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The potential role of university community engagement in supporting transformative social innovation – experiences from Hungary

György Málovics ^{a*}, Zoltán Bajmócy ^a, Janka Csernák ^b, Bori Fehér ^b,
Márta Frigyük ^c, Judit Juhász ^a, Réka Matolay ^c, András Müllner ^d and
Rita Szerencsés ^b

^a*Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Institute for Ecological Economics, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary;* ^b*Social Design Hub, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Budapest, Hungary;* ^c*Corvinus Science Shop, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary;* ^d*Faculty of Arts, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary*

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University community engagement (UCE) is the cooperation between academic actors and marginalized, resource-poor community stakeholders in ways that are mutually beneficial to both parties. The goal of such partnerships is to tackle social exclusion and injustice and to foster environmental sustainability. Such an approach shows remarkable similarities with social innovation (SI), which also denotes bottom-up processes, with CSO involvement aimed at responding to community needs. The present paper aims to analyse the relationship between these two concepts: the role UCE can play in transformative SI (TSI). We approach this topic by the empirical analysis of four initiatives in Hungary, in which universities or their specific units institutionalized UCE as a result of bottom-up processes. To reflect on these cases, we utilize the ‘TRANSIT model’ of SI, which is a relational framework developed to understand how SI processes contribute to transformative change. Our conclusion is that although the diverse practices of UCE contribute to emergence and diffusion of SI in multiple ways, a number of structural and contextual limitations can be identified with regard to UCE’s contributions to TSI. Despite the recognition of these limitations, promoting the expansion of UCE may still play a role in the fostering of TSI processes.

Keywords: University community engagement (UCE); transformative social innovation (TSI); social design; science shop; community embedded learning and research

1. Introduction

In order to change today’s socially and environmentally unsustainable processes, universities also need to change. One tool for accomplishing this change is the implementation of *university community engagement (UCE)* (GUNI 2017), through which universities

*Corresponding author. Email: malovics.gyorgy@eco.u-szeged.hu, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Institute for Ecological Economics, University of Szeged, Kálvária sgt. 1., Szeged 6722, Hungary

engage with external communities to further social justice and sustainability (Hazelkorn 2016) in mutually beneficial ways, which also enrich the university's primary activities (Benneworth et al. 2018). *Social innovation (SI)* is similar to UCE in being a process of co-operation aimed at solving current environmental and social problems, entailing bottom-up collaborations with civic groups and NGOs for innovation and responses to community needs, resulting in social change (Moulaert et al. 2013, Pel et al. 2020). Such similarities do not mean that the concepts are synonymous – SI happens without universities or UCE being involved (Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson 2020). Still, similarities show that universities are potentially significantly able to contribute to SI, both in relation to their conventional missions (e.g. via making SI an integral part of their teaching and research system) and UCE activities (living labs, science shops, providing partners access to infrastructure) (Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson 2020; Morawska-Jancelewicz 2022).

Even though some parts of the literature on social innovation are well conceptualized and developed, universities' and UCE's contribution to SI is empirically largely unexplored, especially if we consider impacts (Bayuo, Chaminade, and Göransson 2020).

As numerous transformative 'views on sustainable development' (see Hopwood, Mellor, and O'Brien 2005) emphasize that a meaningful shift towards environmental sustainability and social justice requires counter-hegemonic action (Avelino and Wittmayer 2016), it is also important to reflect on whether SI supported by UCE is of counter-hegemonic character or not. The TRANSIT model as a relational model provides a proper analytical framework to do that as it understands transformative SI (TSI) 'as a process through which SI challenges, alters and/or replaces dominant institutions' (Avelino et al. 2019, 196).

Our study aims to address the aforementioned *research gap(s)*. Our *research question* is what role university community engagement may play in the expansion of transformative social innovation (TSI).

The *empirical foundation* of the study includes four case studies of academic groups in Hungary that have succeeded in introducing and institutionalizing UCE at Hungarian universities through bottom-up processes over the past decade: MOME Social Design Hub has been focusing on social design issues; Minor Media/Culture Research Center is involved in participatory media research and education; while Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC) and Corvinus Science Shop (CSS) both operate within business schools, RC functioning as a cooperative and social impact orientated research centre and CSS as a competence centre for community-engaged research and learning. Hungary as a context was chosen because of the national origin and the embeddedness of Authors who are themselves academic participants (initiators) of the aforementioned UCE initiatives. Besides, the illiberal transformation (Grzebalska and Pető 2018) of Hungary during the past and present decades results in a unique context, e.g. because of the changed social situation of universities (Kováts et al. 2024) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Gerő et al. 2023) as focal actors in relation to both UCE and SI.

Section 2 of the study offers a conceptual overview of TSI and UCE, outlining correspondences between the two. Section 3 presents the four Hungarian academic cases that provide the empirical basis for the study together with methods and context. This is followed by an account of the impact of UCE on SI (Section 4) and an analytical assessment of this impact (Section 5). The study ends with our conclusions.

2. Social innovation and university community engagement – related concepts?

2.1. Social innovation

Concepts related to SI are often insufficiently clarified and inconsistently used. Moreover, research projects and communities engaged with the social aspects of innovation have remained largely isolated from research into business innovation (Morlacchi and Martin 2009).

In its interpretation of SI, the present study takes the goal of innovative activity as the starting point: SI applies when the *goal* of the innovative activity is not improved in corporate performance, but providing a response to a societal challenge (Havas, Schartinger, and Weber 2023). Similar arguments were put forth by Moulaert et al. (2013), and Mihei (2020):

Social innovation can be defined as the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. (...) Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. (Mihei 2020, 352)

Further characteristics of SI mainly follow from the abovementioned goal. Today's 'grand' (environmental and social) challenges are 'wicked problems'. In order to understand or tackle them, we must identify that the economy, the society and the environment are nested complex systems (Costanza et al. 1997). The knowledge required for the interpretation of problems and for intervention is available frequently in isolated, insufficiently connected terrains. Problem solving therefore requires new types of collaboration between stakeholders in interpreting problems, determining possible solutions, and assessing their potential impacts.

Innovation studies traditionally highlight the learning potential and the synergies that may arise from the involvement of various stakeholders both in a business context (Chesbrough 2006; Rothwell 1994) and when opening towards the civil society (Carayannis and Campbell 2009). With regard to transformative change authors also highlight the importance of shared visions, cooperation, synergies and consensus building; at the same time they draw attention to the emergence of conflicts, dissent and the changing of the power relations (Avelino et al. 2019; Patiño-Valencia et al. 2022; Stilgoe, Owen, and Macnaghten 2013). Therefore, in a transformative context the distinction between consensual and conflictual power; 'power over' and 'power with' is blurred (Avelino 2021). The challenge is 'to identify and work with diversity, dissension and conflicting worldviews, recognizing the contributions which can be made by a large variety of actors, and bringing out into the open the politics involved in any innovation process' (Schot and Steinmueller 2018, 1564).

According to numerous 'views on sustainable development' (see Hopwood, Mellor, and O'Brien 2005) transformation is not necessarily in the interest of currently dominant power centres: unsustainable and unjust processes are tied to conflicts of social interests and values, and *changing those requires counter-hegemonic action*. Such an approach is also reflected in conflict theory (Campbell 2021), critical theory (Fuchs 2017), ecological economics (Spash 2020), degrowth (Kallis, Kerschner, and Martinez-Alier 2012) and environmental sociology (Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg 2015) and is backed up by empirical data that today's dominant socio-economic structures largely lack capacity in solving environmental (Richardson et al. 2023; Rockström et al. 2009) and social (Piketty and Saez 2014) problems.

The reason the term *transformative social innovation (TSI)* has spread in academic discourse is the need to emphasize these circumstances and need for the complete rethinking of current structures and large systems (Avelino et al. 2019; Pel et al. 2020). The question of how, to what extent and under what conditions can SI processes contribute to transformative change led to the conceptualization of the ‘TRANSIT’ model of TSI, where ‘TSI is considered as a process through which SI challenges, alters and/or replaces dominant institutions’ (Avelino et al. 2019, 196).

In this framework SI refers to ‘changing social relations, involving new ways of doing, organising, framing and knowing’ (Avelino et al. 2019, 197). The main forms of SI can be deduced from this definition:

- *New framing*: new framing of problems and possible solutions.
- *New knowing*: production of new types of knowledge related to problems and possible solutions; new modes of knowledge production.
- *New doing*: new types of actions, creation of new possibilities of agency.
- *New organizing*: new types of collaborations and modes of collaboration, changing characteristics (e.g. power relations) of existing modes of collaboration, transformed operation of organizations.

TSI is not simply a set of ‘revolutionary actions’ against monolithically conceived ‘institutions’ or ‘systems’. It is considered to take place *through* them: existing structures, institutions, power hierarchies inevitably structure SI (Pel et al. 2020, 3). The model also defines circumstances which are likely to enable SI initiatives to become transformative (counter hegemonic). Four *key categories* of relations may help to assess the counter-hegemonic/transformative potential of SI (Pel et al. 2020):

- *Relations within SI initiatives*: agents of SI are able to develop empowering collectives (through empowerment, new social relations, reflexive experimentation);
- *Relations in network formation*: the success in alliance building, trans-local connectivity, discourse formation;
- *Relations to institutional change*: through finding an ‘institutional home’ actors are able to challenge, alter or replace dominant institutions whilst also being shaped by those;
- *Relations to the socio-material context*: the transformative attempts are able to avoid co-optation while being shaped by the wider context.

To sum up, TSI produces new types of social relations among stakeholders of present-day ‘grand challenges’: it involves counter-hegemonic efforts and actions. As SI, it is a collaborative concept (Ziegler 2017) both academically, recognizing that it is a multi/transdisciplinary concept, and practically, recognizing that SI is co-operation between social sectors/spheres.

2.2. University community engagement

UCE refers to *universities engaging with external communities* in mutually, if differently, beneficial ways, which also enrich the university’s primary activities (Benneworth et al. 2018). UCE as a diverse set of activities (Culum 2018) may involve every single aspect of a university’s operations in varied ways, through diverse activities. It may involve the organizational structures of the university; university facilities; the

dissemination of research output; community-engaged research and service learning; and student and university staff community engagement. UCE is intrinsically diverse (Benneworth et al. 2018), as the diversity of universities and their environments justifies and enables the use of different UCE methods and tools, depending on the size, profile, resources, external expectations, etc.

The *theoretical affinities with the concept of TSI* are borne out by the key features of UCE. UCE's community partners are local communities and CSOs that lack power and access to university resources and are affected by social problems. Hazelkorn (2016) calls this the social justice perspective on UCE: the role of UCE is the fight against social exclusion and injustice, the empowerment of marginalized groups, and taking responsibility globally, including support for environmental sustainability initiatives.

Another important feature of UCE is its collaborative and democratic character (Benneworth et al. 2018). Available models (Clayton et al. 2010; Davis et al. 2017; Dorado and Giles 2004; Himmelman 2001) all distinguish between transactional and transformative relationship within UCE. Transactional refers to instrumental collaborations controlled by those (in this context, academic participants) in power who do not seek to change power relations. Transformative refers to collaborations that seek to change power relations and to empower communities. Thus, *transformation is a key approach to UCE*. Similarly to the concept of TSI, UCE captures this transformative impact/character through the *transformation of power relations*.

This also shows that *UCE*, understood as a set of transformational connections, is *intrinsically of counter-hegemonic character* as it is carried out in an academic environment of corporatization that transforms universities from local institutions into internationally competing 'enterprises' (Shek et al. 2017) and paves the way to transnational academic capitalism (Hazelkorn 2018, 12). Universities increasingly need to compete for resources and prioritize effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and transparency (Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña 2017). This neoliberal turn in higher education (see, e.g. Shek et al. 2017) makes the provision of a suitable workforce for the labour market the main task of universities, which are corporatized, marketized, commercialized and privatized, being under a 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, rankings) set by international organizations (Hazelkorn 2018). Governance shifts to a managerial-administrative role, and the focus shifts to corporate/market/managerial performance (e.g. cost efficiency, relationships with industry and enterprise) (Shek et al. 2017).

In opposition to that, *UCE as conceptualized for present paper places emphasis on the social and environmental* (Hazelkorn 2016). It emphasizes the role of dominant competitiveness and growth-orientated approaches and functioning in socially unjust and unsustainable socio-economic processes (GUNI 2017; Trencher et al. 2014). Thus, UCE within the present higher education environment is an anti-hegemonic approach that shows similarities with transformational approaches to sustainability (Hopwood, Mellor, and O'Brien 2005) and TSI (Pel et al. 2020).

3. Cases, methods, context

Empirical analysis in the present paper is related to *four university units operating at universities in Hungary* that have embarked on the path of UCE in recent years, each in its own way and independently of the others.¹ These four were selected, as these operate

(1) as a result of bottom-up processes, (2) as institutionalized UCE groups (distinct organizational units at their host universities) commanding resources and (3) aim to support SI processes in line with the previously quoted definition of TSI.

Authors of the present paper work for and have been playing a major role in the establishment and running of these Units as *boundary spanners* (Weerts and Sandmann 2010): individuals who serve as mediators, establishing connections and fostering collaboration between the academic institution and the surrounding community.

3.1. *The cases*

Building on over 10 years' experience, the *MOME Social Design Hub* was launched in 2020. Its goal is to make long-term social impact through MOME's (Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design) internal and external partnerships with NGOs, municipal governments, primary, secondary and higher education institutions, research institutes and companies. Within these partnerships, the Unit aims (1) to develop social design tools for facilitating the development of creative competences of disadvantaged children living in resource-poor rural villages; (2) to broaden the perspectives and opportunities of the participating children and to raise the social awareness of participating students, teachers, etc. (Fehér and Szerencsés 2023); (3) enable disadvantaged girls aged 10–18 to engage in creative learning and shared creative processes, drawing attention to marginalized groups previously absent from the spaces of the grassroots maker movement (Csernák et al. 2023; Toupin 2014); and (4) to use social design tools to discover how the urban mobility of children (aged 8–13) can be made safer and more attractive through placemaking activities (Pancholi, Yigitcanlar, and Guaralda 2015).

Unit partnerships involve practice-based design research frameworks and participatory processes, while the Hub also serves as a knowledge centre within MOME, supporting related activities and striving to bring new knowledge into the institution. The most frequent mode of student engagement is involvement in ongoing research projects, but interdisciplinary and cross-departmental research-development-innovation (RDI) course formats are also important.

The *Minor Media/Culture Research Center* was established with the aim of strengthening the role of media education and media studies in promoting democratic media representation at ELTE University, and to support socially just representation (unequal access to media, majority control of minority identities, appropriation of representation). The research centre grew out of a film programme, primarily focusing on documentaries about Roma communities in Hungary and Europe (Müllner and Pócsik 2018) and seeks to achieve its goals through activist art and academic reflection, combining the form of education with the characteristics of open cultural space.² Minor Media/Culture Research Center expanded its tradition to include *participatory video* (Müllner 2023): projects (workshops, summer camps) with the participation of youths and professionals have been at times integrated into larger participatory action research (PAR) projects or realized in the framework of longstanding film or media camps or film clubs, but also included one-off events. All this become institutionalized in the form of a specialization in participatory media culture: introducing students to participatory video methods, PAR, arts-based participatory research methods, and community radio and participatory journalism.

UCE type partnerships began at the *Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)* with a *PAR process* with and for segregated Roma communities living in extreme poverty in 2011 (Málovics et al. 2021), followed later by other cooperative research processes with other voiceless social groups (Mihók, Juhász, and Gébert 2023). Using the

service-learning methodology, connecting students and civic organizations started in 2017 (Juhász, Málovics, and Bajmócy 2021), the course currently engaging in collaborations with 12–15 local civic organizations dedicated to advancing social justice each semester. The RC has engaged with the issue of equal opportunity within the faculty since 2018³ (Málovics, Juhász, and Bajmócy 2022). The RC seeks to generate *educational and research processes with significant social impacts* and to implement the principles of the approaches used (UCE, PAR, service learning) in its internal and external operations. Thus, the RC aims to (1) empower participants to influence activities meaningfully despite existing power imbalances, (2) promote transparent, equitable and deeply democratic collaboration and (3) partner with organizations/groups that are run by disempowered stakeholders or represent and meaningfully support such stakeholders, including the natural environment as a disempowered non-human stakeholder.

Corvinus Science Shop was established at Corvinus University of Budapest in 2017. Its precursor was a *service-learning* course launched over 10 years earlier connecting students with social entrepreneurs. As a *science shop*, it aims to enable higher education by providing support for teaching and research ‘in response to concerns experienced by civil society’ (Fokkink and Mulder 2004, 550). The core values of CSS emphasize the collaborative work of university citizens and community partners in a mutual learning process, built on a recognition of the diversity and equality of knowledge (scientific and practical, academic and civic, etc.). CSS aims to be impactful by offering meaningful responses to questions, promoting community wellbeing and innovative solutions to social-ecological problems.

CSS connects academic faculty and students with community partners (civil society organizations (CSOs), non-profits, social enterprises, active informal communities and citizen groups, etc.) primarily through course projects dedicated to responding to the community partners’ questions. Students are also engaged via student research project, thesis writing, science shop internships and teacher assistant positions. Furthermore, CSS seeks out common paths with the non-academic support staff of the university from Library to Student Support and beyond.

The above written shows that all included university units, albeit being diverse in relation to actual activities, establish longer-term UCE partnerships that significantly involve teaching and/or research activities. All of these activities have their origins in internationally well-established approaches/methodologies, including:

- social design (Gutiérrez and Jurow 2016) at *MOME Social Design Hub*;
- participatory video (Milne, Mitchell, and Lange 2012) at *ELTE Minor Media/Culture Research Centre*;
- participatory action research/community-based participatory research (Bradbury and Reason 2003) and service learning (Clayton et al. 2010) at *Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)*; and
- the science shop approach (Fokkink and Mulder 2004) at *Corvinus Science Shop*.

In accordance with the principles of UCE, academic stakeholders include university (most of all academic) staff and students, while major non-academic stakeholders (supposed non-academic beneficiaries) are marginalized social groups, including extremely poor and stigmatized Roma communities/residents, LGBTQ communities, homeless people, socially disadvantaged women and girls, urban lower class youth, refugees, people living with mental (e.g. autism) and/or physical disabilities (e.g. hard of moving, seeing, hearing people). UCE units work with non-academic partners either

Table 1. UCE’s impacts.

		Cases		
Partners		MOME Social Design Hub	Minor Media/Culture Research Center	Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)
		Rural primary schools involving marginalized (mostly Roma) children	Roma kids living in poor rural communities (sometimes cooperating with middle-class kids)	Local CSOs working with different marginalized groups (poor, Roma, LGBTQ, disabled – hard of seeing, hard of hearing, mentally or physically disabled)
Impact on ...		Charity/development organization working with marginalized communities, social workers (as employees) and marginalized – mostly poor Roma – clients		Local CSOs and SEs working with different marginalized groups (poor, Roma, LGBTQ, disabled – hard of seeing, hard of hearing, mentally or physically disabled)
	students	Urban children		
		Municipalities		
		Experimental learning, increased social sensitivity, broadened perspective		
			Continued volunteering and civic activities	Continued volunteering activities
				Influence on professional life
				Providing an institutional home
	academic staff	Learning		safe and supportive environment for lecturers, a place to meet like-minded colleagues and to conceptualize their previously implicit teaching aspirations

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

			Cases		
Factors influencing UCE's impact Major challenges	... non- academic participants	Increased self-confidence, self-reflexivity, social relations (marginalized kids) Increased participation (marginalized kids) Broadened perspective (marginalized kids) Increased work motivation (social workers) Considering urban childrens' perspective in urban planning processes (municipality) New relations (with university and non-university partners)	Experimental learning (marginalized kids, middle-class kids) New relations and local networks (with university and non-university partners)	Increased welfare and capacity for interest representation (marginalized, segregated Roma communities) Enhanced capacity to reach own goals (local CSOs working with marginalized groups) Enhanced local networking activities (local CSOs working with marginalized groups) Increased capacity for advocacy (hard of hearing youth) Increased legitimacy (of claims)	Increased legitimacy (partner CSOs and SEs) Increased resources (partner CSOs and SEs) Novel ideas (partner CSOs and SEs) New partnerships
	academic institution	Increased visibility of working with and positive representation of marginalized groups (Roma) in the context of design Increased recognition of social design New related courses and thesis topics and processes involving an increased number of students	New educational programme New related courses and thesis topics and processes involving an increased number of students	Increased visibility of and activities (e.g. committee, strategy) related to student equality and UCE Establishing a university-level UCE Centre (in process) Positive impact on academic institution in international accreditation processes	Positive impact on academic institution in international accreditation processes University-level student volunteering programme implementation
		Partner/intermediator Hierarchy at partner organization	Partner/intermediator Local political circumstances (dependencies)	Partner community hierarchy Local political circumstances	Thematic focus of cooperation Relations with partners
		Long-term impact evaluation Sustaining long term cooperation (student involvement, project-based finance, geographical distance, partners' changed preferences) Linking certain activities to education	Sustaining long term cooperation (project-based finance, geographical distance) Issue-centred film-making	Equal relationships when cooperating with powerless people/communities Risk of co-optation Lack of structural change	Institutional co-optation Controversial impacts on academic staff and institution

Source: own compilation.

directly or by cooperating with CSOs and/or social institutions (e.g. schools, museums, art galleries) as intermediators (see also Table 1). This set of primary non-academic partners (beneficiaries) shows that all initiatives are transformative in their goals as they aim to contribute to social justice and environmental sustainability through changing societal power relations by cooperating with and contributing to the empowerment of marginalized social groups.

Meanwhile, cooperation occasionally also involves relatively more powerful socio-economic actors (including municipalities and firms). The reason for that is that transformation is always a multi-actor process (Geels and Schot 2007) and typically, SI processes comprise both market, state, community and third-party actors while the hierarchies that are formed alongside the formal/informal, non-profit/for-profit and public/private are even more layered in reality (Avelino and Wittmayer 2016): not necessarily in connection to their sector, actors are also part of hierarchies such as gender, expert/lay, employer/employee, representative/citizen, large/small, rich/poor, etc. Thus, TSI is considered to take place through and within existing structures, institutions and power hierarchies (see Section 2.1.) and social change takes place among diverse power relations through parallel processes of conflict and cooperation (Avelino 2021).

Within this vein, changing (transforming) host universities in line with the core values of UCE and TSI (including social justice, environmental sustainability, democratic involvement/cooperation with and opening up to marginalized non-academic communities, empowering the powerless) e.g. by institutionalizing UCE and enabling students and colleagues to participate in UCE cooperation is also an important goal for UCE Units at hand, beside external impacts.

3.2. Methods

As all co-authors of this study are also (academic) participants of UCE initiatives at hand, *empirical data were not collected directly for the purpose of present publication*, but existing impact measurement documents of the University Units served as information sources. This means a *variety of qualitative data sources*:

- *MOME Social Design Hub*: (1) narrative based impact assessment through storytelling and story collection, i.e. diaries aggregating the observations, experiences and reflections of the participants; (2) in-depth interviews with participants; and (3) participatory workshops with conversations and concurrent creative activities for children (Csernák et al. 2023).
- *Minor Media/Culture Research Center*: (1) research diary of the leader of the Unit (as one of the Authors) that contains not only information of field observations but also notes about feedbacks (informal field interviews) of non-academic partners; and (2) individual accounts of students who participated in the courses and in participatory video-related UCE activities.
- *Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)*: (1) autoethnographic reflections (Málovics, Juhász, and Bajmócy 2022) of academic UCE participants (also Authors of present study) in relation to impact assessment of UCE activities; (2) research diaries of academic participants (also Authors of present study), including feedback from students and non-academic partners and self-reflexive notes; and (3) qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with university stakeholders (14 interviews) and non-academic UCE partners (14 interviews) carried out in 2023.

- *Corvinus Science Shop*: (1) regular post-project student surveys (at the end of each semester) with open questions about the impact of the course project on them and also the potential social impacts they foresee in the future; (2) regular post-project community partner surveys (at the end of each semester) with open questions to explore direct impacts of collaboration; (3) regular post-project discussion with lecturers and the science shop manager serving as a closure to the course project and an exploration of the experiences and impacts on participants; and (4) occasional interviews and focus group discussions with lecturers and case studies of community engaged course developments.

Data analysis was carried out in three rounds:

- (1) Authors analysed the documents of the University Unit they are part of (work for) in a qualitative and open (inductive) way to identify (1) social impacts of UCE; (2) related influencing factors and (3) challenges;
- (2) these analytical documents were shared among all co-authors followed by a common reflection and analysis of deductive character based on the main forms of SI as defined by the TRANSIT model; followed by
- (3) common reflection and analysis of deductive character based on the key categories of the TRANSIT model (related to SI's potential anti-hegemonic/transformational character).

Such a process means that *both insider and outsider perspectives* are involved as recommended in qualitative research (Dwyer and Buckle 2009):

- data sources reflect both insider (academic participants) and outsider (non-academic participants) perspectives; while
- data analysis reflects academic participant's perspective in relation to their own work (insider perspective, first stage of analysis) followed by discussion by co-authors as critical peers (outsider perspective, stages 2 and 3).

The *active participation of all Authors within the examined Cases as self-reflexive change agents* also means that the applied research approach is also related to PAR (Participatory Action Research) (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014) and analytical auto-ethnography (Anderson 2006).

The fact that data emerged through observations within long-term action-orientated cooperative processes that date back to more than a decade is on one hand clearly able to handle certain validity challenges in relation to assessing UCE's impacts on TSI. As conventional research processes (based on one-time inquiry, data analysis and scientific publications) have often been perceived as being oppressive towards marginalized communities, such communities are often distrustful towards outside researchers (Bowen et al. 2022; Bracic 2018; García et al. 2013), leading to reactivity bias (Maxwell 2012). Meanwhile, long term action-orientated cooperative processes enable academics to (1) make idiographic observations concerning diverse spheres of the life of partners, and (2) enrich the conventional 'researcher versus subjects' roles via the peer perspective, allowing trust to emerge, all voices and (unconventional) viewpoints to be expressed and to address 'undiscussables' (Bradbury and Reason 2003, 165) in a longitudinal manner, on a time scale that is rather rare in social research.

However, even within such a research setting, impact assessment cannot escape difficulties that are inherent in relation to UCE (Farnell and Šćukanec 2018; Wanjiru and Xiaoguang 2021) and SI (Mihci 2020), including the identification problem, immeasurability with quantitative indicators and issues of scale.

Besides, there are further challenges related to cooperative methodologies. First, the scope and quality of data emerging through long-term cooperative (e.g. UCE) processes are diverse and numerous feedbacks (including those related to impacts) emerge through less structured ways of observations (e.g. informal conversations and joint activities). Second, impact assessment processes based on conventional norms of scientific rigour are rather time and energy-consuming and as such are often less prioritized compared to doing together/things to happen for (especially non-academic) participants (see, e.g. Smith et al. 2010).

3.3. Context

In order to evaluate the counter-hegemonic character of UCE, three elements of the Hungarian context need to be considered. First, the *illiberal transformation* (Grzebalska and Pető 2018) of the *Hungarian state has created a variety of challenges for civil society organisations*: the legal and political environment is increasingly hostile as the state aims to control civil society rather than enable citizen participation (Gerő et al. 2023). This means (1) radical cuts in state (and also international) funding for ‘non-loyal’ CSOs/NGOs; (2) creating a hostile public attitude towards these 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 (see Agh 2016; Batory 2016; Gerő et al. 2023).

Second, especially since 2010, the Hungarian government regime is based on a ‘politics of revenge’ (Udvarhelyi 2014, 827): it has become a political (communication) strategy to blame ‘enemies’ of ‘Hungarians’ for all the ills of Hungarian society. Such ‘enemies’ include groups that are different compared to the white middle-class Hungarians, e.g. homeless people (Udvarhelyi 2014), refugees/migrants (Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram 2016), LGBTQ people and communities (Gera 2023) and the Roma (Bartha, Boda, and Szikra 2020). This means that many of the potential stakeholders both in UCE and TSI processes are stigmatized and discriminated as undeserving poor (Gans 1994) and ‘undeserving different’ by the Hungarian state.

Finally, as part of the illiberal transformation and power centralization, by 2022 *almost all Hungarian state universities were placed under the control of so-called public interest foundations*. Newly created ‘boards’ gained considerable power and authority over the institutions (Kováts et al. 2024). This process of power centralization resulted in a high proportion of politicians among board members with lifetime employment (Kováts et al. 2024), all of whom being appointed by the present illiberal political regime, not independently of their perceived political loyalty. This means increased direct state power and reduced institutional autonomy for universities.

4. Results – the social impacts of university community engagement

The university units at hand documented numerous *social impacts* in relation to their UCE activities (Table 1).

At *MOME Social Design Hub*, marginalized children and youth participating in the projects opened up, gained self-confidence, self-reflection, social relationships, and

positive feelings about creativity and attended programmes of the local charity organization more enthusiastically, while the work-related motivation of the social workers' of the charity organization grew (Fehér and Szerencsés 2023). Mobility concerns of urban children received significant attention and they appeared as full-fledged stakeholders in shaping the urban ecosystem (e.g. school-adjacent spaces). Moreover, a highly marginalized group became the focus of attention in the context of design, building positive representations of the group in collaboration with them. The recognition of social design grew considerably in Hungary over the past 10 years as a result of the Hub's activities.

When assessing the impacts of *Minor Media/Culture Research Center's* visual interventions, it must be stressed that any community activity holds the potential for emancipatory power, especially when young people of different social statuses work together, as this in itself goes against autocratic and anti-democratic systems that seek to fix and preserve social relations and subjects. As for obstacles, raising awareness of the issues and ensuring commitment seemed a great challenge. Members of Minor Media/Culture Research Center were concerned about how filmmaking could be made issue-centred and the attention of young participants be directed toward social issues, when they (understandably) often showed an interest in popular genres (genre films, music genres).

The PAR at *Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)* with the local Roma community contributed to several processes aimed at improving the situation of stigmatized local Roma living in extreme poverty, such as (1) establishment and operation of a local Roma afternoon school and community centre; (2) operation of a local support network; (3) improvement of the living conditions of Roma families living in or near local segregated areas; and (4) amplifying the voice of Roma representatives and advocacy groups in local public affairs (Málovics, Berki, and Mihály 2021).

Students taking the Service Learning course contributed to the goals of partner associations, such as improved school performance of disadvantaged, at-risk youths and hard-of-hearing children; support for people with disabilities; provision of food to local people in need; implementation of cultural programmes; advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community of RC's city; support for people with visual impairments. A number of these students stayed on as long-term volunteers and even members of the associations. The course has enhanced the network of local civil society and expanded its collaborations with the academic sphere (Juhász, Málovics, and Bajmócy 2021).

The partnership aimed at improving the well-being of hard-of-hearing youths helps to communicate the situation and social challenges of the hard-of-hearing community and catalyses co-operation and discussion between local civil society and advocacy groups (Bajmócy, Mihók, and Gébert 2022; Mihók, Juhász, and Gébert 2023).

There is an increased visibility of equal opportunity issues at the Faculty that is home to the RC, with some previously overlooked situations being addressed and some improvements in student services (such as mental health counselling). This also had an impact on the university (with substantial university committee activity and accessibility audits of additional university buildings in-progress). Additional areas in which the institutionalization of UCE has started include the document establishing the Faculty's community engagement strategy, prepared by RC staff, and the design for a university-wide community centre (also motivated by international accreditation processes), also being developed by the RC.

Corvinus Science Shop drives for impacts primarily in promoting the SIs of its community partners. The Unit's impact map also includes the impacts of university-community partnerships, such as a safe and supportive environment for lecturers, a place to meet like-minded colleagues and to conceptualize their previously implicit teaching aspirations.

For the community partner, the science shop partnership entails legitimacy, a potential security of a large institution as well as a wide range of potential resources.

In most of the cases, the mutual-learning processes of the course projects result in proposals and solutions for the community partners, sometimes with prompt implementation, for example on the launch of a student-planned fundraising campaign and its results in back-to-school support for children living in extreme poverty. In some cases, university students choose to become volunteers or even employees of the community partners, or interns at the science shop following their course projects. The science shop is assumed to have a positive impact on the perception of the university, at least in international accreditations. The international Business School Impact System (BSIS) provided some of its recommendations for university impact measurement based on the practice of CSS, while the Host University has also started a volunteering programme relying on the activities and connections of CSS.

Beside the above-mentioned diverse impacts, *all four initiatives seem to have similar impacts on participating university staff* (most of all learning, but also increased volunteering for some) *and students* (getting insights into working with partners and communities within situations that involve real stake; increased level of social sensitivity, empathy, responsibility, critical thinking; broadened perspectives (e.g. in relation to social responsibility); and increasing participation in UCE-related activities (courses, thesis)).

Challenges in relation to social impacts also seem to be similar. First, the social impact of UCE (including impact on SI) is heavily influenced by the *thematic focus* of the cooperation (e.g. whether students get interested in the focal topic/problem of CSOs or not); the relations with partners (whether relationship based on mutual trust and respects emerge); and the inner-hierarchies and local dependencies of partners and communities and local political circumstances.

Second, there is a relatively rare opportunity for long-term commitment by students in the framework of course-based engagement and thus there is a limited possibility of linking certain activities to education. The dominance of project-based operation means short-term funding and the uncertainties of future funding and research grant regulations are unprepared for new methodologies such as PAR (e.g. financial support excluding costs indispensable for participatory projects, especially where geographical distance is involved (travel, food and accommodation costs)). Meanwhile, counter-hegemonic initiatives run the risk of institutional (the Unit's results are used by the Host University to showcase its' community engaged character without further related fundamental efforts) or external co-optation (powerful external parties may wish to implement these initiatives according to logics that serve their own interests) (Málovics, Berki, and Mihály 2021).

The *lack of fundamental institutional/structural change is also characteristic to each cases*: even though University Units at hand generally experience a supportive atmosphere within their Host Institutions, this does not mean that they mean a challenge for dominant institutional logics on an institutional level., and might even have also controversial impacts on the Host Institution (e.g. contribution to the self-exploitation of colleagues in an efficiency and performance promoting institution).

Finally, another common challenge is *impact evaluation*, especially in relation to long-term impacts (see Section 3.2. Methods).

Table 2. UCE's contribution to SI.

<i>New knowing</i> : production of new types of knowledge related to problems and possible solutions; new modes of knowledge production.	Non-academic partners: film-making and using film as a tool for interest representation	<i>Minor Media/Culture Research Center</i> /participatory video
	New knowledge of academic participants: filmmaking as an activist and research methodology	
	Audience: new, authentic representation of social reality	
	Actionable knowledge in relation to the empowerment of marginalized groups	<i>Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)/</i> PAR
	Actionable knowledge about public participation and deliberation	<i>Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)/</i> PAR
	Students learning about vulnerable groups	<i>Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)/SL</i>
	NGOs learning about cooperative educational and research processes	<i>Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)/</i> PAR + SL <i>Corvinus Science Shop (CSS)/Science Shop</i> activities
	New knowledge about contributing to 'social benefit' for business school staff and students	<i>Corvinus Science Shop (CSS)/Science Shop</i> activities
	New knowledge about community-based research methods and practice and supportive academic processes	<i>Corvinus Science Shop (CSS)/Science Shop</i> activities <i>Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)/</i> PAR

<i>New organizing:</i> new types of collaborations and modes of collaboration, changing characteristics (e.g. power relations) of existing modes of collaboration, transformed operation of organizations.	Less hierarchical (more horizontal) academic researchers vs. students and non-academic (CSO/NGO/vulnerable) relations on a local level compared to conventional university-student-vulnerable relations, based on new (non-monetized) logics	all units/all projects
	New forms of democratic cooperation and new networks among actors with often high social distance (e.g. academics, poor, stigmatized Roma, public bodies, NGOs, children) through co-creation	all units/all projects
	New participatory, action – and emancipation-orientated university-initiated research projects	all units/all projects
	New co-educative and multidisciplinary higher educational courses and programmes (participatory media culture)	<i>MOME Social Design Hub</i> /all projects <i>Minor Media/Culture Research Center</i> /participatory video
	Increased social power of marginalized groups causing new and less oppressive local social relations (e.g. in a majority-minority or city-council-minority relations)	<i>Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)/PAR</i>
	New cooperation of UCE-orientated academic staff within the university	<i>Faculty of Economics Research Centre (RC)/SL</i> <i>Corvinus Science Shop (CSS)/Science Shop</i> activities
	New university unit (science shop)	<i>Corvinus Science Shop (CSS)/Science Shop</i> activities

<i>New framing</i> : new framing of problems and possible solutions.	Reframing the concept of 'stakeholders' in urban planning – involving previously neglected social groups	<i>MOME Social Design Hub</i> /Urban design <i>Faculty of Economics</i> <i>Research Centre (RC)/</i> PAR
	Reframing media as a participatory issue	<i>Minor Media/Culture</i> <i>Research Center</i> /participatory video
	Vulnerable groups reframing themselves (their dominant representation) for the public	<i>Minor Media/Culture</i> <i>Research Center</i> /participatory video <i>Faculty of Economics</i> <i>Research Centre (RC)/</i> PAR
	Reframing the social role of business schools and education (contributing also to social justice and sustainability beside business and economic development)	<i>Faculty of Economics</i> <i>Research Centre (RC)/SL</i> + PAR , <i>Corvinus Science Shop</i> (CSS)/Science Shop activities
	Reframing the role of the university in education and knowledge creation (education and knowledge creation as a participatory and democratic processes that acknowledge the diversity and complementary character of different forms of knowledge with and for communities instead of hierarchical processes driven by the superiority of 'scientific' knowledge and methodologies about social phenomena for pure publications)	<i>Faculty of Economics</i> <i>Research Centre (RC)/SL</i> + PAR <i>Corvinus Science Shop</i> (CSS)/Science Shop activities
	Reframing the concept of value for business schools, education and research: social value instead of pure business (monetized) value	<i>Faculty of Economics</i> <i>Research Centre (RC)/SL</i> + PAR <i>Corvinus Science Shop</i> (CSS)/Science Shop activities

<i>New doing</i> : new types of actions, creation of new possibilities of agency.	Community-based education and research institutionalized and continuously developed at universities	all units/all projects
	Maker-spaces that are inclusive for the oppressed and marginalized	<i>MOME Social Design Hub/</i> Fruska project
	New participatory film-making procedures	<i>Minor Media/Culture</i> <i>Research Center</i> /participatory video
	New, cooperatively managed places and processes (e.g. community centre for the vulnerable, political activism, social support, map of ‘supportive’ local businesses for vulnerable groups etc.)	<i>Faculty of Economics</i> <i>Research Centre (RC)/</i> PAR
	Diverse new and strengthened activities at community partners (NGOs, CSOs, SEs, community groups)	<i>Faculty of Economics</i> <i>Research Centre (RC)/SL</i> + PAR <i>Corvinus Science Shop</i> (CSS)/Science Shop activities

Note: CSO = civil society organization; NGO = non-governmental organization; PAR = participatory action research; SL = service learning.
Source: own compilation.

5. Discussion – UCE and transformative SI

If main forms of SI are operationalized through the categories of the TRANSIT model, the practice of *UCE clearly contributes to SI* processes in a significant and diverse way (Table 2).

It is a more complex question though whether this contribution can be evaluated as contribution to TSI – whether it has transformative character or not. Below we evaluate this contribution by the four key assessment categories introduced in Section 2.1 (Pel et al. 2020).

5.1. Relations within SI initiatives

One transformative characteristic is the aim of questioning and softening current social (middle class vs. marginalized) hierarchies, to which end they make significant effort to connect participants (stakeholders) with high social distance – this applies to each project and group. *Such an effort (goal) is clearly of counter-hegemonic character* if we consider that:

- working by such goals and cooperating with powerless groups is clearly not in line (against the) dominant goals, interest and logic of transnational academic capitalism (Hazelkorn 2018); and
- in a Hungarian context it means working within institutions (universities) under increasing state control (Kováts et al. 2024), with and for NGOs/CSOs and social groups that are often stigmatized by itself the illiberal Hungarian state (Gerő et al. 2023; Udvarhelyi 2014).

Intensive interaction among actors characterized by great social distance generates types of knowledge that are essential for dislodging ingrained ways of thinking (expansion of one's horizon, raised professional awareness, sensitization). This is also the precondition for generating genuinely stakeholder and location-specific solutions: it is crucial for the meaningful combination of local practical knowledge with diverse sorts of abstract academic knowledge supporting SI. As these new connections can in theory shift rigid relations of power to less hierarchical and more equitable, democratic, and participatory relationships, these are crucial for achieving the emancipatory goals of TSI through UCE.

Personal empowerment happens in the sense that both non-academic and academic participants gain new knowledge, skills, self-confidence, sensitivity, widened perspectives, and new social connections. UCE also provides room for *reflexive experimentation* – a core element of transformative UCE (Himmelman 2001) as community-driven issue-selection (Minkler 2004) is not only a normative expectation but a prerequisite for the meaningful commitment of non-academic participants. Therefore, *counterhegemonic/transformative relations do emerge* within SI initiatives (Pel et al. 2020).

However, *this does not mean that people living within multiple forms of oppression (social disadvantages) will be able to transform these personal and network-related change to counter-hegemonic actions* that alter their personal and/or social circumstances. The widespread occurrence of such a situation is rather a hope for academic actors involved than an empirically supported fact. This is also related to the fact that *capturing the social impacts of both UCE and SI are yet to be resolved*. Factors that play a key role in the present case are (see also Farnell and Šćukanec 2018 and Mihci 2020):

- *multiple causes behind individual-/community-level change* make it impossible to distinguish of UCE's impacts on SI and/or SI's social (counter-hegemonic) impacts of parallel factors; and
- the fact that while *potential counter-hegemonic change happens on the large scale and on the long run* (e.g. marginalized life/social situations are characterized by extreme inertia), UCE-driven SI processes, even though often based on long-term relationships and cooperation compared to conventional research or education processes, are still limited in their scale and time frame, and as such, long-term post-process evaluation practically does not happen.

This also means that even though long-term participatory research processes (may) play an important role in impact assessment, and so does a self-reflective attitude, *long-term impacts of UCE on TSI processes are inevitably uncertain*. This is strengthened by the quantitatively orientated short-term 'efficiency' expectations of transnational academic capitalism (Hazelkorn 2018) related to research and education (see, e.g. Urai and Kelly 2023) and the dominance of the 'project paradigm' in higher education: research and educational projects (processes) tend to rely on relatively short-term project-based funding, especially compared to the timeframe for achieving social impact.

Similar statements apply to student participants. The fact that they are enriched in their knowledge, their attitudes are changed in line with UCE values (democracy, empowerment, social justice and sustainability), and their perspective opens to accommodate relevant alternative career paths (organized around the values of solidarity and sustainability), does not mean that they will indeed be able to incorporate these principles into their future professional practice – even though we find examples for that, especially in the practice of *Corvinus Science Shop*. Considering e.g. the well-documented attitude-action gap (Lane and Potter 2007) and the strength of dominant economic structures (capitalism) in structuring human behaviour towards efficiency and growth-orientation (Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg 2015), we might have doubts here.

5.2. Relations in network formation

UCE is able to support *network formation and alliance building* – examples of cooperation involve all kinds of UCE participants (among CSOs, between CSOs and academics and/or students). However, such emerging relationships are often side-effects of UCE cooperations, and as such usually function without academic UCE participants. Therefore, observing their social impacts is beyond the research capacity of UCE processes. Such networks usually emerge in case actors are part of the same locality: geographical distance works against networking, except where hybridity is of key importance (e.g. if participatory media methods are involved).

UCE also contributes to *counterhegemonic discourse formation*. The normative and practical criteria of UCE, that research and education should happen with and for the marginalized on an equal basis instead of research and education on/about them, is in itself a counterhegemonic message towards academia as methodological rigour (Greenwood 2015) still suggests the superiority of the trained researcher compared to 'research subjects'. Also, in relation to academia, formerly missing concepts like 'social design', 'social responsibility', 'justice', 'equality', 'volunteering' or 'community partners' become part of (a changed) institutional language within host universities. Finally, the message that marginalized and (stately) stigmatized people and groups are worth

cooperating with and to be listened to as equal citizens and possessors of sound knowledge is far from the dominant functioning in e.g. policymaking in a Hungarian context (see, e.g. Udvarhelyi 2014) characterized by a missing science-policy interface.

5.3. *Relations to institutional change*

We found example of UCE having an impact on the local (municipal) situation of civil society and thus on local political processes (of decision-making, representation, participation) by facilitating the networking of local actors having an interest in emancipation. However, such an impact is not a general one but rather an exception.

This leads us to impacts related to *institutional change*. On one hand, UCE initiatives mean that universities provide an institutional home for UCE and SI networks (and students within). As ‘HUBs’, these provide access to infrastructure, human resources (staff and students via new courses and educational programmes, thesis works, etc.) and increased social legitimacy (as being partners of influential social institutions that are able to produce ‘sound’ knowledge with and for them). This latter is important for CSOs both because of the oppressive illiberal Hungarian environment and because general legitimacy challenges they face (see, e.g. Doyle and Patel 2008). All this clearly contribute to the long-term sustainability of cooperation and networks.

On the other hand, *such processes do not mean fundamental institutional change* – the dominance of transnational academic capitalism is not fundamentally challenged. Even more, it co-opts UCE and related SI activities as these possess an instrumental value for universities in relation to international accreditation processes and rankings, while also support regaining lost social legitimacy (Hazelkorn 2018) by showing that universities contribute to the ‘common good’. This means that counter-hegemonic and co-optative processes might happen parallel via UCE cooperation. Such processes of co-optation might fundamentally change Host Institutions’ practices on the very long run (the time frame of observations of present research might be too short here for a well-grounded evaluation), by e.g. getting institutionalized: institutionalizing student equality on the institutional level at the University of Szeged and similar processes in relation to student volunteering at Corvinus University of Budapest might be examples for that. In case these concepts themselves will not be co-opted during institution-wide institutionalization processes, it will mean that what is now evaluated as counter-hegemonic becomes part of business-as-usual. This highlights the *temporality of the counter-hegemony concept*. However, there is no guarantee that co-optation does not happen – for an example in relation to business and the concept of sustainable development see Springett (2003).

This means that even though UCE can reflect back on the academic sphere itself, and is theoretically able to democratizing university teaching and research to a degree, *shifting these conventionally rather hierarchical activities in a more emancipatory direction is a major challenge*. The latter’s impact is related to *governance processes of SI* (Galego et al. 2022): changes in universities, as major and potentially influential social agents of the SI governance ecosystem, the expansion of teaching and research practices in line with UCE and SI principles and values (emancipatory goals, democratic commitment and relationships with disempowered external agents) holds vast potential for TSI. However, such a transformation of universities are not observable in present case (nor it is in line with the dominance of transnational academic capitalism). These observations at least have to make us cautious in relation to the potential of pure consensus building and rather highlight the role of explicit or implicit conflicts in social change (Avelino 2021).

5.4. Relations to the socio-material context

UCE initiatives and their impacts on SI are heavily context-dependent. These are influenced by the *professional profile* (background) of academic participants and institutions. Representatives of virtually any discipline or research area (university unit) can find a connection to UCE contributing to SI. Professional background will, however, influence co-operation with external partners – it takes different shapes in art higher education, in media studies and in business higher education.

The contribution of UCE to SI is also influenced by the *participatory approach adopted*. Relatively long-term and action-oriented PAR processes directly and openly aimed at (politically) empowering marginalized communities that lack the capacity for self-organizing entail a more active (and activist) research stance (Málovics et al. 2021). By contrast, science shop and service learning are ‘services offered’ to already self-organized communities, CSOs and social enterprises. In these cases, the researcher’s influence (academic influence) is limited to facilitating processes.

Besides, the *local context* is also of importance – an impact might be demonstrated by referring to differences between e.g. Budapest (capital) and least developed rural areas of Hungary. Budapest has such an outstanding economic, cultural and social role in Hungarian society and economy (26 per cent of the Hungarian population lived in the Budapest agglomeration according to 2011 Census) that the city is often excluded from territorial analysis (Vida and Dudás 2017). This means the extensive presence of both higher education institutions and transition-orientated NGOs/CSOs and SEs (see, e.g. Neulinger, Kiss, and Veress 2023), often run by highly educated people with high socio-economic status. Such a context cannot be compared to economically disadvantageous rural ones where not only higher education institutions and CSOs that work with and for marginalized communities are often absent, but which are characterized by the lack of economic opportunities and highly feudal (dependent) social relations (see, e.g. Bori and Gonda 2022) meaning extreme political and economic barriers to independent and counter-hegemonic activities.

Such contextual differences also influence UCE’s contribution to TSI by having an impact on both potential partners and intermediators/facilitators, influencing: who is present in the given locality; with what kind of skills; within what kind of dependencies/hierarchies that shape opportunities/capabilities; what are the relevant problems; and what are the prevailing social norms (e.g. the presence/lack of oppression/stigmatization/perceived unreservedness).

6. Summary

Within the present study, we analysed the role UCE plays in TSI. Our results show that the (lack of) *counterhegemonic character of UCE and SI is context-dependent*: what might be considered counter-hegemonic in an illiberal context (e.g. working with and for marginalized groups suffering from state-level stigmatization and oppression), might not mean the same in liberal democracies where oppression and root causes of social injustice and unsustainability take partly different forms.

Furthermore, *even the four case presented show a rather diverse picture of UCE and SI, influenced by institutional (academic) backgrounds and contextual factors*. This not only means a challenge in relation to impact assessment and cross-case analysis, but also means that it is far from evident to what extent SI initiatives created/boosted by UCE can be replicated, given their contextual nature. This does not mean that SI projects

cannot be adapted, but it does mean that *adaptation processes cannot be taken for granted*. In this sense, UCE's impact on SI is fundamentally limited in geographical scale and scope, and its spread is not automatic.

It also follows from the counter-hegemonic nature of TSI that UCE supported TSI initiatives, especially when they are carried out with and for the benefit of marginalized groups unable to self-organize and live among striking structural boundaries, need to be 'managed'. *Sustaining these processes and their outcomes requires ongoing commitment and action* on the part of the actors – see, for instance, the challenges of making PAR processes sustainable (Letiecq and Schmalzbauer 2012). This does not mean that academic participants need to remain in these processes 'forever' (continuously 'backing' the related/strengthened SI process with UCE), but it does mean, however, that for some SI processes, not only their expansion, but even their survival is far from guaranteed (self-evident). And this is clearly not in-line with the short-term efficiency-orientated expectations related to academic capitalism and project-orientation – it would require e.g. slow science and education and long-term project (e.g. research) funding.

Given our results, it is therefore unsurprising that relatively few studies deal with *adaptation* (Hölsgens 2022), and the EU policy expectation of adaptation (Hölsgens 2022) might be evaluated as a misplaced one. Our results confirm the adaptation challenges of SI outputs (see, e.g. Johansson and Stefansen 2020) and suggest that similarities can be found mainly in the processes leading to SI (cooperative, democratic and action-oriented processes, in our case, between academic and non-academic actors), rather than the outputs that count as the specific SI. Therefore, rather than supporting outputs, supporting the expansion of such processes (including the expansion of UCE) may be the key policy tool for expanding SI, increasing its transferability, as also emphasized in the academic literature on e.g. PAR (Greenwood 2015). *This is however another 'wicked' challenge*, as universities are hardly moving away from the 'business-economic' interpretation of their social role (as would be required by UCE and (T)SI); quite the contrary: the weight of this interpretation is increasing (Hazelkorn 2018). In such an environment, how can one expect counter-hegemonic UCE, which defies this logic, to permeate the university and become a factor in governance supporting (T)SI on a large scale?

This also means that *transformative impacts/benefits of UCE and SI processes do not come automatically*. There are potential *gaps* between (1) empowerment as changed knowledge, perspective, self-confidence and self-reflection and (2) being able to counter-act oppressing systemic forces on an individual and especially (3) on an institutional-level. Our results show that the detectable changes are at individual levels and related to attitudes, knowledge, self-confidence and self-reflection (and even these are diverse and do not come automatically) and do not necessarily affect or significantly challenge larger institutions and/or structures. *The impacts of UCE on TSI are not 'automatically' transferred/upscaled from the local level*. The fact that potential large-scale counter-hegemonic change happens in the long run while the duration of UCE-driven TSI processes are limited compared to that, causes inherent complexities in relation to impact assessment. This situation is further complicated as small-scale counter-hegemonic process might also be co-opted by larger structures meaning that *counter-hegemonic and hegemonic impacts might appear hand-in-hand, while counter-hegemony is both a context-dependent and temporal concept*.

Finally, an obvious *limitation* of our research is the small sample (4 cases) and the non-generalizable (Hungarian) context of observation. It must also be stressed that our results reflect the lessons of resource-poor bottom-up UCE processes that rely on and are

primarily driven by the personal commitment of actors despite showing certain signs of institutionalization. If UCE were to be genuinely institutionalized in academia, i.e. if the academic actors who currently run UCE quasi voluntarily, primarily on the basis of internal motivation, could play a more significant role, this could bring changes in the array of partners, modes of co-operation, and the creation and propagation of best practices (co-learning), that is in adaptation, transferability and scale.

Notes

1. And also fully independently from the TRANSIT project.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/@romakepmuhely>, <http://romakepmuhely.hu/>
3. <http://eco.u-szeged.hu/eselyegyenloseg-es-sokfeleseg/eselyegyenloseg-a-karon/eselyegyenloseg-a-karon>

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Notes on contributors

György Málovics is a professor at the University of Szeged, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Institute for Ecological Economics. He has been working with vulnerable groups (most of all Roma, but also disabled people, environmentalists and related CSOs) during the past 15 years, following cooperative and action-orientated research (participatory action research) and educational (service learning) approaches. As a person with a researcher-activist identity, he is interested in contributing to both scientifically and locally significant knowledge production and social change for social justice and environmental sustainability, following an ecological economic/transformational paradigm. He has also been interested in and initiates processes opening up the university for the (local) community, most of all with and for vulnerable communities, in line with the approach of university community engagement. E-mail: malovics.gyorgy@eco.u-szeged.hu

Zoltán Bajmócy is a professor at the University of Szeged, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Institute for Ecological Economics, Hungary. He is the deputy dean of the faculty for science and for inclusion and equal opportunities. He is an ecological economist, holds a PhD in economics. His research focuses on the socio-technical, environmental and spatial aspects of sustainability transitions. He aims to apply cooperative and action-oriented approaches in his research and teaching activities in order to contribute to knowledge production

and transformation towards social justice and sustainability. E-mail: bajmoczy.zoltan@eco.u-szeged.hu

Janka Csernák is a social designer and researcher at the Social Design HUB of MOME Innovation Center since 2020, currently working on her doctoral dissertation. Her track record as a market-based product and concept designer and curator for diverse audiences has informed her years of working in social design since 2015. Currently, her research focuses on the impact of design tools on disadvantaged women's communities and adolescent youth. In addition to teaching multi-disciplinary social design courses in Zagreb (ALU), Gent (KASK), Tallinn (EKA), workshops during hackathons and summer universities, she is a co-founder of the Social Design Network. She received the Hungarian Design Award for several projects in 2014 and 2015, and the Fondation Jacques Rougerie Award in 2013. E-mail: csernak.janka@mome.hu

Bori Fehér is a social designer and design strategist focused on resilience and sustainability. She heads the Social Design Hub at MOME Innovation Center (MOME Interaction Design – Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest). She has facilitated students and researchers in social, eco and humanitarian design practice-based research projects for over a decade. Her research focuses on the opportunities of design in the climate crisis and its relations to social resilience, particularly on underprivileged communities and organisations on the rural periphery. She is the Co-Chair of the International Social Design Network she co-founded in 2020. Since 2014 she has been a Visiting Scholar at the Maryland Institute College of Art Center for Social Design in Baltimore, USA. She has a background in architecture and previously practised it in New York, USA. E-mail: feher.bori@mome.hu

Márta Frigyk works as partnership coordinator in the Corvinus Science Shop setting up course projects and thesis work between local community partners and lecturers, researchers and students of University of Corvinus, Hungary. With a background in Management and Organization development, Márta facilitates the community partners of the science shop to articulate their questions and research needs and supports the cooperation for Community Engaged Research and Learning to happen. E-mail: marta.frigyk@uni-corvinus.hu

Judit Juhász holds a PhD in economics. She has been involved in participatory action research and university-community engagement initiatives since 2013. Her research interests are human development and well-being, and the nature of a worthy life. She is working with vulnerable groups to promote equality, autonomy, and diversity. She is a research fellow at the Institute for Ecological Economics, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University of Szeged, Hungary. E-mail: judit.juhasz@eco.u-szeged.hu

Réka Matolay is one of the founders and the Head of Corvinus Science Shop and an associate professor at Corvinus University of Budapest. Her primary teaching and research fields are Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation; Community Engaged Research and Learning; Responsible Research and Innovation; Critical Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability. She is on professional juries evaluating CSR efforts by companies and initiatives of civil society organizations. She has been working on embedding community engagement, experiential and transformative learning for social inclusion and sustainability in higher education. E-mail: reka.matolay@uni-corvinus.hu

András Müllner is associate professor at the Department of Media and Communication in Eötvös Loránd University of Sciences, Budapest, and head of the Minor Media/Culture Research Centre and Roma Visual Lab university film programme. He holds PhD in Literary Studies (2001), and his main research interests are Hungarian neoavantgarde art and the visual culture, especially the representation of minorities. In recent years he edited several collections of essays in different subjects, like visual memory of the blood libel (Apertúra), Marshall McLuhan (Replika), allegorical impulses (Enigma), participatory film (Replika and Acta Universitatis Sapientiae/Film and Media Studies). He has published five books of his own. Müllner is member of the board of trustees of Artpool Research Centre, Romano Istituto, and the organizing committee of the Hungarian Society for Film Studies. E-mail: mullner.andras@btk.elte.hu

Rita Szerencsés is a social designer, impact researcher, urbanist, design and art manager. She has been a researcher at the Social Design Hub at the MOME Innovation Center since 2020 and a doctoral student at the MOME Doctoral School since 2016. Her doctoral research is assessing the impact of art-based socially committed interventions. She is involved in social design research,

practice oriented courses as a teacher and interested in maintaining urban communities, socially beneficial innovations. Apart from MOME Rita is founding partner of Budapest100, an internationally acclaimed architectural heritage project, an external expert at the Contemporary Architecture Center Budapest and a co-expert in the Come in! URBACT Transfer Network. E-mail: szerencses.rita@mome.hu.

ORCID

György Málovics  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6539-8588>

Zoltán Bajmócy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4462-0469>

Janka Csernák  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9152-1551>

Bori Fehér  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7736-998X>

Márta Frigyük  <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-2397-9713>

Judit Juhász  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5765-6575>

Réka Matolay  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5060-0336>

András Müllner  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3303-8171>

Rita Szerencsés  <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-9305-7730>

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