The Operationalisation of Community Engagement in Higher Education Institutions: An Exploratory Study.

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Abstract.

The issue of how Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) engage with society presents challenges as they endeavour to embrace a community engagement agenda and build it into the strategic fabric of their organisations. This paper outlines key factors in the operationalisation of community engagement for HEIs: firstly, through the lens of the literature; secondly, through empirical research, based on interviews with managers responsible for community engagement in fourteen Higher Education Institutes in Ireland. The findings suggest that there is a large element of agreement on the key factors in operationalising community engagement between the literature and the managers interviewed, but some factors reflect future ambitions rather than the current reality faced by some managers. The paper does indicate a possible roadmap in operationalising community engagement.

Keywords: Community Engagement; Higher Education; Operationalisation.

1. Introduction.

The issue of how HEIs engage with society continues to gain increased prominence (Wynne, 2014; Farnell &Ilić, 2021). For example, in Ireland the National Strategy for Higher Education (NSHE) to 2030 advocates that HEIs need to ensure that community engagement (CE) is integrated into the mission and strategic fabric of these institutions (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). At an international level, this is reflected in the debate, which surrounds Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) meeting the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At a European level there is evidence of CE's increased importance where CE is part of EU policy on Higher Education within the Commission's Renewed Agenda on Higher Education (2017) (Farnell &Ilić, 2021). Looking to the Irish landscape on CE, in 2014, leaders

from across twenty-three HEIs signed the Campus Engage Charter for Community Engagement. This charter emphasised their commitment to the development of CE in their institutions (Campus Engage, 2014). In terms of how to make CE happen in HEIs the literature covering this operationalisation of CE at institute level is under researched and fragmented (McEwen & O'Connor, 2013; Benneworth, 2018). The aim of this paper is to address this under-researched area by focusing on the key factors in operationalising CE within a HEI. The paper's concentration is on "*how*" to make CE happen within a HEI, as distinct to the institutionalisation of CE, in terms of reviewing characteristics such as organisation characteristics linked to intervention characteristics, processes and indicators of institutionalisation (Cummings et al., 2020). Therefore, there are two research objectives associated with the aim of the paper, first, to identify what are the key components in the operationalisation of CE within a HEI, as suggested by the literature. Second, what are the key factors in the operationalisation of CE from the perspective of the CE managers or those responsible for managing CE in these HEIs?

2. Literature Review.

In order to achieve these objectives, the paper examines the literature through a number of different facets, primarily it defines CE, and secondly, it develops the discussion by reviewing the key factors (as postulated by the literature) in the operationalisation of CE in a HEI. In terms of defining CE, the literature suggests that there are three significant components identified - Community, Participation and Positive Action (Matto et al., 2017; Meshram and O'Cass, 2013; Quillinan et al., 2018, Wilson et al., 2008; Young, 2011). One definition of CE which incorporates these key elements suggests that CE is a process "*whereby universities engage with community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial even if each side benefits in a different way*" (Benneworth, 2018). This will be the working definition used as the foundation for this paper.

In all, nine key factors were identified in this literature review on how to effectively operationalise CE within a HEI. Directing the focus to these key factors, it has been argued that it is not uncommon for senior figures in third level institutions to sign important collaborative agreements that have no effect at operational level (Chatterton & Goddard, 2000: Kempton, 2019). Furthermore, it is suggested that strategic plans refer to CE but without any actions being outlined to turn aspirations into reality (Murphy & McGrath, 2018). Therefore, all aspects of the

operationalisation of CE needs to have strong senior management support and engagement throughout the formulation of the plan and the implementation process.

Faculty members are shaped by an academic culture that often-run contrary to an engaged scholarship (Checkoway, 2013). Building on this point, it is argued that one significant challenge, with regard to the Institute's faculty members being involved in CE initiatives, is that what is necessary is not a programme of engagement, but to help infuse the institute's culture, practices and structures with a new spirit encompassing the CE agenda and so CE becomes a core part of what is done within the Institute (McKenna and Martin, 2014).

Closely linked to the idea of culture is the lack of recognition within the Institute (Boland, 2008). Similarly, it was found that a lack of recognition of staff involved in CE projects, meant that staff's involvement came down to their own "*goodwill*", hence, while relying on the goodwill of faculty "*was not an issue in itself*", barriers with regard to the sustainability of relying on such contributions existed (Quillinan et al., 2018, p.9).

Therefore, to sustain staff and student involvement in CE, there needs to be an appropriate reward structure, including promotion and permanency, time for professional priorities, credits, salary increases, and other rewards. Otherwise, it is likely to be dysfunctional for the individual and for the institution (Checkoway, 2013). In addition, it is contended that once an effective rewards system is established, then, ceremonies, awards, recognition, undertaken energetically, become a part of the fabric of the institution thus strengthening the image of the Institute within the community (Boland, 2008).

Additionally, it is advocated that there must be authority and subsequent decision makers in place with the intention of initiating and enhancing the institution's engagement (Moore, 2014). It is essential that such a department is run by a dedicated person responsible for the achievement of CE goals and objectives and that much work is still needed in terms of the institutional structures to support "*cultures of engagement built into their core, rather than at the periphery of their missions*" (Adshead, 2015, p.50).

It is suggested that it is crucial for the Institute to strengthen their strategic planning approach by ensuring a comprehensive direction is put in place to address insightful "*issues, challenges,*

concerns and opportunities" in relation to CE (Huda et al., 2018, p.24). Furthermore, it is argued that CE needs to be aligned with the HEI's overall strategy and in particular, the institution's mission, and also at a macro level with national and international qualification frameworks (Wynne, 2014). Thus, it is assumed that participation and social inclusion goals be widened throughout the HEI through the corresponding community competences outlined in National and European qualifications frameworks. Therefore, creating a cumulative effect where the message becomes a consistent theme and permeates across all functions of the HEI (Wynne, 2014). However, Barker (2015) contends that engagement does not tend to be linked with targets or performance indicators and its operationalisation tends to be left to one side (Barker, 2015).

It is contended that from the outset of the CE initiative, the potential impacts must be aligned to each stakeholder's values (Moore, 2014). Furthermore, it is argued that communications between each party must not be seen as a one-way process, as this can impair clarity and damage relationships which may mean that potential CE initiatives will not perform effectively (Wynne, 2014).

Allied to the need for a change in culture and recognition, several scholars have advocated the importance of the institution providing both time and resources to identify and develop the appropriate staff for CE (Sandman et al., 2019). Weerts and Sandman (2008) argue that the lack of time acts as a substantial hindrance to staff and faculty of the institution to get involved in CE activities and they also suggest that barriers such as promotion and tenure (giving permanency) policies reduce commitment to participating in any effective CE programmes (this reinforces the importance of recognition). Furthermore, It is argued that staff must be educated about the importance and value of CE in order to truly understand that it is part of the institution's culture (Lebeau & Bennion, 2014). In addition, it is proposed that Institutes should communicate and engage with external stakeholders, to familiarise themselves with what communities and collective organisations require from the institute, through their CE initiatives (Brisbin & Hunter, 2003) and extending this engagement to internal stakeholders also to ensure that they have a realistic sense of what can be achieved in planning their CE agenda going forward (Mlyn, 2013).

Institutes need to focus on the evaluation of CE, in particular, the need to assess such activities and outcomes for stakeholders involved (Gelmon et al., 2018). It is suggested that this lack of

evaluation of CE is due to the fact that faculty have difficulty in knowing how to evaluate this work and, thus, have difficulty in giving it real consideration in promotion and tenure decisions (Weerts & Sandman, 2008). Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity and misunderstanding in which educational experiences are most effective for improving the effects of CE (Whitley & Yoder, 2015). However, it is suggested that one of the lessons learned from a CE initiative was that "*ongoing monitoring*" was a crucial element to success of the CE project (Quillinan et al., 2018, p.11).

However, for each of these strategic factors of CE to work effectively, it is important that all are implemented collectively. While each factor is discussed separately, the need for integration is deemed vital, as all act inter-dependent upon one another (Moore, 2014). It is worth noting that the above key factors in the operationalisation of CE do not suggest a one size-fits-all approach, but that these factors help to ensure effective operationalisation of CE within the HEI.

3. Methodology.

The role of the empirical research was to gain an insight into the perceptions of CE managers or those responsible for CE in the HEI. The empirical research took the form of interviews with CE managers or persons responsible for CE in the HEIs. Fourteen HEIs agreed to take part in this research. The interviewees were chosen based on their ability to provide in-depth insight into how CE operated within their HEI, and these were managers who had responsibility for CE within their HEI. Semi-structured interviews were used, thus allowing each participant to be asked the same set of questions while permitting the interviewer the flexibility to ask additional questions (Becker et al., 2012). The questions asked related to the nine elements identified in the literature above as to the effective operationalisation of CE and other open-ended questions so as to capture any additional factors not identified in the literature. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained in advance of undertaking this empirical research. The interviews were taped, and thematic analysis was used as it allowed the contents of the interviews to be captured clearly and concisely (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis involves an analysis of the data through themes (Quinlan et al., 2015). Themes were identified through careful reading of the interview transcripts. It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Javadi & Zarea, 2016).

4. Findings.

As outlined above in the methodology, the findings are based on interviews with CE managers or those who had responsibility for CE in their organisation. A summary of the key factors highlighted by these interviewees in relation to the operationalisation of CE are outlined in Table 2 below:

Table 1: Key factors in the effective operationalization of CE.

		% of managers agreeing
1	Dedicated CE person/team	100
2	Recognition of CE efforts	100
3	Strategic approach	100
4	Senior management support	100
5	Engagement with stakeholders	100
6	Educating staff on the value of CE	71
7	Embedded into the organisation's culture	64
8	Identification and development of staff in the CE arena	57
9	Evaluation of CE activities	57

The discussion below will examine each of these key factors depicted in Table 1, as highlighted by the interviewees on their perceptions of what were the key factors needed to ensure the effective operationalisation of the CE strategy at institute level within their higher education institution. While there is a strong overlap between the managers' views and the key factors identified in the literature, it is important to note that while many managers agreed that these key factors were important, it does not necessarily mean that these were present in their

organisation. Indeed, many noted that the key factors were absent in their own organisation.

4.1 Dedicated person.

All the interviewees suggested that a dedicated person was important in ensuring that CE occurred. However, half of the organisations had no dedicated resource. Of the seven that had a dedicated person, five had a full-time position holder and two had a part-time person managing the CE function.

One interviewee outlined the importance of a dedicated resource in the following terms:

'*I am fundamentally convinced that this work would not happen without people like me and my team who can nurture, support and act as a catalyst within the institute… so if a team isn't in existence, it is an un-supportive environment*.' (Interview 4).

4.2 The need for recognition.

The recognition of CE was deemed important by the interviewees. By recognition, it means the acknowledgement and recognised appreciation of the CE work of staff and/or students for their contribution to CE in the HEI. However, only three institutions recognise the efforts of staff involved in CE. While, of the remaining institutions, four had no awards scheme or recognition at all and seven recognised the efforts of students.

The interviewees suggested that the lack of recognition within their institution was hindering the development of CE. Another interviewee suggested that unless there is recognition of CE, it is unlikely to happen, as these key stakeholders want their contribution recognised in some way. This is outlined as follows:

'It is not core to the institution. When there is no recognition or credits to CE work, then it is just an add on, it is voluntary, but if there is no recognition you cannot expect staff and students to engage entirely' (Interview 2).

4.3 A strategic approach.

The interviewees agreed that a strategic approach was essential, with all the institutes included references to CE in their strategic plans (with two having a separate CE strategic plan). As outlined above, a strategic approach is important in developing CE as it tends to be discrete

projects undertaken by individuals which are spread across the institutes without any linkages or cohesion. This is outlined as follows:

'*What hinders the sustainability of CE is often that it is not delivered in a strategic way and that it tends to be delivered in a way where you have various pockets of this type of work but often times they are not connected up and they are not working in a strategic way together…*' (Interview 5).

4.4 Senior management support.

All interviewees agreed that senior management support was deemed essential in sustaining and developing CE efforts within the institution, been seen as key stakeholders in the process. This is outlined as follows:

"*It is the senior management's eye that can waiver at times, and it really does depend on senior management, I cannot highlight that enough*" (Interview 4).

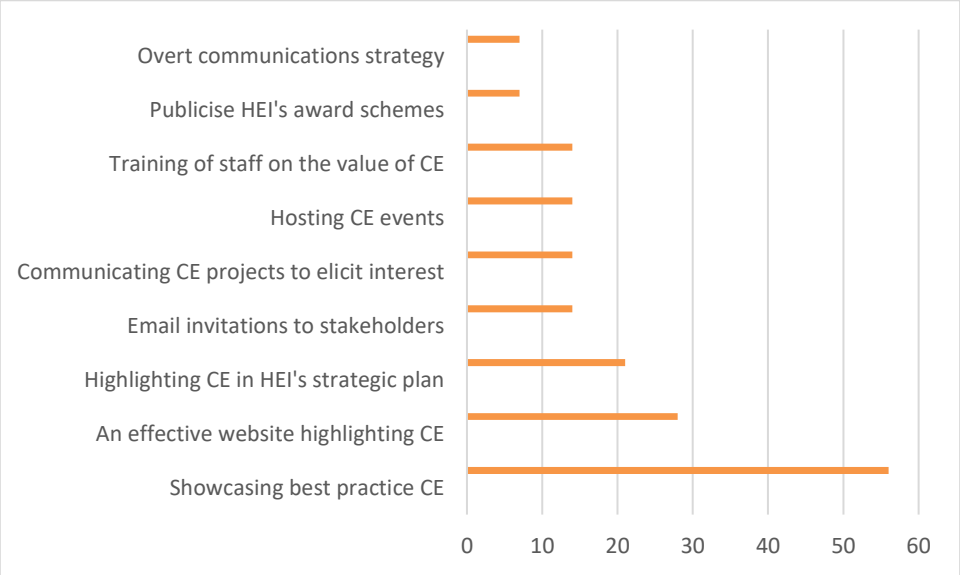
Furthermore, it was suggested that senior management need to be engaged through a committee made up of representatives from across the institution. In addition, the interviewees suggested that senior management must play a key part in driving this strategy through their support and appreciation.

4.5 Educating staff on the value of CE.

Most interviewees (10) agreed on the importance of this and suggested ways of increasing the visibility of activity across the institutions, with focus on increasing the value and appreciation of CE. The suggestions consisted of various communication platforms and techniques and are categorised as '*key steps*' in increasing the visibility of CE and are highlighted in Figure 1.

As outlined in Figure 1, almost sixty percent of respondents believe the institute should showcase best-practice CE activity to inform others, internally and externally, and for future evaluation. One interviewee suggested that it should be of a "*very high level*" with the idea of showcasing the most "*excellent work*" which also can be "*used as examples for others*" (Interview 5). Other options included a wide range of communications tools such as a website and emails, as well inclusion in the strategic plan.

Figure 1: Suggestions for improving the visibility of CE throughout the HEI.



4.6 Stakeholder engagement.

In order to identify who are the key drivers of CE, interviewees were asked who the key stakeholders were in the early stages of developing a CE initiative. All respondents felt the community partner is a key driver of a new CE initiative or project. In addition, academic staff members trail closely, followed by professional staff and students.

Overall, a common response from each of the interviews in relation to stakeholder engagement and CE projects was that this process occurs organically, hence, is grown from the "*grass roots*" of the organisation up (Interview 5, 6, 10). Furthermore, as the community partner featured prominently in the initial development stages of CE projects with the institution, all the interviewees stressed the importance of "*meaningful*" engagement (Interview 3, 5). For example, one respondent stated the need for "*greater and meaningful engagement with voluntary groups in the community*" as "*typically [the institution] is heavily involved with industry"* and therefore, the respondent felt that "*by and large, the voluntary groups do not feel they have an adequate voice either on the governing body or within the management of the institution"* (Interview 13). Furthermore, interviewees emphasised the importance of discussion

between internal and external stakeholders, prior to any CE project, so that "*expectations can be agreed upon*" and "*risk of disappointment*" is avoided (Interview 4, 9, 12).

4.7 CE embedded into organisational culture.

The majority of respondents (nine) felt that their institution does not have a culture that supports their CE strategy where many respondents felt CE is not fully valued and appreciated. For example, one respondent felt that CE was not a part of the organisational culture because of CE being a "*woolly topic*" where often "*confusion about what it is, and what exactly we mean by it*" can perhaps get in the way of it being valued and appreciated (Interview 7). Furthermore, some respondents believed that CE was not a part of the higher education institution's culture, and this came down to the need for recognition and appreciation. However, five participants stated the culture of their organisation did in fact fully support the CE strategy. For example, Interview 10 stated

'*CE is part of who we are, it is embedded in our values and is part of how we do things around here'* (Interview 10).

4.8 Identification and development of staff in CE.

In relation to how the internal stakeholders, the staff of the institution are managed, it was necessary to first analyse how institutions identify staff members for involvement in CE initiatives. Three categories in relation to the identification of staff members for the purpose of promoting CE activity were extrapolated from the results of the interviews undertaken. The categories include the following: individual self-selection, recruitment drive and/or a profiling system.

In the main, it is individual staff members who self-select themselves for CE projects, where respondents felt that institutions engage for "*altruistic*" reasons and "*self-interest*" (Interview 5, 6). One respondent stated it is a case of "*frequent dialogue*" that needs to happen in order to identify staff (and students), who are motivated and willing to get involved with CE (Interview 1).

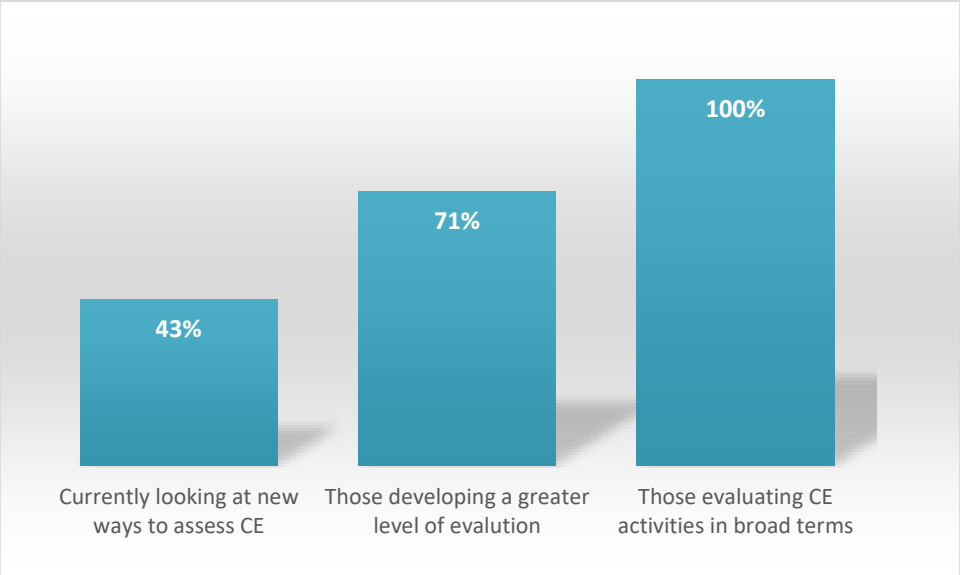
One respondent expressed how the institutions did not have an institutional CE strategy, and therefore, the notion of profiling staff for this type of activity simply was non-existent. This response is outlined below:

'They identify themselves really. They are not sought out because it is their own strategic approach. I could tell you from an institute wide perspective the names of the staff who are actually interested, because they have gotten themselves involved in a project. There is no way of profiling the staff, as there isn't a strategy for it' (Interview 11).

4.9 Evaluation of CE.

Interviewees were asked if there was evaluation of CE activities within their organisation. Figure 2 illustrates the diversity of responses gathered.

Figure 2: Evaluation of CE activity



The interviewees stated that there is a broad level of evaluation being done. However, the vast majority stated the need for a greater level of evaluation. Furthermore, six institutions affirmed that they are in the process of introducing additional evaluation methods for the purpose of enhancing and improving upon their CE activity. For example, one interview expressed how

'There are some measures, for instance, the number of students involved in volunteering", however, *"there is probably not as much qualitative evaluation or metrics as there would be quantitative'* (Interview 10). Interview 4 also highlighted this issue:

This suggests that there is a greater need to measure the impact of CE activities. Another interviewee held a different perspective and suggested they are "*constantly evaluating*" and how the importance of evaluation assists in prioritising the community needs.

In addition, Interview 9 highlighted how evaluation methods of CE "*will have to be a key thing factored into the operational planning*" of the institution alongside the coming of a new office of CE in the near future.

5. Discussion.

It is suggested that there is a gap between the aspiration of an engaged campus and the reality on the ground (McKenna and Martin, 2014) with the literature and the empirical research suggesting that CE is mainly an add-on activity undertaken by individuals in a series of discrete projects spread across the institution. This voluntary effort is eventually undermined by the lack of support from within the institutes and often leads to the demise of the initiative (Murphy & McGrath, 2018). This is not due to the lack of attention among institutes but is due more to the inability to operationalise the lofty ambitions outlined in the strategic plan (Barker, 2015).

In order to embed CE into a core activity, a strategic approach in the operationalisation of CE is required. The literature review and the empirical research outlines a number of key factors which helps to operationalise CE. These key factors should reinforce each other rather than being a check list of tasks. While the key factors suggested in the empirical work are similar to those suggested by the literature, they do not reflect (in many instances) what is happening in practice. In fact, the managers perceive these key factors are the ideal for embedding CE at institute level. For instance, recognition of staff is important in embedding CE, but many managers felt recognition did not exist or was limited.

Recognition of staff and students was highlighted as a key factor in both the literature review and empirical research. The managers cited the lack of recognition as a barrier to CE development in the long term, as the "*goodwill*" alone will not carry progress of CE in the long-term (Murphy & McGrath, 2018). This is linked into the need for CE to be part of the institute's culture and is also associated with the need to educate and inform staff, as well as identifying and developing staff.

A dedicated person is deemed important in the empirical research, while this is not mentioned

specifically in the literature review it is assumed this occurs, in terms of the structures put in place to support implementation within the higher education institution (Quillinan et al., 2018). The interviews would suggest that a dedicated person is essential in developing CE within the institute.

A strategic approach is highlighted in the literature and the empirical findings. Yet, in practice the interviews would suggest that there is a disjointed approach across the key pillars of the plan and so CE continues to be an "*add-on*" activity. The need for senior management support is considered essential within both the literature review and empirical research. A top-down approach to CE is highlighted as imperative, yet, what seems to be happening in practice, is that top management give approval and sign documents to this effect, but do not get actively involved (Kempton, 2019). The CE strategy is driven therefore by volunteering and "*goodwill*" and so it is difficult to sustain the momentum in the medium to long term.

Both the literature review and empirical research stressed the value of CE being communicated to staff and students. Various suggestions were made by the interviewees; for example, highlighting achievements and showcasing best practice within the higher education institution, to give exposure, focus and an example for others to get involved. Again, this links back to the need for recognition and senior management commitment.

Stakeholder engagement was regarded as extremely important by both the literature and empirical research, particularly at the early stages of the development of CE activity to ensure the relevant stakeholders were aware of the issues and so expectations could be managed on possible outcomes. It was particularly stressed in relation to the promotion of a culture of engagement and dialogue with stakeholders, creating the "*engaged campus*" and that this presented a key challenge to institutions (Quillinan et al, 2018).

While the importance of embedding CE into the institution's culture was deemed a key factor by both the literature and empirical research, the majority of interviewees stated that CE is not part of the culture of their institution, and they believed that there was a lack of recognition and appreciation. This idea of embedding CE into the culture of the institution's was summed up by the literature by stating that it was not a programme of engagement that was required, but rather to infuse institution's culture with practices and structures with a new spirit to encompass CE (Quillinan et al, 2018).

The interviewees suggested that the individual staff members self-select themselves for CE projects. Many of the key factors discussed above such as recognition, appreciation, engagement, understanding the value of CE all impact the embedding of CE at institute level. The literature advocates that these are linked, but also in the culture and top management support are critical to driving and supporting CE initiatives (Checkoway, 2013).

The literature outlines the importance of evaluating CE activities and the interviewees recognised this point with all interviewees stating evaluation does happen in broad terms, but what is needed is the development of more meaningful metrics. The literature highlighted the difficulty in evaluation, in terms of the impact of the CE activities and stresses the need for effective evaluation and presented this as a key challenge to institutions going forward (Whitley & Yoder, 2015).

6. Conclusion.

On examining the nine key factors in the operationalisation of CE in totality, the literature suggests that for these identified key factors to be present, two main factors are critical in operationalising sustainable CE. These are firstly, the need to have CE embedded into the culture of the institution (McKenna and Martin, 2014) and secondly, that senior management support is imperative to ensure this cultural change occurs (Murphy and McGrath, 2018; Kempton, 2019). While a bottom-up approach has worked to drive the agenda to date, evidence suggests this dilutes over time if senior management support is not present, (Checkoway, 2013; Kempton, 2019). The literature contends that the signing of agreements, charters or priority listings of CE that are aspirational is not enough, but ongoing visible actions, as identified in the key factors outlined here need to be actively embraced by senior management in order to operationalise CE fully and effectively. It is argued that the nine factors identified assist in ensuring the effective operationalisation of CE more systematically and strategically within Irish HEIs. The nine factors need to exist against a background of positive collaboration among the key stakeholder groupings to ensure the mutual benefits while different exist for these stakeholders (Benneworth, 2018).

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