a statement made by ZB, who believes that self-commitment is crucial for initiating and running their UCE unit in a context where UCE is initiated by grassroots academic actors without adequate institutional support.

> If we don't cooperate with them or if we don't respond to any of their questions, it obviously doesn't endanger our operations at any level or our individual position within academia. Clearly, our internal commitments and value choices are behind all of this.

Recently, Research Center was officially requested to plan (and later run) a university-wide Community Engagement Center after the university participated in an (initially) unsuccessful international accreditation process related to UCE. This work is in progress at the time of the submission of the present paper.

As for Science Shop, its history involves various processes and actors as well as diverse dynamics and resources. As a first step, two academics who had an idea about the role of higher education in society started to shape their own pedagogical approaches toward service-learning and then found ways to spread the notion and practices of CE first to colleagues and then to university decision makers. In 2006, the two lecturers, RM and her colleague, co-founded the Social Entrepreneurs and Social Economy course, which not only introduced a new field (social enterprises) into the curriculum but also a new teaching methodology at the university by engaging students and social entrepreneurs in course collaborations. They have built a broad network of social enterprises and CSOs, that is, the first community partners of the later unit 4. In parallel, they started to be involved in the international network of science shops, first attracting an international science shop summer school to their university and then persuading a handful of the faculty to attend the Living Knowledge Conference, the international gathering of the science shop network, in 2016. This was an important milestone for both internal engagement and external legitimacy.

Writing a proposal for the establishment of this unit, this group of faculty members has become the science shop team (besides RM and four other colleagues). The international support and the intensive advocacy work within the university played a central role in institutionalization. (They not only organized the next Living Knowledge Conference at their university and became a partner in a related Horizon project as part of an international coalition of respected European universities; they also highlighted connections to responsibility, sustainability, engagement, and impact expectations in international accreditation, as well as building a research culture.) Science Shop was opened in 2017, and the Science Shop manager position was created: a non-academic, full-time position to provide CE

support. When Science Shop was upgraded to a competence center, RM became the head; MF currently has this role.

As the four cases above show, the idea of establishing UCE units was explicitly rooted in the personal ideas of the boundary spanners in all cases. This idea did not arise suddenly but was cultivated over years of experience, both in direct engagement with communities and within academic environments. The culmination of these experiences led boundary spanners to undertake a shared mission tying the needs of communities to actors within their institutions.

Discussion

Characteristics that influence UCE implementation in relation to boundary-spanners' roles are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3.

Boundary Spanners and UCE Implementation

Characteristics/Factors that influence UCE institutionalization	**Units: authors**			
	Social Design Hub: BF, JCs, and RSz	Minor Media: AM	Research Center: ASW, GyM, JJ, and ZB	Science Shop: MF and RM
Initial institutional support and the role of bottom-up initiatives	Lack of institutional/legal support for UCE (no rewards for UCE) —> bottom-up initiatives for UCE institutionalization			
Boundary-spanner roles in UCE institutionalization	Multiple and diffuse roles of boundary spanners in UCE institutionalization instead of discrete and well-defined roles			
Legitimization of UCE claims made to institutional management	Proving UCE's usefulness in relation to conventional academic standards/missions by showing that UCE supports:			
	Connection to international professional networks; meeting international professional standards.	Access to prestigious national (Hungarian) tenders and scholarships.	International accreditation processes; connection to international professional networks; high-quality publications.	International accreditation processes; connection to international professional networks.
UCE and the wider political context (transnational academic capitalism and illiberal political setting)	Multiple challenges and opportunities as a result of the parallel presence of the often-conflicting demands of transnational academic capitalism and the illiberal political setting.			

Source: Authors (2024)

Lack of Initial Institutional Support: UCE from the Bottom Up

These results show the emergence of officially recognized (institutionalized) UCE units—a rather exceptional situation in Hungary, where the concept of UCE is not an integral part of the local higher education culture, nor has it been institutionalized or supported under any legal framework (Málovics, 2024b), thus clearly creating a barrier to UCE institutionalization. This means no direct (e.g., financial) compensation for UCE-related work is provided, indicating the initial absence of several key elements that are supposed to be crucial to the success of UCE, as suggested by previous research (Bhagwan, 2020): institutional support and rewarding engagement. These two key factors that significantly influence the sustainability of UCE programs (Benneworth & Osborne, 2014; Bhagwan, 2020) do not obtain in Hungarian academia in relation to UCE. Meanwhile, prior research has also indicated that a lack of

recognition, such as rewards, inhibits UCE at institutions and relegates it to a lesser status compared to teaching and research (Driscoll, 2008; Sandmann, 2006). Therefore, the institution's rituals, awards, and ceremonies should recognize the value of CE, with prior research indicating that it should be "celebrated" (Beere et al., 2011, p. 38).

Such an initial lack of state- and/or university-level motivation for supporting UCE leads to a situation where UCE needs to be initiated from the bottom up; indeed, the long-term commitment and dedicated work of boundary spanners play a key role in UCE institutionalization. Their work is mostly driven by personal commitment (not an uncommon situation internationally; see (Benneworth & Osborne, 2014; Levin, 2012), rather than being something inherently present and supported in HEIs in Hungary.

Multiple and Diffuse Roles of Boundary Spanners in UCE Institutionalization

Within such a resource-poor setting, boundary spanners play multiple and diffuse roles during the institutionalization process. In the case of Social Design Hub, the role of leadership was held by BF. However, in the process of carrying out cooperative projects, all three boundary spanners (BF, JCs, and RSz) actively and directly collaborated with the community. Similarly, in Research Center, although ZB held a leadership position at his school, he was directly involved in continuous and intense contact with numerous local CSOs as an instructor in a service-learning course and numerous science shop-like cooperative efforts. Meanwhile, in the case of Minor Media, due to limited resources, the initial unit had only one staff member (AM) performing both leadership and technical tasks while being directly involved in collaborative work with the community. In Science Shop, RM and her colleague were long engaged with community partners, and later (a) unit 4 manager(s) joined them in this activity. All of the boundary spanners have worked both within the university and in the community. Therefore, typologies that allocate different roles to different people (boundary spanners) within UCE institutionalization processes (Corsi et al., 2021; Pilbeam & Jamieson, 2010; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010) do not seem to apply to a context where UCE units are still in the process of initialization in an academic environment that is more or less unfamiliar with UCE as a concept. Within such a setting, groups of boundary spanners who aim to institutionalize UCE had to (1) take on leadership roles (leading university units, e.g., "conventional" institutions that are responsible for research and education and science–society units, and participating in school management); (2) engage in institutional lobbying activities (to secure resources and institutional embedding); (3) carry out significant research and publication activities; (4) experiment with new forms and combinations of research and education to move toward participative, inclusive, and socially impactful research and education (including approaches like science shop, service-learning, social design, PAR, participatory video, summer schools, and field trips); (5) work as project managers (initiating domestic and international projects, arranging, running, and managing applications/tenders); (6) actively participate in international professional and local non-academic networking activities (e.g., being part of local NGOs and CSOs themselves and supporting the emergence of new NGO/CSO networks); and (7) cooperate/work directly with (and being present in the life of) non-academic (marginalized) communities.

Fluctuating and Interchangeably Applied Boundary-Spanning Skills

Taking the most cited typology as an example (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010), a single boundary spanner can both act as a community-based problem-solver and simultaneously serve as a technical expert. An example of this is GyM, who has close ties to the Roma community, thus playing a vital role in understanding its needs while also being involved in technical tasks in the process of institutionalizing Research Center, and is an active scholar of poverty, marginalization, and UCE (Málovics, Bajmócy, et al., 2022; Málovics, Juhász, et al., 2022). Given limited resources and institutional support, boundary spanners need to take on multiple roles (those noted above at the very end of section 6.2), for example, establishing relationships and interconnections between university and community at the same time to enhance the more effective management of complex issues. This finding aligns with a line of research that has found that the frequency of using these boundary-spanning skills fluctuates at different stages of the engagement process and specific skills are employed interchangeably (Burbach et al., 2023).

Legitimization of Claims for UCE Institutionalization: The Role of UCE in Institutional Success within Transnational Academic Capitalism

Since the desirability of institutionalizing (even supporting) UCE is not present at the institutional (university) level, boundary spanners also need to legitimize their claims of UCE institutionalization for institutional management. A potential source for proving institutional "usefulness" is the positive impact of UCE on international accreditation processes, as shown by the examples of Research Center and Science Shop. Another source might be being able to connect to prestigious scholarly networks run by prestigious (European) universities and academic partners, Social Design Hub, Research Center, and Science Shop being examples. Furthermore, usefulness might also be proven by producing publications in high-quality scholarly journals with alternative/unusual UCE-related approaches/methodologies—in the present case, especially PAR, as the case of Minor Media shows. Finally, meeting international professional standards to perform well in international academic competition is also important here, as shown by the example of Social Design Hub.

Thus, legitimizing UCE is related to its support for the host university to perform better within international academic competition (capitalism) (Hazelkorn, 2018) by contributing to the conventional missions of universities. International (educational) accreditation processes are perceived to contribute to attracting students in an international environment, high-quality publications contribute to better university ranking positions (as indicators of academic excellence), and participation in prestigious international (European) networks might contribute to both of these activities while potentially also representing direct revenues for the host institution.

In addition, performance according to national indicators of academic success might also play a role here. Financial support in the form of influential national research grants and scholarships also contributes to strengthening the position (legitimacy) of UCE-like activities within HEIs, as the examples of Minor Media and Research Center show.

Transnational Academic Capitalism, an Illiberal Political Setting, the Institutionalization of UCE, and Related Contradictions

Reflecting on the wider political context of UCE, all these mean that certain standards of transnational academic capitalism (Hazelkorn, 2018)—that is, on a fundamental (ontological) level, represent a significant barrier to UCE, as introduced in section 3.1—open spaces for bottom-up UCE institutionalization in resource-poor, illiberal political settings, as universities face multiple expectations. As loyalty is a core expectation in the illiberal politics of universities under strict state control (Éltető & Martin, 2024), academics who are part of the Hungarian HEI system working with social groups/communities who are stigmatized by the state itself (e.g., Roma, homeless people, and other minority groups) (Bartha et al., 2020; Kallius et al., 2016; Udvarhelyi, 2014) constitute, at first glance, a counterhegemonic act in itself. However, besides domestic political expectations, HEIs also need to be successful in international competition, both as an internal institutional expectation and as an expectation of the illiberal state (as funder), since international competitiveness not only provides revenues (e.g., by attracting international students and through research grants) but also a core element of academic success that needs to be communicated. This means that activities that support international institutional competitiveness (in the present case, international accreditation processes, high-quality publications as elements of rankings, research excellence, and revenues) might also be supported even if these counteract the expectation of loyalty. This means that if boundary spanners are able to show the contribution of UCE to these achievements, UCE might still be supported intuitionally—even if such institutional support seemingly counteracts the expectation of loyalty. This is because UCE involves working with people and communities that are evaluated and stigmatized as "undeserving others," in reference to the "undeserving poor" concept (Gans, 1994), as an analogy by those possessing political power at the moment.

It is probably the recognition of this tension between loyalty (understood as supporting the political goals of the illiberal state) and quality (understood as contributing to international academic

competitiveness) that motivated the illiberal Hungarian state to establish parallel research institutions and university-like organizations for the social sciences to reflect its ideological foundation, instead of turning conventional and academically still competitive Hungarian universities into institutions that exclusively serve state ideology. While these newly created institutions are under strong state direction to employ loyal people in a generously financed manner to support state ideology and power (Éltető & Martin, 2024), conventional Hungarian universities as academically more competitive institutions (even though placed under the control of public interest foundations to be more directly state-controlled [Kováts et al., 2024]) do not necessarily meet direct loyalty expectations in relation to serving state ideology.

Even though all this seems to show that transnational academic capitalism might support the spread and institutionalization in an illiberal context, the situation is more complex. In addition to creating opportunities, UCE within a transnational academic concept is still only considered to have instrumental value—it only seems to be recognized and supported by university management because it contributes to institutional competitiveness. Such an approach (attitude) always involves the potential for co-optation (see, e.g., Greenwood & Levin [1998] in relation to supporting socially impactful science versus replicating existing social arrangements). The present research shows that the level of institutional support for UCE initiatives is negligible compared to the size and resources of host institutions and that UCE institutionalization is clearly not transforming any HEIs. Such tendencies, on the one hand, show that the timeframe needed to institutionalize UCE in a non-supportive (hostile) environment might be even longer compared with the also significant (decade(s)-long) time needed in more supportive environments (Furco, 2014). On the other hand, this should also make boundary spanners in such contexts cautious in relation to their achievements: even if they (we) are proud of what they (we) have achieved, taking one step back, institutionalized UCE initiatives still seem to be minor efforts on the part of universities that probably use these to legitimize their own roles and (lack of/contradictory) social impacts within transnational academic capitalism rather than meaningfully contributing to social change for social justice and sustainability, as has happened according to critiques tied to corporate social responsibility (Kallio, 2007) and corporate sustainability (Springett, 2003), for example.

Diversity within One Context

Besides experiencing the same phenomena in relation to the context that influences UCE implementation (lack of institutional support, multiple roles to be performed for UCE to be institutionalized, the need for legitimization, and multiple challenges caused by the parallel presence of transnational academic capitalism and the illiberal political context), there is also diversity in the concrete roles and activities that boundary spanners play in UCE institutionalization within different HEIs. For example, in relation to legitimization claims, the contribution of UCE to linking prestigious international professional networks seems to be a general pattern (for Social Design Hub, Research Center, and Science Shop). As for Social Design Hub, it is a professional expectation of the hosting HEI on the part of the international professional community to demonstrate its commitment to social design processes as part of its sustainability agenda if it wants to succeed as the leading university regionally in the area of design. Meanwhile, in Research Center and Science Shop, the contribution of UCE to international educational and engagement accreditation processes also plays an important role, while in Minor Media, it is access to prestigious national (Hungarian) tenders and scholarships that serve as a source of legitimization. Furthermore, for Research Center is the institutionally outstanding publication performance of the unit's members that was key to legitimization.

This diversity also means that, even though boundary spanners perform multiple and diffuse roles in UCE institutionalization in all cases (see 6.2), the fact that they usually work in teams means that there is typically a division of labor among them that allows for a certain level of differentiation in boundary-spanner skills and tasks: we find examples for both leadership-oriented, community (activist)-oriented, and research-oriented boundary spanners—even though all of them (us) participate in multiple tasks (including research, activism, and institutional advocacy) to a certain extent.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the role of boundary spanners in institutionalizing UCE in multiple hostile settings. Our results show that, in a context characterized by (1) transnational academic capitalism, (2) a general lack of knowledge of and institutional and/or policy support for UCE, and (3) an illiberal political context, resulting in an absence of top-down support and barriers to recognition and rewards, institutionalization might come from the bottom up, meaning that boundary spanners indeed play a pivotal role in UCE institutionalization. As boundary spanners struggle with resource scarcity and the absence of a familiar and supportive environment, they undertake multiple roles and engage in multitasking as individuals motivated by UCE institutionalization.

Multiple and Conflicting Hostilities as Barriers to Meaningful UCE Institutionalization: An Illiberal Political Context and Transnational Academic Capitalism

Even though both transnational academic capitalism and illiberal state politics represent a fundamentally hostile context (and thus another set of barriers) for UCE, their impact is different. In an illiberal local (national) context, the global context determined by transnational academic capitalism might even open up spaces for boundary spanners for UCE institutionalization (working with and for social groups that are stigmatized and oppressed by the illiberal state itself). Legitimization is of vital importance here: provided boundary spanners are able to prove the usefulness of such work (UCE institutionalization) in relation to the conventional (educational and research) missions of universities and thus its positive impacts in relation to the core expectations of transnational academic capitalism.

Such "support" is instrumental: UCE is not normatively important, but it is a tool to contribute to institutional (and national) competitiveness. Such an instrumentalization has the risk of leading to co-optation, whereas it is the communication of institutional change (for social justice and sustainability) that is important, independently of the presence (or lack) of actual and meaningful institutional change.

This highlights that it is not only the illiberal context that explains the lack of support for UCE in higher education. The relatively low level of the spread of UCE and its often bottom-up and voluntary basis (Benneworth et al., 2018), the lack of a science–policy interface in relation to transformative social justice and sustainability initiatives (Wesselink et al., 2013), the phenomenon of cooperative research approaches being marginalized within academia (Greenwood, 2012), and the co-optation of the concepts of "justice" and "sustainability" by policymaking (and business organizations) (Spash, 2020; Springett, 2003) are not purely illiberal (Hungarian) tendencies. They can be explained from the perspective of critical theory, showing the presence of current conflicts of interest within our globalized capitalist economies/societies (Fuchs, 2017). Also, based on functional social theory (Lange & Schimank, 2004), it means that while it is the binary code of the economic subsystem that has an increased influence on the functioning of the academy on a global scale, it interacts and might conflict with the parallel presence of the binary code of the political subsystem in an illiberal context. Still, the colonization of academia by business and/or politics constitutes a substantial barrier to meaningful UCE institutionalization.

Implications for Theory: Boundary Spanners, Bottom-Up UCE Institutionalization, and Institutional Change

In relation to the role of boundary spanners in UCE institutionalization, this study has some core implications. First, in the theoretical area, this study shows that the typology proposed by Weerts and Sandmann (2010) needs to be updated and developed by other researchers to encompass more contexts of UCE institutionalization. In this regard, an extension of Weerts and Sandmann's (2010) theory is needed.

Second, our findings also complement the usual understanding of change in higher education, according to which universities as "stakeholder organizations" (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007), which respond to the expectations of stakeholders powerful enough to articulate their interests, are resistant to change because of the presence of too many stakeholders that are interested in different types of change and "institutional isomorphism" (Kezar, 2009). Clearly, the heavily influential and often conflicting demands and dominant

goals (e.g., an industrial kind of publication production, ranking fetish, or expectations of loyalty) set by (powerful stakeholders within as well as) transnational academic capitalism and illiberal politics support the thesis noted above. However, our research also shows that context indeed has an impact on change (e.g., influencing the dominant norms/culture/tradition of higher education in relation to UCE that influences opportunities for UCE institutionalization), while certain HEIs might at least open up spaces for committed staff to implement certain changes—even if this does not lead to "building a true capacity for change" (Kezar, 2009). Our findings demonstrate that, in the context of the study, changes from the academic side are present, even though they are rather small-scale at present.

Implications for Research and Policy

In a methodological sense, our study shows the feasibility of conducting autoethnographic studies on UCE. In a situation where participant boundary spanners are deeply (emotionally) involved in the process they are researching as committed scholar-activists, our horizons (Vessey, 2009) necessarily have a significant impact on what is included in the data. Still, throughout the research process, we felt that the application of analytical autoethnography as a tool for structured self-reflection facilitated by an "outsider researcher" as an external peer and the fact that we served as external peers for each other (critically becoming engaged with each other's experiences) supported us in being able "to treat [our] own experiences at 'arm's length'" (Levin, 2012, p. 134) and thus contributed to a balanced understanding of and reflection on our own work.

Finally, on a tactical level, our research reinforces the pivotal role of boundary spanners in organizing and institutionalizing UCE to bridge and connect the needs of communities and universities. Policymakers in HEIs should recognize the crucial role of boundary spanners in supporting the well-being of individuals who are involved in and contribute to the higher education CE landscape.

Limitation of the Study

This study is based on a single-country context. This means that it cannot be generalized—transmitted—to other contexts automatically and cannot reveal the contextual diversity of boundary spanning). Besides, the first structured inquiry about UCE in Hungary (Málovics, 2024b) revealed that even though the spread of UCE within the country is indeed rather low, still, there might still be other small-scale initiatives within HEIs for UCE institutionalization within the country. Finally, the fact that most authors are insiders (boundary spanners) themselves and produced knowledge about their own work within present paper also has an impact on the (self-)evaluation of UCE institutionalization, while perspectives of other relevant actors (e.g., university leaders) is lacking.

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