

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: TERMINOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The concept of *civic engagement* in higher education remains terminologically diverse and often ambiguous. Scholars employ various synonyms, such as civic participation, community engagement, service-learning, and public work, which complicates their conceptual clarity and practical application. This paper examines and clarifies the conceptual and terminological understanding of civic engagement in academic discourse, proposing a working definition applicable to the Latvian higher education context. This study's central research question is: *How is civic engagement defined and interpreted in the scientific literature?*

A summative content analysis was conducted on 97 scholarly definitions published between 2000 and 2024 to address this. The analysis focused on identifying the key dimensions and recurring elements of the definitions. The findings reveal that *civic engagement* is a multidimensional phenomenon, involving both individual and collective action, as well as political and non-political participation, and voluntary contributions to the public good. It also encompasses values such as responsibility, solidarity, and active citizenship.

The study highlights the importance of terminological precision in differentiating *civic engagement* from related concepts, particularly *civic participation*, which often implies narrower or more institutionalised forms of involvement. Based on the analysis, the paper proposes a synthesised definition of *civic engagement*, emphasising its role in fostering democratic values, critical thinking, and socially responsible behaviour among students. This definitional clarity is intended to inform future research, policy development, and curriculum design in education.

Keywords: *civic engagement; civic participation; democratic participation; higher education; student involvement*

Introduction

Civic engagement (hereafter referred to as CE) is becoming increasingly important in contemporary higher education; however, its interpretation in the academic literature remains diverse and ambiguous (Hulbert & Harkins, 2024). Scholars define it using different concepts and synonyms, reflecting different approaches and understandings of CE. This terminological ambiguity calls for in-depth analysis and clarification.

To understand the fundamental origins of CE and the challenges associated with terminology, this research paper analyses and structures the meaning of CE, which is necessary for clear and precise communication within research, avoiding terminological ambiguities and inconsistencies in the use of the concept.

Recent data reveal significant challenges in developing civic engagement in Latvia. Studies show that students rate their civic competence as the lowest among six other transversal competences (Rubene et al., 2024). Only 20% of young adults (aged 18–30) are politically active, and 47% of students consider democracy the best form of government (Čekse, 2021; Čekse et al., 2023). Voter turnout remains critically low, with only 17% of residents having voted in the past five years, and just 31% believing their vote matters (Kažoka & Bērziņa, 2023). Moreover, trust in government institutions is below the OECD average, with only 29% of the population trusting the government and just 13% trusting political parties (OECD, 2024). These indicators highlight the need for strengthened civic education, including CE, and the active role of higher education institutions in fostering CE.

The study aims to explore CE in the scientific literature, identify its main characteristics, and develop a terminologically precise definition suitable for the Latvian context. The research question is: How is CE defined and interpreted in the scientific literature? To answer this question, 97 scholarly sources were analysed using thematic and summative content analysis. This approach enables the structured collection of different definitions, identifying recurrent themes and classifying them according to relevant conceptual features. The study's results contribute to the scholarly discourse on the meaning of CE and offer a structured approach to terminological precision in research and practice.

Literature review

The concept of CE is complex and polyonymous (Jacoby, 2009), meaning it has different meanings and/or is defined by different terms. The available scholarly literature on CE in English reveals a range of synonyms used depending on the research context. This diversity complicates the research process and creates the potential for conceptual inconsistency. The most used synonyms for “civic engagement” in the English-language research literature are summarised below (see Table 1) and used depending on the context. Synonyms should be used responsibly and with care, as although they may be conceptually related to CE, their meanings can vary considerably, especially in the English-language academic literature. Just because two terms seem similar does not mean they can be used interchangeably without risking misinterpretation or conceptual inaccuracy, especially in research and academic writing.

Some scholars (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Vargulis, 2021; Berger, 2009) argue that the concept of CE and related terms are not helpful for anything because of the wide range of definitions. Researchers support the idea that the term is used as a buzzword to encompass everything from voting to donating money, attending workshops in the local community, or participating in sports games. There is a lack of clarity about what CE means (Saltmarsh, 2005). CE is problematic due to its widespread popularity (Levine, 2007).

Table 1 Synonyms of the term “civic engagement” in the scientific literature

The most used synonyms for the English term “ <i>civic engagement</i> ” in scientific literature
Social capital, citizenship, democratic participation/citizenship/practice, public work/public problem solving, political engagement, community engagement, social responsibility, social justice, civic professionalism, public agency, community building, civic or public leadership, development of public intellectuals, preservation and expansion of the commons
Active participation in public life, civic responsibility, community service-learning, community-based research, engaged scholarship, service-learning, volunteerism

Source. Adapted from C. M. Cress & S. T. Stokamer “Civic Engagement in Higher Education” (2017); R. M. Battistoni “Civic Engagement across the Curriculum: A Resource Book for Service-Learning Faculty in All Disciplines” (2002); and P. Levine, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens*” (2007).

Second, there are ideological differences in how CE is perceived (Battistoni, 2002), for example, leftist academics may see civic education as patriotic and demonstrative, while more conservative academics may see CE as participation in activist programmes. The different views can create misconceptions and make the definition of CE contradictory and value-oriented. The controversy may affect different individuals both within and outside academia. Thirdly, the question of whether the aim of CE should be to build a socially just world is important, as terms such as “*good society*” and “*common good*” are conflated with social justice, leading to different interpretations of what justice means (Levine, 2007). Fourth, there is terminological confusion, where academics, students, the community or society at large do not understand whether community service and CE, for example, are synonymous (Jacoby, 2009), which calls for a systematic literature review that provides a detailed analysis of how CE can be defined.

To understand the meaning of the term CE, it is first necessary to look at and analyse the English vocabulary of “*civic*” and “*engagement*”. Translating the term “*civic*” from English, its meaning is “citizen-” or “citizen-” (Belzēja et al., 1995). Specifically, the conceptual interpretation of the term “*civic*” is related to the keywords “citizen” or “citizens”¹ (Oxford University Press, n.d.) and “city”, “citizenship”² (Oxford University Press, 1991) – that which belongs to or relates to a citizen, the duties of a citizen, that which is appropriate to a citizen.

Generally, the term “engagement” translates to “occupation” or “commitment” in English (Kalniņa et al., 2007). Hegna (2018) points out that the term can be considered as interest and initially has two meanings: first, engagement as activation, consent or participation, and second, the emotional side, which refers to interest and emotional involvement. It is worth noting that the first meaning is reflected in typologies of CE research. Analysing and combining the explanations available in the scientific literature, it can be concluded that the term is related to interest and commitment (Hegna, 2018; Simpson & Patterson, 2018), is an active and emotional activity (Morris, 2022) and involvement (Bignoux, 2020) in which there are two or more parties involved who

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “civic (adj.),” July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3288042650>

² Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary. (1991). Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 203.

define and jointly achieve a goal (Dippert et al., 2017) by interacting within a specific task (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

From a psychological perspective, the term “*engagement*” is a psychological process and an active contribution or motivational state (Herrada-Lores & Estrella-Ramón, 2019) aimed at acquiring knowledge and developing skills and abilities (Popescu et al., 2022). It involves reflection, exploration, evaluation, and a level of understanding, and it is associated with a sense of power and control (El Zoghbi, 2019). A psychological state experienced when engaging, interacting and immersing oneself in a particular task (Holmquest, 2021). Thus, engagement in the psychological sense of the term is a multidimensional process that encompasses cognitive, emotional and behavioural involvement, facilitating deeper learning and developmental experiences, while reflecting an individual’s active participation and motivation, which influences both the acquisition of knowledge and the feeling of control over one’s actions.

In educational culture, “*engagement*” is a broadly defined term that refers to (Majdoub, 2022) the encouragement of students to engage in academic activities, learning communities and interact with academic staff by dedicating time and resources (Cofer, 2021) and using active learning and collaborative skills (Piedra, 2020) to develop knowledge, skills and dispositions for learning content (Majdoub, 2022) and to influence the future (El Zoghbi, 2019). Specifically, in higher education, this encompasses student engagement in academic life, approaches to developing engaging curricula, and understanding an engaged university – one that actively engages with economic and civil society, embracing mutual listening, reciprocity, and dialogue that focuses on the well-being of the community. It encompasses both the promise of action and the actual outcome of action. It is usually a permanent rather than a temporary situation, and engagement rules and regulations exist in specific contexts. Engagement has potential, promise, risk and uncertainty, often because it involves the individual adapting and being willing to change. It involves intense, thoughtful and reasoned interaction with the broader world (Boland & McIlrath, 2008). On the institutional side of higher education, “*engagement*” is defined as a new partnership between academia and civil society, emphasising the need for higher education institutions to work more closely with other organisations (Zlotkowski, 2007), ensuring knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing, so that other actors involved also become participants in the dissemination and use of knowledge (Garretson et al., 2020).

The Latvian term “*pilsoniskā līdzdalība*” (the English term “*civic participation*” is also considered synonymous in Latvian (Bela & Rasnača, 2023) and in foreign literature (Scerri & James, 2010), its meaning is “*civic engagement*”, which is the involvement of citizens in the discussion, decision-making and implementation of issues of importance to society. It is one of the fundamental principles of a democratic country and of the European Union. CE can be implemented at the local, regional, national and international levels. It can include participation in elections, activities in non-governmental organisations, volunteering, and involvement in informal civic activities to defend one’s interests or address public concerns. CE also involves citizens engaging with public authorities

in a multifaceted way and participating in decision-making processes at different levels that contribute to positive societal change and improve quality of life. CE in social work is essential because it ensures that representatives of social groups and communities can adopt and implement social policy decisions that affect specific groups or communities. It also involves community members in resource planning and the development of social services to ensure that social support and services best meet the population's needs (Bela & Rasnača, 2023). For example, higher education institutions promote CE in a significant way by incorporating it into their missions, curricula, and structures. It is closely integrated into institutional policies and governance structures, shaping educational strategies and promoting student participation (Evans et al., 2018). Similarly, research on the institutionalisation of CE highlights that universities can systematically incorporate it into their core functions by developing structured programmes that align with organisational goals (Batten et al., 2017). Higher education institutions play a key role in promoting democratic values and social responsibility through organised initiatives, further strengthening the institutional nature of CE (Hulbert & Harkins, 2024). These conclusions collectively indicate that CE extends beyond individual involvement, functioning as a structured and institutionalised process that promotes democratic values and societal transformation.

When examining English-language definitions of the synonym term “*civic participation*”, it is often described as political and social activity (Hirzalla & Banaji, 2018) or as an active civic position (Scerri & James, 2010), involving a willingness to take part in social mechanisms through which individuals or groups engage in processes and issues affecting the community, aiming to protect its values and interests (Witte et al., 2017; Song, 2019). As previously mentioned, “*civic participation*” and “*civic engagement*” are frequently used interchangeably in English and Latvian. However, there is a subtle difference in meaning: “*civic engagement*” typically emphasises citizen initiative and active involvement in society, whereas “*civic participation*” is considered a more neutral term (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Some scholars argue that these terms are not accurate synonyms, explaining that “*participation*” is often interpreted as observable civic behaviour and therefore used to refer to acts of civic participation. In contrast, “*engagement*” refers to the interest, awareness, knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or emotions related to political or civic matters (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). According to Barrett & Brunton-Smith (2014), “*participation*” refers to collaborative actions aimed at addressing social problems, including membership in civic organisations, attending community meetings, volunteering, and donating to charity. On the other hand, “*engagement*” includes following news across media platforms (newspapers, magazines, television, radio, internet), knowledge about politics and civic topics, understanding political and civic values, and forming opinions and attitudes toward civic and political events and processes. Other researchers (Hauser, 2000; Putnam, 1995) define *civic participation* as encompassing voting, social and political activism, and volunteering. The author notes that within the scope of this research, the focus was on the term “*civic engagement*” when conducting keyword-based literature searches and analysis, rather than “*civic participation*”.

Table 2 Typology of specific definitions of CE

Civic engagement as service for the public good	Civic engagement as a collective action	Civic engagement as political involvement	Civic engagement as social change
Civic engagement is an individual's duty to assume civic responsibilities by actively participating, either alone or with others, in voluntary activities that strengthen the local community (Diller, 2001).	Civic engagement can be defined as a means through which an individual, by participating in collective action, influences the broader civil society (Van Benschoten, 2001). Civic engagement is an activity in which people come together to fulfil their role as citizens (Diller, 2001).	Civic engagement refers to the rediscovery of politics and public life, where citizens speak and act together as members of a community (Ronan, 2004).	Civic engagement refers to the active participation of citizens in community life, helping to shape its future. It necessarily includes dimensions of social change (Crowley, 2011).

However, it is important to recognise that in some scholarly publications, the terms are used interchangeably (Artamonova & Fomchenkova, 2021).

To understand the essence of CE, it is necessary to examine its defining characteristics and their diversity in various academic and practical contexts. CE includes individual and collective actions that promote societal development and strengthen democratic processes. It can manifest in various forms, from political participation and active citizenship to volunteer work and community initiatives. The term “*civic engagement*” refers to the involvement of members of society in discussing, making, and implementing decisions on issues significant to society, without distinguishing between whether individuals or external actors initiate the action.

Adler and Goggin (2005) categorise CE definitions into two groups: specific definitions (which limit the definition to a particular field or type of activity) and broad definitions (which are more inclusive). Separate examples of specific CE definitions are compiled in Table 2 (see Table 2).

Definitions that frame CE as a public service emphasise participation in voluntary service within one's local community, where the individual acts independently or as a group member. CE as collective action refers specifically to group-based efforts aimed at improving society. Definitions conceptualising CE as political involvement include collective action and activities related to governmental processes and decision-making. Meanwhile, CE as a social change approach highlights that tangible social transformations can occur through active participation in community life, shaping the community's future (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

Table 3 presents several examples of broad definitions of CE that are inclusive and allow for more expansive interpretation of the concept (see Table 3). These specific definitions have been cited ten times in scholarly publications and included in the comprehensive collection of 97 definitions.

Table 3 Examples of broad definitions of CE

R. P. Adler, J. Goggin (2005)	T. Ehrlich (2000)	B. Jacoby (2009)
Civic engagement refers to how an active citizen participates in community life to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future. It involves citizens interacting with their society and government.	Civic engagement means working to transform the community's civic life while developing a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that happen. It involves enhancing the quality of life in a community through both political and non-political processes	An activity based on an elevated sense of responsibility toward one's community. It includes a broad range of actions, including the development of civic awareness, participation in shaping civic society, and contributing to the common good. It also encompasses the concepts of global citizenship and interdependence

By synthesising the three definitions outlined above, it can be concluded that CE, in its broader dimension, is characterised by the following features: 1) active participation in community life aims to improve community members' conditions and quality of life and contribute to the community's future; 2) the need to develop knowledge, skills, values, and motivation that support civic life and highlight the role of education, lifelong learning, and personal development; 3) interaction with both society and government; 4) a wide range of activities, including political and non-political engagement forms; 5) a sense of responsibility toward the community, not only at the local level but also nationally and globally.

In summary, the theoretical findings reveal that CE is a multidimensional concept whose interpretation varies depending on context, language, and research approach. This diversity underscores the need for precise terminology and conceptual consistency in future research.

Methodology

As part of the study, a systematic review of scholarly literature in English was conducted using the keywords “*civic engagement in higher education*” across two major academic databases: Web of Science and Oxford Academic. The PRISMA method was used to ensure a systematic and transparent literature selection process, which helps to document the flow of identified and excluded studies. It included sources in the study (Page et al., 2021) and additional sources, including books, education policy documents, and dissertations. In total, 309 sources were reviewed, of which 97 were included (see Figure 1) in the final analysis based on relevance criteria (90 articles and 7 book sources). The main reasons for exclusion were a lack of focus on the concept (e.g., no definition of civic engagement or no relation to the higher education context). The time frame covered 2000 to 2024, which marks a significant development of the concept in global educational discourse.

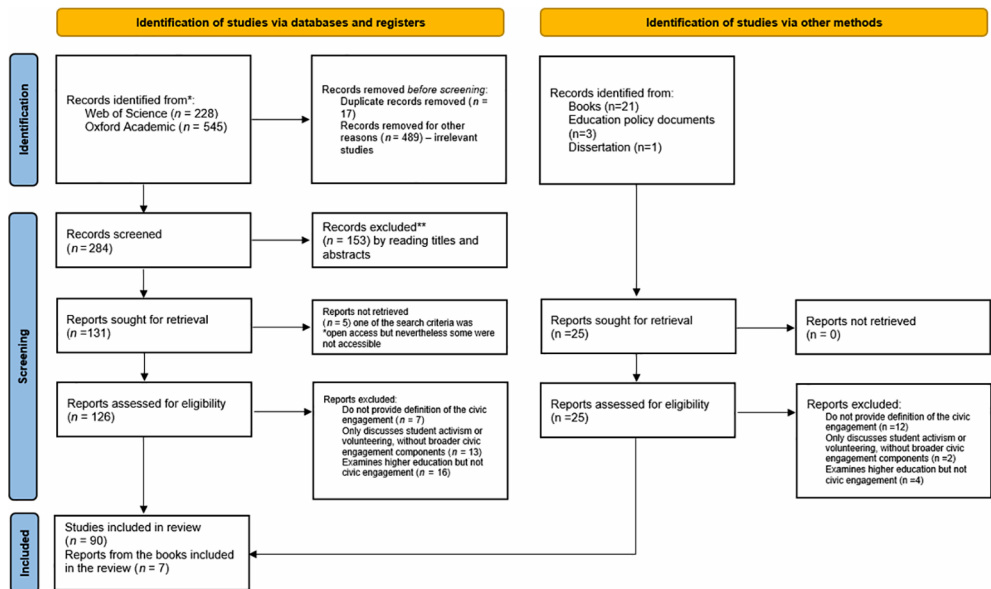


Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process

The literature review used thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes, motifs, and characteristic elements within textual data. This approach is beneficial for analysing definitions and discourses around a concept such as CE, offering a flexible and systematic framework for exploring patterns of meaning across texts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ninety-seven definitions and conceptualisations were collected and structured chronologically and thematically. Recurrent features were identified, such as types of engagement, values, goals, the notion of public good, and the role of students. A summary and relevant keywords accompanied each source to facilitate comparability. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial (manual) codes, development of themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and presenting the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A summative content analysis was also applied to better understand how CE is used in the literature. This approach begins with a quantitative phase, counting specific terms and phrases in the texts, and proceeds with a qualitative interpretation. It helps reveal the contexts and meanings of the term and associated values and strategies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

By combining thematic and summative content analysis, this study ensures both a deeper conceptual understanding and a broader overview of how the term CE is applied across different academic contexts.

Results

Analysing a wide range of definitions was essential to gaining a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of CE by identifying core characteristics and recurring

patterns across various contexts. The conceptual descriptions of the term reveal the following key features:

- CE is important in strengthening democracy (Maiello et al., 2003) and fostering democratic societal values (Torney-Purta et al., 2015).
- CE entails personal development and includes or promotes the development of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation necessary to support community civic life. It is a significant component of individual growth (Ehrlich, 2000; UNESCO, 2014).
- CE is characterised by community involvement to promote the community's well-being, through actions or behaviours that address societal issues and contribute to the development of society at local, national, and global levels (Diller, 2001).
- CE as a component of higher education refers to a) *an institutional mission – the “third mission” of higher education institutions (HEIs)* – where universities actively engage with their local communities through research, education, and service, assuming responsibility for the society they serve. Mission-related activities include civic and social engagement, technology and innovation transfer, and entrepreneurship (Gerholz et al., 2018; Brandt et al., 2018); b) *a pedagogical method, an educational approach, and/or a learning outcome*, depending on HEIs's mission, traditions, and institutional culture.
- CE is defined as voluntary individual (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2002; Campbell, 2006) or collective action (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Cress, 2012; Medne et al., 2024), and/or civic behaviour (Levine, 2007; Bowman, 2011; Zaff et al., 2011), which can be political (Hauser, 2000) or non-political (Greenfield et al., 2021). Such actions can occur locally, nationally, or globally (Tarman & Kilinc, 2023).
- CE may be defined as service for the public good, whether expressed through individual motivation and self-expression or collective involvement (e.g., student groups participating in public service initiatives).
- CE involves social change within society (Welch, 2007) and resolving community-level social issues.
- CE can be understood as a professional competence (Levine, 2007), encompassing various domains that build citizens' understanding of their role in a democratic society. It may also be regarded as a goal supported by the development of civic competence. In the Latvian context, CE is one of the six transversal competencies in general and higher education (Ministru kabinets, 2019). In general education, these include critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and entrepreneurship, self-directed learning, collaboration, civic engagement, and digital literacy. In higher education, transversal competences include digital, research, innovation, entrepreneurship, global, and civic competence (Rubene et al., 2024).
- CE is also expressed through (civic) behaviour (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2002; Epstein et al., 2021; Zaff et al., 2011) and/or a mindset fostering a sense of community responsibility.

Table 4 Frequency of keyword phrase usage in the literature analysis

Code phrases	Frequency of occurrence
Foundational element of democracy and a component that promotes democracy	12
Personal growth/development and a factor that includes and/or promotes knowledge, skills, values, and motivation	19
Involvement in the community and a factor that promotes community well-being and/or social change	38
Political and/or non-political engagement	30
Individual and/or collective participation	28
Component of higher education – teaching approach, pedagogical method, learning outcome, third mission	24
Public service / Work for the common good	16
Voluntary activity	7
(Civic) behaviour and/or way of thinking that fosters a sense of responsibility toward the community	11
Driver of global change	7
Competence (professional and/or civic)	2
Domain of identity formation	2

Source. Own research.

Following the synthesis and analysis of CE definitions, the identification of key characteristics, and the theoretical framework for how Adler and Goggin (2005) divided CE definitions, the author grouped the terms into twelve categories based on keywords that reflect and define the essence of CE in each publication (see Table 4).

The frequency analysis of 97 definitions highlights the multidimensional nature of civic engagement (CE) and its conceptual consistency across diverse contexts. The most cited feature – community involvement and contribution to societal well-being – reflects CE’s deep link to collective responsibility and the public good (Diller, 2001; Welch, 2007). Participation was characterised as political and non-political (Hauser, 2000; Greenfield et al., 2021), and as involving individual or collective actions (Arvanitidis, 2017; Cress, 2012; Medne et al., 2024).

Many definitions emphasise personal development and promoting civic knowledge, skills, values, and motivation (Ehrlich, 2000; UNESCO, 2014; Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018), which are essential for fostering responsible citizenship. Civic engagement was also frequently connected to higher education, particularly through institutions’ “third mission” of community partnership and social responsibility (Gerholz et al., 2018; Brandt et al., 2018; Dipholo & Tshishonga, 2022; Al-Amin & Gazar, 2020). This integration positions CE as both an educational strategy and a structural commitment.

Recurring elements such as voluntarism and public service further emphasise CE as a value-driven process (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2002; Hedin, 1989; Tansey, 2012), often motivated by altruism, trust, and solidarity (Uslaner, 2004; Jankowski, 2007; Beyerlein & Vaisey, 2013).

These behaviours, typically unpaid and non-compulsory, contribute to community well-being and democratic life (Verba et al., 1995; Tolbert et al., 2003; Parvin & Saunders, 2018).

Although less frequently cited, CE was also framed as a competence, both civic and professional, and a factor in identity formation, particularly among youth and students (Levine, 2007; Liu et al., 2018; Crocetti et al., 2012; Crocetti et al., 2014). This aligns with perspectives that highlight the developmental nature of CE as both an external practice and an internalised mindset (Zaff et al., 2011; Epstein et al., 2021). Finally, some scholars point to CE's potential role in addressing global challenges and promoting cross-cultural understanding, thereby positioning it as a driver of global change (Bowman, 2011; Castellanos & Cole, 2015). These broader interpretations signal a need for further empirical exploration of how CE is expressed across contexts and its implications for policy and education (Doolittle & Faul, 2013).

These insights reinforce CE as a complex, value-laden construct that merges individual action with institutional structures, and behavioural expression with personal growth. The frequency data provide a foundation for developing a more unified, context-sensitive framework to guide future research, policy, and educational practice. This multidimensional understanding of CE highlights the importance of developing a conceptually grounded framework tailored to higher education. Such a framework can guide academic research and institutional practice and may serve as a foundation for further empirical research, policy development, and faculty professional development in the Latvian context.

Discussion

Definitions of CE are numerous and often discipline-specific or shaped by individual researchers' perspectives. With civic engagement across various institutions and organisations, the chosen term, definition, or approach should align with the institution's mission, culture, and traditions (Jacoby, 2009). There is no single, universally accepted definition or consensus regarding the term 'civic engagement' (Gibson, 2001), nor a fixed interpretation of the term itself. The definition of the term largely depends on the research perspective and the interests of the person or institution defining it (Adler & Goggin, 2005). CE is understood as a set of actions through which active citizens participate in improving community conditions to transform and shape the future of civic life. This includes interaction between citizens, society, and government. To foster improved quality of life within the community, individuals must develop knowledge, skills, values, motivation, and a heightened sense of responsibility, applying both political and non-political means of participation.

Based on the analysis of 97 definitions, the author proposes a definition of CE: "CE is defined as an active, multidimensional process involving both individual and collective actions aimed at promoting citizens' participation in community life, driving social change in society, and ensuring democratic involvement in decision-making

processes. It encompasses both political and non-political forms of participation and engagement, fostering collaboration between higher education, society, and organisations through knowledge exchange and transfer. It supports personal and skills development, as well as public service. Through structured and voluntary participation, CE contributes to strengthening democratic foundations, civic responsibility and competence, and the broader well-being of society.

Nevertheless, the definitional complexity raises important questions. For instance, should CE be considered primarily a set of *behaviours* (as implied by “*participation*”), or a broader *motivational and attitudinal orientation* (as conveyed by “*engagement*”) ? The data suggest both are relevant, but a growing consensus is that engagement must go beyond mere activity and encompass reflection, responsibility, and intentionality (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Doolittle & Faul, 2013). For example, Putra, Annas, and Reni (2024) emphasise that service-learning programs in higher education promote academic, personal, and civic growth among students. However, their effectiveness depends on their quality and implementation. Lewing and Bunkowski (2022) highlight the importance of faculty professional development and collaboration between teaching and CE centres, which is essential for advancing civic and community-based pedagogical practices.

The most common characteristics of CE, as identified in this study, include active involvement in the community; a focus on democratic values; personal growth and the development of civic knowledge, skills, and motivation; engagement through both political and non-political means; voluntary participation; and CE’s integration into higher education as both public service and a reflection of civic responsibility. These dimensions align with established characteristics in the scholarly literature (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2012; Hilger, 2006; Verba et al., 1995), such as voluntariness, unpaid and altruistic participation, and collective civic action in the public sphere. They highlight CE as a value-driven process rooted in behaviour and responsibility.

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis was limited to English-language sources, which may restrict cultural diversity. Second, many definitions are context-specific, shaped by national education and political systems, and may not fully align with the Latvian context. Finally, theme identification might have involved some degree of researcher subjectivity.

Future studies should examine how the theoretically identified characteristics are reflected in the policies, curricula, and professional practices of higher education institutions to deepen the understanding of how CE is implemented. Such analysis would help assess the extent to which CE is integrated into educational processes and how it influences student development.

Conclusion

Numerous definitions of CE exist, often specific to fields or shaped by the perspectives of individual researchers. This study analysed 97 academic sources to clarify how higher education defines and interprets CE. The most prominent features of CE identified were

community involvement, promotion of social change, support for democracy, individual growth and competence development, acquisition of knowledge, values, and motivation, voluntarism, and participation in both political and non-political activities, as well as its role as a component of higher education. CE is also viewed as a form of (civic) behaviour and mindset, rooted in a sense of responsibility toward the community.

The findings of this study provide a conceptually organised foundation for understanding CE in higher education, which may serve as a reference point for researchers, policymakers, and faculty. Further research is needed to empirically evaluate how these key features are implemented in practice, within curricula, academic staff activities, and student experiences. Clarifying terminology and identifying core features of CE is essential for making the concept practically applicable and for encouraging institutions to reflect on their role in promoting civic values through education. This study provides a theoretical foundation for future research on civic engagement, as the integration and analysis of ninety-seven scholarly definitions represent a considerable scholarly effort and a significant contribution to the conceptual advancement of the field.

AUTHOR NOTE

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