

UNIVERSITIES AS TRUST BROKERS IN POLARISED COMMUNITIES



SCAN CARD · 01

DESCRIPTION

In many European societies, public trust in institutions is declining and social debate is polarised. Communities lack spaces to discuss different perspectives with reliable evidence. Universities — seen as relatively neutral and credible — are hosting citizens' assemblies, moderated debates and structured dialogues between students, citizens, policymakers and civil society.

This role is often informal, depending on individual academics or short-term projects rather than institutional strategy. As polarisation deepens, universities face growing pressure to take positions or manage conflicts beyond their formal mandate.

RELEVANCE

Trust has become a prerequisite for meaningful community engagement. Without it, collaboration risks being symbolic or conflict-driven. Universities perceived as credible and relatively independent may help rebuild dialogue and social cohesion.

At the same time, acting as a trust broker exposes universities to political pressure, reputational risks and accusations of bias — making the role strategically important but potentially fragile.

NEED

Universities need clear institutional guidance on whether and how acting as a mediator fits within their mission — principles for legitimacy, boundary-setting and risk management when convening dialogue in contested contexts, plus cooperation with public authorities and civil society organisations.

Without such decisions, universities risk becoming informal conflict mediators without mandate, capacity or protection — increasing reputational and governance risks.

CATEGORY

Social · Political · Ethical

SIGNAL STRENGTH

Medium



SCANNING METHOD

Literature · Observation · Expert

SOURCES

OECD (2022) Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy · UNESCO (2021) Reimagining Our Futures Together · EUA (2021) Universities without Walls



Alliance for Community Engagement
in European Higher Education