



When the neighbourhood becomes the classroom

A guide for doing LOCUS in your city

Written by Pieter Cools, Dag Jensen, Peter Kemper and Ana Isabel Corchado Castillo with support from the whole LOCUS consortium.

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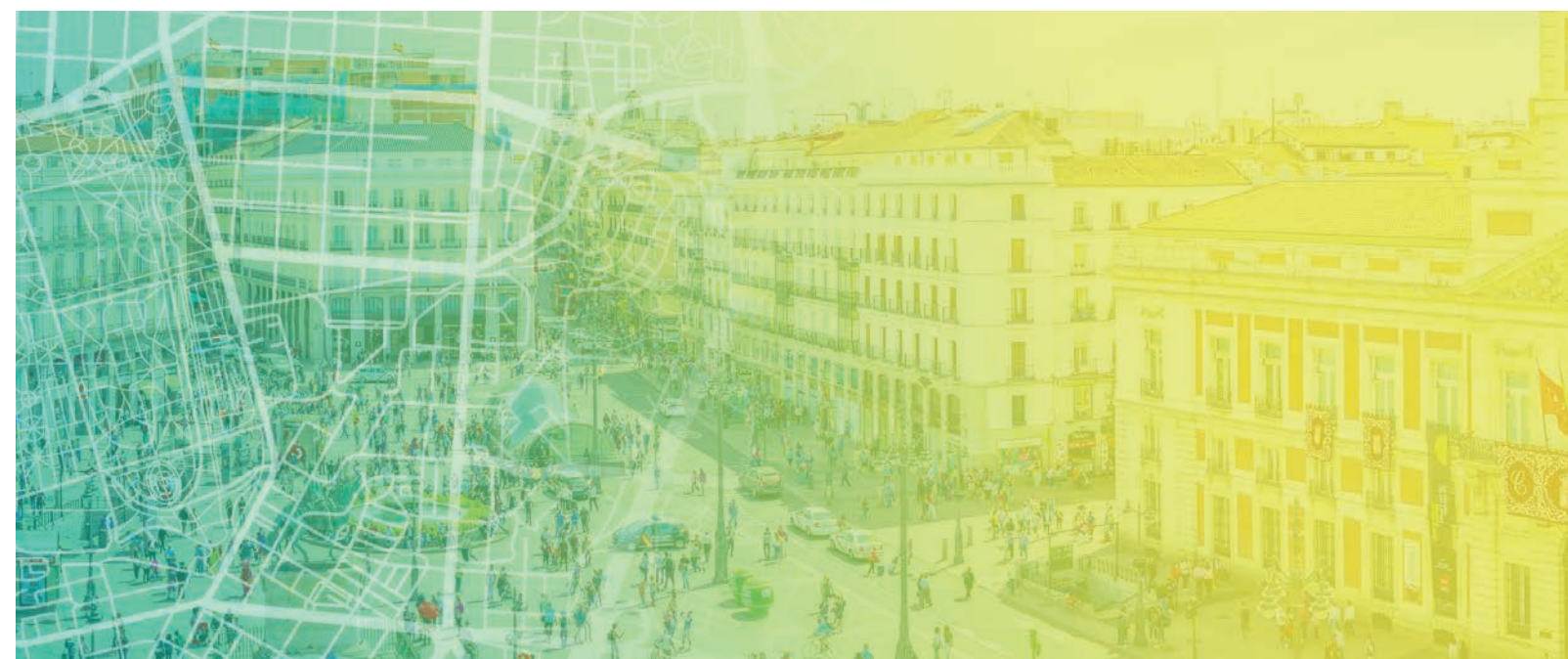


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Introduction: the purpose of this guide

Welcome! With this 'how to guide' we want to introduce you to the LOCUS model for training future social workers. We will explain and show how '*sending students onto the streets*' can be a valuable educational practice and how it can be organized as a collaborative practice that builds strong relationships between higher education institutes and fieldwork partners. The purpose is not only to convince you that this is an interesting model, but to offer you a step-by-step plan, guidelines and suggestions on how you could implement this educational program in your specific context.

This guide is written for social work educators, social professionals and students that want to collaborate to (a) gain knowledge about the experiences of neighbourhood residents and (b) train social work students by sending them onto the streets and talk to residents to investigate neighbourhood needs and facilitate discussion about their findings during community meetings. Additionally, this manual could also be of interest for researchers with an interest in urban social work.

By showing you how we did it, we tell the story of the Erasmus+ higher education partnership called LOCUS: Labs of Contextualized Social Work. Today this project plays out in five European cities: Amsterdam, Antwerp, Madrid, Oslo and Tallinn. This international collaboration between higher education institutes and fieldwork partners is driven by three general questions or ambitions.

- > How do we prepare our social work students to contribute to social inclusion and community building in the 21st century European cities?
- > How can students contribute to a better understanding of the experiences, needs and preferences of urban residents in general, and in particular those residents whose voices are often not heard?
- > How can urban residents and their knowledge about the neighbourhood get more actively involved in relevant discussions about the needs and future of their neighbourhood?

LOCUS provides concrete and straightforward answers to these big questions:

- > Send social work students to diverse and socio-economically challenged urban neighbourhoods to observe the neighbourhood dynamics and talk with residents.
- > Collaborate with local community social workers, municipalities or other service providers to decide upon relevant questions and prepare students for the field.
- > Encourage and support students to use social science research methods, conversation skills and their creativity to gather and process this information in a way that allows for discussion with social professionals, residents and students from different cities.
- > Involve students and fieldwork partners in the organization of community meetings where residents and other local stakeholders provide feedback on student's findings and discuss neighbourhood needs and opportunities for a better future.

This how-to guide presents the ambitions, actions and lessons learned of the LOCUS project, both at the local level and as an international collaboration between cities. Doing so, we hope to inspire other universities or university colleges and social work organizations to try similar approaches.

The text is structured as follows. The first chapter goes a bit deeper into the different aspects (what) and motivations (why) of the LOCUS project. The second and largest chapter presents how to do it. Here, while presenting a step-by-step plan, we also discuss different options and choices you can make to cater this approach to your local context and partnership. The third chapter discusses what you can do with the research findings and the final chapter reflects on the added value of the different stakeholders involved.

We wish you a pleasant and inspiring read!

The LOCUS team



*Students, lecturers and fieldwork partners in Tallinn, October 2024,
Picture: Annela Samuel.*

1. Chapter 1: The many what's and why's of LOCUS

1.

1.1 What is LOCUS?

At the time of writing, LOCUS is a EU funded, Erasmus+ higher education partnership. It involves higher education partners and social work fieldwork partners from five European cities: Amsterdam, Antwerp, Madrid, Oslo and Tallinn. LOCUS is an innovative educational program for social work students, a partnership between educators and professionals, an attempt to create dialogue with residents, and an international consortium.

While it is definitely possible to 'do LOCUS' at the local level, that is: in one city, the Erasmus+ funding made it possible to exchange experiences and findings across the different cities and national contexts. This international dimension creates added value for fieldworkers, students, teachers, and researchers (see chapter 4). That being said, even without an international consortium, we are convinced that LOCUS provides a valuable opportunity for training students and collaboration between fieldwork partners and higher education institutions.

In short, LOCUS tries to connect the need of local social professionals to understand the lifeworld perspectives of residents with the ambition of lecturers to train the research and conversation skills of social work students in more experiential and socially engaged ways. In the process we want to build knowledge alliances between teachers, researchers and practitioners and learn from our international colleagues

The core ambition of LOCUS is to enable students to contribute to a better understanding of the needs and lifeworld perspectives of residents in diverse, multicultural and fast-changing and/or marginalized urban neighbourhoods. In order to do this, lecturers, researchers and fieldwork partners have to work together to decide on interesting neighbourhoods, questions, methods and ways of feeding back the research findings to residents and other stakeholders.

In the process, students are introduced to the practice of doing research, they are exposed to contexts and people they are not very familiar with and they have to facilitate discussions with a diverse group of residents. Furthermore, students are challenged to produce some English outputs in order to exchange their findings with their international peers.

The first experience with research should be challenging and fun. I like that LOCUS connects residents and fieldwork partners with the 'beginner eye' that many of our students have. They use their senses and gut to connect with people on the streets. Knowing that it is real research in an international group, gives them a sense of how important they can be in knowledge creation, now and in the future. When they proudly present their findings to residents, I see them so empowered. I love that about LOCUS.

Sjoukje Botman, Lecturer and researcher Amsterdam

Different actors and activities within the LOCUS project

In order to do LOCUS you always need three groups: social workers (fieldwork partners), social work teachers (higher education institutes) and social work students. Ideally your teacher staff also includes colleagues with research experience and if possible you can involve representatives of the local municipality as fieldwork partner or as an associated partner that attends community meetings and gives input on research questions and interesting neighbourhoods.

The profile of these three essential partners is likely to differ depending on the national and local context. In Amsterdam and Antwerp, higher education partners are University Colleges of Applied Sciences, in Madrid, Oslo and Tallinn they are Universities. In some countries the fieldwork partners are NGO's that receive public funding, whereas in Oslo for instance, the fieldwork partner is part of the municipality.

Also the ways in which LOCUS activities were embedded in the curriculum differs across the cities. Some cities worked with first year bachelor students, others with second year bachelor students, and in Tallinn these student activities were carried out by master students. For some students the activities were part of a course on research methodology or a research seminar, while for others it was part of a course on professional skills.



Student discussing their findings with resident in Deurne-Noord, Antwerpen, may 2024
Picture: Brandpunt 23

As mentioned earlier, the Erasmus + framework adds an international dimension to LOCUS. This allowed us to develop two types of educational activities.

On the one hand we have 'local semester activities'. Each year, in the second semester we send our students out on the streets to observe neighbourhood dynamics and talk to residents with a survey or a topic list. The students have to create outputs for their course (reports, short movies etc.) and feedback their findings to residents with presentations or discussion tables.

1.

On the other hand LOCUS also organized two Intensive Programs. During these programs, five excellent students from each participating city came together in Madrid (November 2023) and Tallinn (October 2024) for a week of seminars, field visits and research assignments in international teams. During these intensive programs, researchers also presented an international comparison of student findings. Depending on the available funding and partners, the LOCUS method can involve more or less international exchange. Throughout this guide, we will regularly refer to the possibilities of doing LOCUS only 'at home' or as part of an international network or consortium.

There is not one perfect way of doing LOCUS. As the title 'Labs of contextualized social work' suggest, it is crucial to adapt the model and its ambitions to your local context. These guidelines will try to present a coherent model, while still showing the richness and different possibilities to tailor it to different contexts. We hope that our different choices and lessons learned will help you to see how it could fit into your context. Before we go on the show you 'how' to do it, we want to take some time to reflect on why you should consider LOCUS. In our opinion, there are many reasons.

1.2 The many why's of LOCUS

Why did we develop the LOCUS project and why do we continue to believe that it is important to continue on this path? In fact, we have many reasons that relate to different stakeholder needs, opportunities and sources of inspiration. This chapter provides more information on the main reasons for implementing the LOCUS approach in our curricula.

- > We believe that if you want to do social interventions in communities, you should try to **understand the context and the lifeworld perspectives** of the people living there.¹ LOCUS challenges students to do just that.
- > Community workers and service providers need to understand the lifeworld and needs of the people that live in socio-economically challenged urban neighbourhoods. However, they often lack the time and resources to gather sufficient information about large and rapidly changing populations. **Students and teachers can help** them with that.
- > As teachers we want to prepare our students to work in the urban reality of the 21st century. To that end we want students to learn to **go outside the classroom** and offices of service providing organizations and immerse themselves in the daily realities of urban neighbourhoods and find out who lives there and how.
- > Not all social work skills can be taught in a classroom. Furthermore many internships or 'workplace learning' assignments are organized in highly institutionalized and controlled settings. Sending students to the street to talk to residents provides a challenging opportunity to experience how you can **connect and talk to people** you don't know in uncertain circumstances. A basic, but crucial skill for social workers in our opinion.
- > We are convinced that future social workers should develop research skills and an **inquisitive attitude**. However, we observe that students often struggle with research classes, especially when its approach is very theoretical and detached from social issues and social work practice. We want students to have 'real life' experiences to make their first encounters with social science methods relevant and fun.
- > As schools of social work, we want to **strengthen our alliances with fieldwork partners** and nurture a tradition of 'giving back' to local communities after our research activities. Furthermore, we are convinced that students and teachers can learn a lot from discussing their findings with residents and fieldwork partners.

¹ van Ewijk, H. (2011). Collaboration in community research. *European Journal of Social Work*, 14(1), 41-52.

- > We firmly believe in **internationalization** as a means to improve education and because learning from other contexts helps us to better understand our own context.
- > We want our social work curricula to focus more explicitly on social work in the city and more specifically **the challenge of community development in diverse and rapidly changing urban neighbourhoods**. We believe this to be an important, timely and often forgotten focus in social work education and research, despite the fact that we are living in 'the urban age' where growing cities face complex challenges.²

The societal responsibility of universities: *Universities face the challenge of collaborating with social entities, public or private, that are actively involved in addressing urban social issues. This requires academics and students to step outside the classroom and engage in horizontal partnerships with fieldwork partners. LOCUS offers a nice opportunity to co-create knowledge and build horizontal relationships between fieldwork partners and universities in the context of urban policy and social work.*

Prof. Esteban Sanchez Moreno, Madrid

1.3 Inspiration from the pioneers of urban social work

Clearly, LOCUS wants to realize different goals at once. The key to this ambitious endeavour is to bring together the needs and strengths of social work students, fieldwork partners, lecturers, researchers and urban residents. In this regard the LOCUS project is inspired by the knowledge alliances between researchers, educators and community social workers that existed in large cities like London and Chicago around the turn of the 20th century.



Visiting a community repair workshop in North-Tallinn, October 2024

Picture: Annela Samuel

² Gleeson, B. (2012). Critical commentary. The urban age: paradox and prospect. *Urban studies*, 49(5), 931-943.

Around this time academic boundaries were still blurry and social work was far from the institutionalized practice that it is today. This can explain why founding mothers of modern social work like Jane Addams are also regarded as pioneers in sociology and criminology. Addams in particular always stressed the importance of social science research to inform social work practice and socio-political reform. In the opposite direction urban sociologists like those of the famous Chicago School were often very much involved in social reform. Institutes like Thornbey Hall in London organized university extension activities to bring research and education into deprived working-class neighbourhoods.

In this period the distance between researchers and practitioners, between investigating society and trying to solve social problems, seems much closer than it is today. Interestingly, these pioneers often resorted to both ethnographic research methods and survey research to better understand the social dynamics and lived experiences in rapidly changing urban neighbourhoods. This research generally started with going into economically deprived neighbourhoods, walking around with your eyes and mind open and talking to residents. While some of this research might not be up to today's methodological standards in terms of rigor and the neutrality of the researcher, they remain inspiring in terms of providing deep insights into the lived experience of urban residents.³

These historical roots inspired the LOCUS project in at least two ways. Firstly, they point towards **the importance of creating a kind of community or 'knowledge alliance' of academic and civic partners** who want to work and learn together to pursue their shared goal of a more just and inclusive city. Secondly, they **encourage us to adopt a broad methodological approach**, inspired by ethnography, and to **combine an investigative attitude with the ambition to co-create social interventions** that improve people's lives and opportunities.⁵

With the famous quote of Marx in mind we feel that social work students should not only learn to interpret the world in different ways, but also learn how to change it. At the very least, LOCUS hopes to provide a spark that can fire up this ambition in our future social workers.

3 Williams, C. (Ed.). (2016). Social work and the city: Urban themes in 21st-century social work. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

4 Stigendal, M., & Novy, A. (2018). Founding transdisciplinary knowledge production in critical realism: implications and benefits. *Journal of Critical Realism*, 17(3), 203-220.

5 Shaw, I. (2011). Social work research—an urban desert?. *European Journal of Social Work*, 14(1), 11-26.

2. Chapter 2: How to do LOCUS

2.

2.1 Assembling all players: students, fieldworkers, teachers and residents

The LOCUS project has been implemented in various ways across participating cities. However, a fundamental similarity is the involvement of three key parties: social work students, social work teachers (higher education institutes), and social workers (fieldwork partners). Additionally, LOCUS emphasizes the involvement of local residents through interviews and community meetings, making them a crucial fourth stakeholder in every city.

Selecting suitable students

In the LOCUS project, students gather data by engaging with residents on the streets. **It is recommended that students participating in LOCUS are from the first or second year of their studies.** A first reason is that we believe that this method is suited to be students' first introduction to doing research. A second reason is LOCUS is a group assignment, and last-year students typically conduct more individual research projects.

During our project we had both groups with 'full-time students' and groups with 'part-time students' who combine study and work. We observed that, on average, working students find it less challenging to talk to people they don't know, but they often have more difficulties in doing the analysis and more creative assignments. That being said, we believe that both groups or a combination of both groups can be involved in this project.

In the case of an international Intensive Programme (see 2.6) were students of different cities gather in one city to conduct research in an international students, each higher education partner selected those students who excelled in the regular LOCUS activities at their city.

The teachers

Teachers involved in LOCUS should have a strong understanding of research methodology, particularly qualitative and quantitative research methods, with a focus on practice-based research. Since data collection occurs in the field rather than a laboratory, experience ethnography is a relevant asset. Complementary research experience, knowledge about community oriented social work is also of great value to the team of teachers. The training program developed as part of LOCUS can provide practical advice to teachers.

Cooperation with fieldwork partners

Students and higher education institutes collaborate with fieldwork partners, who should ideally be community-oriented. This ensures that knowledge about the neighbourhood and its residents can be shared with students during their assignments.

Planning and Coordination

Before involving students and residents, higher education institutes (HEI) and fieldwork partners (FWP) should establish their engagement, create a general plan, and determine the focus of the students' research. Sustainable partnerships require that research topics align with the focus and ambitions of the fieldwork partners while remaining relevant to the

social work curriculum. The international LOCUS consortium maintained a broad focus on neighbourhood needs, strengths, and experiences, allowing local teams to choose additional topics such as neighbourhood solidarity, meeting places, and sense of belonging. It is important to decide on a general focus before the LOCUS semester but also leave room for suggestions from residents.

Involving residents as much as possible: *If you want sufficient support from the community in projects like these, it's crucial to involve them beforehand and make sure they will remain engaged during the entire process. Before the community meeting even starts, it's important to invest in contextualizing the project for the residents, and asking them to join. They are the experts on their own neighbourhood, so it helps to position them that way. Ideally, therefore, they decide what will be researched and where. For students this is crucial as well. If you want them to have a good understanding of what a neighbourhood needs and what problems residents may face, it is crucial that they collaborate with the existing community.*

Gina van der Linden, Teamleader Eigenwijken Amsterdam

Interaction Between Students and Residents

LOCUS aims to prepare social work students to contribute to social inclusion and community building by understanding the experiences, needs, and preferences of urban residents. Interaction between students and residents is crucial throughout the project.

While students will engage with residents during street interviews, **it is recommended to organize two community meetings—one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester**. The first meeting serves as a kick-off where fieldwork partners, residents, students, and teachers share information about the neighbourhood and potential research topics. The second meeting allows students to present their findings to residents, fieldwork partners, and teachers. The second community meeting will be discussed later in section 2.6 and chapter 3 of this guide. Here we focus on the first, introductory community meeting.



Students and residents having a discussion about the neighbourhood in public space. Coslada, Spain 2024

During the first community meeting, **residents should have the opportunity to inform students about the neighbourhood and relevant topics**. These meetings should be guided by social workers who organize and invite residents, and supported by social work teachers to ensure the suggested topics are feasible for student research. The kick-off meeting should be informal and may include activities like neighbourhood walks or testing questionnaires. These meetings help students understand the urgency of their work and foster a sense of ownership among residents. The format of the first community meeting can vary, depending on the research topics and the involvement of residents.

2.2 What do we want? Deciding on topics and methods

The focus of our research, including specific research questions, can be pre-determined by higher education and fieldwork partners. However, suggestions from residents are also valuable, and a combination of both approaches can be beneficial.

During our Erasmus+ project, teachers and fieldwork partners collaboratively decided on the main research focus across different cities. This approach ensured uniformity and comparability of findings. However, local teams had the flexibility to make their own choices within the broad scope of 'talking to residents about their needs and preferences'. This allowed them to select methods most suitable for their neighbourhoods and students.

To accommodate this, our **survey** included both shared and city-specific questions. In some cities, students conducted surveys with both open and closed questions, while in others, they used shorter surveys with only closed questions and conducted in-depth interviews with a smaller group of residents. **Observation** was a formal part of the research in some cases, while in others, it was part of the field introduction but not the research assignment.

Engagement with residents also varied locally; some teams used traditional methods like posters and presentations, while others opted for **creative approaches** in public space, like making a community drawing, to encourage conversations with residents. In some cities, fieldwork partners emphasized involving residents in deciding what should be researched and the most suitable methods.

In any case, the methods should require students to be present in the neighbourhood and speak with different residents. These conversations can be more open or more structured, depending on the methods of choice and the nature of the topics. **We recommend to expose students to both quantitative and qualitative research methods** and to discuss the strengths and limitations of these different approaches with them.

When LOCUS activities are part of an international network, **we recommend balancing a shared theme and similar methods with openness and flexibility for local variations**. This ensures the research remains relevant and usable for fieldwork partners and local communities.

To make the research relevant for the local community, **we recommend that teachers take sufficient time to discuss topics and methods with fieldwork partners before students enter the field**. If fieldwork partners wish to **involve residents** in this process, teachers should facilitate this as much as possible. LOCUS values residents' lived expertise, and involving them in the early stages, despite requiring additional time and effort, fosters shared ownership and local relevance. This **co-ownership is likely to enhance the usability of research findings and provide students with opportunities to interact with motivated residents**.

2.3 Preparing students for fieldwork

Preparing students: During Locus we have learned that it is crucial for our students to organize an introductory lecture on field work, including practical examples and ethical considerations. We also learned that it is good to reserve two days for students to get to know the area before starting the interviews, i.e. students are asked to “liberate themselves”, leave their prejudices and just observe as much as possible. Groups of students are also offered two hours of supervision with a lecturer qualified to do field work. These efforts have proven to be successful to support students in the different aspects of their fieldwork

Jorunn Vindegg & Dag Jenssen, teachers at OsloMet

Getting to know the neighbourhood

When preparing students for fieldwork, several factors must be considered. A first step is that students get a feeling of the neighbourhood. A good way to achieve this is to **walk around** with their eyes open, by walking around the area they will conduct their investigation. **We recommend to give students observation assignments and guidelines** on doing observations. They can be very broad or more focussed in scope, depending on the focus of their research assignment.

Another, complementary strategy is to **use already existing sources**. In most cases, your students will not be the first to gather data on this neighbourhood. It is very likely that there will be government statistics, earlier research, newspaper articles, documentaries or other documents about the area. Lecturers and fieldworkers can use this information to prepare students. It can also be part of the student assignment to do desk research about the neighbourhood before or during their research.

Approaching Respondents

Another key aspect is to talk with students on how to select and approach respondents. Respondents often come from neighbourhoods with lower socio-economic status and may feel marginalized or scrutinized by society. It is crucial to **recognize that respondents are more than just data points. They are experts of the neighbourhood**, their input is valuable and should be treated with respect.

Using **gatekeepers**—individuals who are well-informed about the neighbourhood and can facilitate introductions—can be beneficial. Gatekeepers could be long-time residents, local shopkeeper or social workers. They can point students towards important places to find respondents or even help students to connect with the “right” people who are willing to share their experiences and insights.

It is important to **engage with a diverse group of residents**. To achieve this, students should **conduct fieldwork on different days, at various times, and in multiple locations**. This approach increases the likelihood of interacting with a wide range of residents. While this might sound self-evident to some, our experience learns that it is important to stress this when preparing students. They should be challenged to reflect about with who they talked to or did not talk to and how this relates to their research strategy and possible personal biases.



Doing conversation exercises before entering the field. Tallinn, October 2024.

Picture: Annela Samuel

Ensuring student safety

During LOCUS each city has its own strategies to ensure student safety during fieldwork. One common measure is having **students work in pairs**. This allows one student to ask questions while the other takes notes or observes non-verbal cues. In some cases it could be appropriate to advise students to conduct surveys and observations during daylight hours and in busy locations. In some cases fieldwork member or a teachers accompanied students the first time they go out to provide support and ensure they feel safe.

Students receive **instructions on how to introduce themselves and initiate conversations**. They are also advised on whom to avoid, such as individuals who appear hurried or are on the phone. Such information can be approach from a social science methodology perspective or from perspective of professional competencies or a combination of both depending on the course connected to the assignment and the input from the fieldwork partner. This guidance helps students feel more secure while conducting interviews.

Rehearsing how to approach residents: In Madrid, students worked with the fieldworker on a script for introducing themselves and starting the conversation, as well as for screening out people who were not going to respond to the interview: people walking too fast, talking on the phone, for example. In this way, students felt safer when they had to conduct interviews.

Marta Perez Ruiz – fieldwork partner from Provienda, Madrid

Maintaining Respectful Interactions

Students are encouraged to establish respectful, non-invasive contact and to handle rejections professionally. In case of any signs of violence or aggression, students are advised to withdraw from the interaction. Although rejections are common, there have been no instances of violence during the LOCUS project fieldwork.

By following these guidelines, students can conduct their fieldwork effectively and safely, ensuring that the voices of the residents are heard and respected.



Preparing students for fieldwork during the Intensive Programme in Tallinn, October 2024
Picture: Annela Samuel

2.4 Conducting fieldwork: data collection and team collaboration

After introducing students to their respective neighbourhoods, the next step involves data collection, where students work collaboratively in teams. A first step is to clearly delineate the area in which groups of students will talk to residents.

Selecting the area and dividing the neighbourhoods

Each year the lecturers and fieldwork partners choose a specific area within their city. These can be municipalities, districts or postcode domains, typically ranging from 10.000 to 50.000 inhabitants. This area should have a distinct identity within the city, recognized by its residents.

Because LOCUS is an educational programme for social work students, it is appropriate to select urban areas that host qualities, dynamics and challenges that are relevant for social work as a profession and academic discipline. **We recommend to look for areas that are known for hosting a broad cultural diversity of residents, have many residents with a lower**

socio-economic status, areas that are being gentrified or areas that have a territorial stigma.

Selecting such neighbourhoods offers opportunities for students to learn about these topics 'from real life' and it creates opportunities for students to present alternative narratives based on their research.

This general area is further **divided into smaller sections, or 'neighbourhoods,' suitable for fieldwork by teams of 4-8 students.** These subdivisions are chosen based on practical considerations, ensuring they are manageable and conducive to engaging with citizens.

It can be beneficial for students to select relatively busy neighbourhoods and areas that have clear 'centres' with shops, libraries, parks, or other public spaces where people gather. Selecting purely residential areas with little community spaces will make the assignment more challenging in terms of finding respondents. Nonetheless, this could be an interesting choice, depending on the focus of the assignment.

Five key elements of the fieldwork

1. Division of Tasks

Teams of 4-8 students can divide tasks to maximize efficiency. During interviews, students should work in pairs, with one asking questions and the other taking notes. Ensuring that all students participate in interviews and observations is crucial for comprehensive data collection. Task division is also beneficial during analysis and report writing. For example, one student might oversee the report's coherence and coordination, while others focus on gathering empirical material and writing or making the creative outputs like short movies or posters.

2. Familiarization

Familiarizing with the area is an essential element of doing fieldwork that already starts in the preparatory stages (see 2.3). Lecturers and fieldwork partners can decide to play a formal and active role in helping students for familiarize with the area or challenge students to explore the area on their own as part of their research.

Familiarization can include visits, walks, and interactions with residents and different social professionals. Reading official social statistics about the area—such as demographics, economic status, cultural background, and health—can provide valuable insights. Additionally, engaging in informal conversations or more formal interviews with fieldwork partners that are knowledgeable about the area's social situation can enhance the familiarization process.

Three familiarization examples.

In Antwerp one or two students from each group volunteered at the start of the semester to do an exploratory neighbourhood walk or 'Jane walk' accompanied by residents/volunteers, social workers and teachers. Talking while walking, the students obtained much background information and identified interesting place to meet resident. This was useful for the students to fulfil their assignment, but it also nurtured the active involvement of residents.

In Oslo each student team visited their assigned neighbourhood for two entire days as a preliminary familiarization before entering into the survey and interview work. During the two days they could note the physical shape of the area and observe people in the streets. There were also meetings with field partners and a short course on how to read local statistics in advance of the field work.

In Madrid, students first had to explore virtual routes through the neighbourhood, using maps and Google Streetview. After searching for additional information about the area on the internet they went on these routes together with teachers and fieldworkers. This method allowed them to compare the information they obtained via desk research with their own observations.



Getting familiar with their neighbourhood, its residents and dynamics, Antwerpen, 2024
Picture: Brandpunt 23

3. Observation

Observing the neighbourhood is a vital part of data collection. Students should be encouraged to ask observation questions such as:

- > Who is out in the streets at different times of the day?
- > Are people busy?
- > Are there groups of people?
- > How is the traffic?
- > What do public spaces look like (architecture, street layout, parks)?
- > What functions do these spaces serve (residential, commercial, recreational, transportation)?
- > How are these spaces used?
- > Which interactions do you see?
- > Which people or groups did you not see in public space?

These observations are crucial for understanding the daily dynamics of the neighbourhood and can be used for descriptive and analytical purposes in the final report.

Painting the scene. While doing observations it is useful to note easy-to-overlook context factors such as weather conditions, season, time of the day, light, noise etc. Taking notes on such details, in addition to social features, enhances vivid, thick description at the report stage. It might be useful to think in terms of descriptively painting a picture of the scene to make the reader able to imagine the place.

Taking pictures or short videos can enhance observational material and contribute to non-written, creative, research outputs that can help to communicate their findings to residents, fieldworkers and international student-peers. However, students must be aware of national regulations regarding photos and videos in public spaces for research purposes. This visual and auditory documentation can provide additional context and support the data collected through surveys, interviews and observations.

As they go out into the neighbourhood, Students engage in exploratory **mini-ethnography**, where social relations become the primary sources of information. The neighbourhood serves as an ethnographic setting. Note that when doing observation there will be a **tension between on the one hand ideas about what to look for** – without any such ideas, observation is hardly possible – and, on the other hand, an open mind for **the unexpected and the easily-neglected details** particular to that neighbourhood. It is important to prepare the students for the inherent uncertainties of field work observation, the openness of situations, which demands **an attitude of curiosity**.

We recommend to give students clear guidelines and examples on how to take notes. Besides physical notebooks, digital notebooks, often mobile phones, can serve as valuable tools for recording events and preserving qualitative data for later analysis. **We also recommend encouraging students to also experiment with non-verbal methods such as audio recordings or drawings.**

4. The survey

During the Erasmus+ project, we decided that all students in the different cities conduct a survey with residents. Using a survey questionnaire with mostly closed questions (e.g. scoring life domains, agreeing on a five-point scale etc.) is **an interesting option if you want to understand the experiences of a larger group of residents.**

Before starting their community research, students receive training sessions to prepare them. They work in pairs and reach out to citizens in various locations such as streets, shopping malls, parks, and more. While one student conducts the survey interview, the other inputs the responses directly into the survey software using a smartphone or tablet provided by the university. **Typically, each pair of students conducts 10 to 14 interviews, with each student handling 5 to 7 interviews.**

Overall, students have found that citizens are generally friendly, approachable, and willing to answer questions, provided they have the time. This makes it relatively easy to collect survey data. However, several students have noted that the surveys were too long, which made some residents uncomfortable. To address this concern, **we recommend designing surveys that take no longer than ten minutes to complete.**

Selection bias.

When doing a survey on the street, selection bias can be an issue. It is to expected that students will find it easier to approach people who look like them or 'unthreatening' for other reasons. Also the time of day, the places they are looking for peoples and how students approach people influence the response and the results. Doing the survey is therefore a good opportunity to become aware of and reflect on selection bias.

During our Erasmus+ project, **some survey questions were used by all cities.** This is a good example of standardizing some aspects of the student research to make sure that students have similar experiences and comparable data. At the same time local partners could also select **local questions that were relevant for that particular context** and responded to the input from residents and the local fieldwork partner.

In the city of Antwerp, it was decided to add more open questions to the survey questionnaire than in the other cities, to grasp the reasons behind the scores and preferences. In most other cities the students had to combine a shorter survey with predominantly closed questions and a few separate qualitative interviews.

In any case, survey questionnaires can produce valuable data and information on the local neighbourhood and the wider city area to which it belongs. Depending on the course and the assignment expectations of what students do with the data in terms of statistical analysis can differ.

We recommend that teachers or researchers make a factsheet to summarize some key findings for the area as a whole. This is one way of giving findings back to the fieldwork partners and residents and incite discussions about the needs, strengths and future of the area (see 3.2.).

LOCUS PROJECT

Erasmus +

SURVEY FACTSHEET DEURNE- NOORD 2024



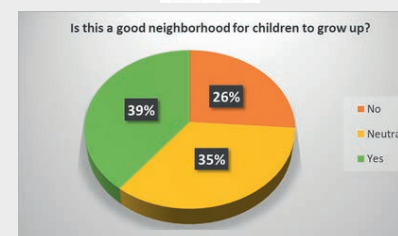
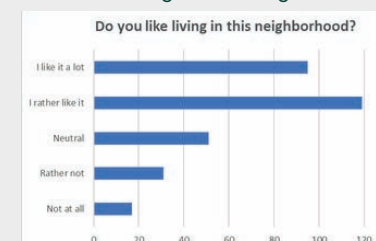
About Deurne-Noord

- Located just outside the ringway of the city of Antwerp in Belgium.
- About 30.000 inhabitants and very densely populated
- Negative image: lack of green spaces and in the news because of drug related violence.
- Houses are relatively affordable, but some are of very poor quality.
- Deurne-Noord lacks green spaces, but it has a very large an beautiful park at its border.

STUDENT RESEARCH

- Focus on three neighborhoods: Kronenburg, Ten Eekhove, & Conforta
- **Interviewed 314 residents**
- 66% born in Belgium
- 59% 1 parent born outside EU

68 % likes living in their neighborhood.



BELONGING AND CONNECTING

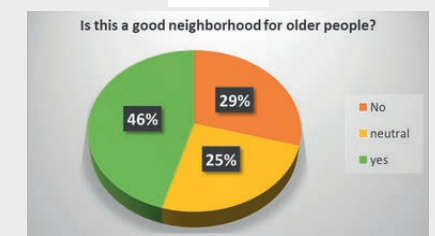
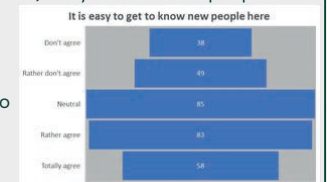


50% feels connected to other residents.

Women feel more connected

45% finds it (rather) easy to meet new people in Deurne-Noord

1 out of 3 experiences a lack of places to meet likeminded people



A factsheet based on the survey results, Antwerpen 2024.

Lastly, using the same survey questions in different times and places allows for **interesting comparison**. It is possible to compare findings in the same area over time or to compare different areas in the same city. In the context of international collaboration, using the same question allows for comparison across cities (see 3.4.).

5. Qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews will provide richer data **than the survey can offer, in particular on how residents perceive their situation**. Such interviews can be organised in at least three ways: either as part of the survey itself; or as separate interviews with the same citizen but after the survey; or as separate interviews with other citizens.

In the case of separate interviews, **semi-structured questionnaires** serve well. Here, one conducts the interview following broad questions or themes determined in advance, but with possibilities for spontaneous development of themes/questions along the way and according to what seems of interest there and then.

Semi-structured interview technique example.

The students may have a survey question about whether the neighbourhood is perceived as good for elderly people. In the subsequent interview the students may follow up with more open “how”- and “why”-questions, which may reveal in which ways the neighbourhood accommodates (or not) elderly people, e.g. “In what ways do you consider the streets difficult to navigate for elderly people?” This may lead to questions about security, traffic, open spaces, street illumination, local senior centres and so on.

Doing qualitative interviews provides **opportunities to learn from life stories**. Note that because the qualitative interviewing method is more open in nature, **students will need more guidance on how to conduct and interpret the interviews** e.g. in terms of how to ask the questions and taking notes, but also in terms of relating particular lived experiences with a neighbourhood context and larger societal dynamics.

2.5 From data collection to writing the report

After completing their fieldwork, each student team is expected to produce a report and a presentation. This stage is crucial for consolidating the team’s work. It consists of **reviewing the data collected, and organizing the analysis and writing process**. Based on our experience in the LOCUS project, **we recommend that each team meets with their supervisor to discuss how to move forward**. These meetings help clarify expectations and provide guidance on how to structure the report and presentation.

Flexibility in report requirements

The format and content of the report may vary depending on several factors:

- > The preferences of the teaching staff
- > The institution and course structure
- > The academic level of the students
- > The context in which the project is embedded (e.g., a regular course, an elective, or a research project)

About reflection. *Reflection is a key part of learning, especially when students step out of the classroom and into real-life fieldwork. It’s during these hands-on experiences that they face challenges, make discoveries, and gain a deeper understanding of their field. Helping students reflect on these moments isn’t just about teaching—it’s about guiding them to think deeply, make sense of their feelings, and see how their experiences connect to what they’ve learned in class.*

Ingrid Sindi, Professor Social Work at Tallinn University

For example, if the project is part of a second-year university course worth 10 ECTS credits, the report must meet the academic standards for that level. In other cases, the project might be part of a research initiative or an elective course, which could allow for more flexibility in the format and focus of the report. We encourage university staff to consult with fieldwork partners and local residents about the desired research outputs. One should try to balance pedagogical aims with what is most meaningful and useful to the community.

Minimum requirements for LOCUS student assignments

In LOCUS all student assignments included both (a) **reporting** findings and (b) **reflecting** on the experiences on a personal level, reflecting on the strengths and needs of the neighbourhood or reflecting on how to engage with residents in a more participatory manner. Additionally, the student assignments are later used by students to feedback their findings to fieldwork partners and residents during the closing community meeting (see chapter 3).

We encourage you to **think creatively about reporting**. Written academic text is only one among several forms. Depending on the course in which these activities are embedded, academic standards might not be as important. An academically ambitious written report will include formulation of research questions, presentation of methods, theoretical perspective, analysis of data and discussion/conclusion. If the course is on professional development or community social work a different structure and expectations might be more appropriate. Add-ons or alternatives can be video, oral presentation, stands etc. **The combination of different reporting outputs allows lecturers to balance different pedagogical goals and publics of this project.**

Presentation in the form of videos and oral presentations can add to this or itself be the main report form. While the academic text forces analytical and writing skills; **video, oral presentations etc. open possibilities for communication with residents in a lively and accessible way**. Also, community meetings can in themselves act as a form of (multi-media) report; here students may have a direct dialogue with citizens and political/administrative persons in the local area, with field partners and teachers present.

Shaping the research questions and the raw data into a written report is a demanding task. Also, other presentation forms can be demanding to create. **We recommend teacher-led supervision sessions for teams**. We also recommend that the project, if possible, is embedded in a regular ECTS course; this brings resources to the process; it represents a formal and durable framework; and it enhances student recruitment and motivation.

2.6 Sharing findings with fieldworkers and resident

Engaging in dialogue among students, fieldworkers, and residents is a crucial aspect of the LOCUS project. From the beginning of the student projects, and throughout the project work, opportunities for exchanging information should be facilitated. We have already seen that meeting with fieldwork partners, and making contact with residents should be a part of the preparation for fieldwork. This section focuses on feeding finding back to the community after the data collection and analysis. This mainly takes the form of a closing community meeting. Other ways of disseminating findings and inciting discussion will be discussed in chapter 3.

Closing community meetings

The main idea of the closing community meeting is that the students, lecturers and fieldwork partners invite residents and perhaps also local social professionals and policy makers to present and discuss their research findings. **We strongly encourage to aim for interaction and discussion between these different groups.** As such, one should avoid too much one-directional presentations from students or professionals with the possibility to pose questions at the end. Instead you should look for forms like poster presentations or discussion tables that prioritize dialogue.

Closing community meetings may include presentations from students, such as posters, videos, oral presentations, open discussions, and informal conversations among participants. In Madrid, students also experimented with more artistic approaches like painting a community wall. Besides exchanging information and discussing challenges and desirable futures for the neighbourhood, these meetings aim to raise awareness about LOCUS as a broader project involving multiple sites and participants. As such it also promotes the values of citizen participation and community research.

These meetings provide **a meaningful conclusion to the students' experience.** Students highly value these meetings as they provide a chance to share knowledge and discuss their findings, which can be as rewarding than receiving a diploma or grade. The fact that they are presenting their findings for 'real' residents and possible future colleagues makes this assignment more relevant and exciting than other presentation exercises.

Careful planning and close collaboration with the fieldwork partner is essential for these meetings. **One major challenge is to attract residents' interest in attending open meetings about their local community.** It is important to be inclusive of the various groups within the community and ensure that the meeting is relevant and enjoyable and that discussions are not dominated by professionals or politicians.

There are several **ways to make the meetings attractive to residents.** One approach, used in Oslo, is to integrate the community meeting into existing regular meeting platforms, such as café meetings organized by the field partner. In Antwerp, the meeting were organized in a local cultural centre and volunteers of the neighbourhood centre made soup for all the participants.

However, it is generally challenging to involve people who are not as actively engaged in the project as students and teachers. To increase attendance we definitely recommend to:

- > Organize the closing community meeting in a well know place in the community.
- > Ask students to invite residents after taking the survey or doing the interview and ask

- them if they want to share their email address to receive an invitation.
- > Make an invitation that does not look too academic and spread it via local partners and local meeting points such as libraries or neighbourhood stores.

The learning curve of organizing closing community meetings. *Despite our intentions of organizing interactive final community meetings in Antwerp, we failed more than we succeeded. The first year we made the mistake of organizing two events, one for professionals and one for residents, missing the opportunity for interaction between the groups. The second year we had a nice turnout, but there were too many students presentations and not enough discussion. The final year we had less presentations and focussed more on the student movies and discussion tables. This allowed for real interaction between students, residents and social professionals.*

Pieter Cools - Researcher AP Hogeschool



Discussion with residents during the community meeting in Amsterdam, 2024

Picture: Sjoukje Botman

2.7 The added value of international exchange

Collaborating with other cities opens up opportunities for international exchange between students, teachers and fieldwork partners. During the LOCUS project we organized two Intensive Programmes of a week during which five excellent students from all cities gathered in one city to do research in international student groups. The first one was in Madrid in 2023, the second one was in Tallinn in 2024. We also organized transnational project meetings with all partners of the consortium in the same weeks, allowing fieldwork partners to go on field visits and give feedback to students.

Without having Erasmus+ higher education partnership like LOCUS, it is still possible to facilitate international exchange, for instance using Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP) or other strategies. On the project website we have uploaded a document with strategies and course materials for doing LOCUS locally and internationally without extensive European funding.

During the Intensive Programme weeks **students** had the opportunity to exchange findings with each other and to discuss local social work practices which differ from country to country. Thereby broadening their view on the profession of social worker. Besides the possibility of comparing findings between the participating cities, the international meeting also gave the students the opportunity to learn about social work practices and the experiences of residents in the city where the meeting was held. Learning about the city, the way social work is organised in different countries gives students a tremendous broadening of their perspectives.

The **fieldwork partners** also joined in on these occasions and gave the work partners an insight in how social work is organised in the participating cities. The field work partners shared their experiences with best practices and how certain governmental regulations would affect wellbeing in their cities.

For **teachers** the international meetings were also of added value. There are multiple ways to teach LOCUS to students and every city has a somewhat different angle. Teachers could learn from each other what teaching methods had the best pedagogical results for the students from the different cities.



Students, teachers and fieldwork partners during a field visit in Tallinn, 2024

Picture: Annela Samuel

Building an international team. *This is the first big project I manage and an international one at that, which put me up for quite the challenge to integrate the very different individuals into one team. Throughout the process I have been trying to stay alert for underlying cultural differences that might influence the work progress. Key to this has been a concept I learned in wildlife conservation, named Radical Listening. Giving space, listening without judgement and letting people express themselves uninterrupted, gave me the opportunity to get to know everyone quickly and thoroughly and helped me to be able to support each member more or less along the lines of their own needs. I think this has contributed to everyone feeling as being part of something together and established a group with strong connections to each other, whom are willing to work hard for each other and accomplish something bigger than their own tasks.*

**Wietse Woensdrecht, LOCUS project coordinator,
Hogeschool van Amsterdam**

3. What can you do with the research findings?

3.

In this chapter we discuss different ways in which the experiences, results and outputs from the student research can be used to ignite learning, reflection, discussion and future research and education.

3.1 Using the assignment and findings for pedagogical purposes

The LOCUS project is, above all, a learning experience. While the research conducted by students is valuable, its primary purpose is educational. LOCUS is not a professional research initiative aimed at producing academic publications. Instead, it is a practice-based programme designed to **introduce social work students and local residents to the process of research** and to explore how student-led research can contribute to community dialogue and social work practice.

The research assignments are embedded in university courses, often at the bachelor level. This means that the expectations and outcomes are shaped by what is realistic and meaningful within that context. We aim to strike a balance between the principles of empirical social science and the practical needs of our community partners.

Importantly, this pragmatic approach does not mean lowering standards. On the contrary, involving students in real-life research creates opportunities to teach and reflect on key research concepts—such as selection bias, interference, and representativity—as well as important social themes like safety, public spaces, and neighbourhood identity.

Although student research may not meet the rigorous standards of doctoral theses or peer-reviewed journals, it still holds significant value. The findings should not be seen as definitive truths about a neighbourhood. Instead, **they should be used as starting points for reflection, dialogue, and learning**—for students, residents, lecturers, and field professionals alike. **The findings are a great starting point to reflect about meaning and desirable social change**, in the neighbourhood and beyond.

3.2 Facilitating discussions about the neighbourhood with residents

Organizing closing community meetings at the end of the student semester is an integral part of the LOCUS approach (see also section 2.6). During these meetings students are tasked with feeding back their findings to residents in order to initiate discussion about the findings and the future of the neighbourhood.

It is important to note that there are **other conceivable strategies to feed findings back to the community and ignite discussion**. For instance, fieldwork partners could use the student materials to facilitate discussions in their neighbourhood centres. Another option is to look for ways to communicate the findings with residents with posters in public space or via the website of the municipality. **The main point is that students ‘give back’ and learn how to communicate with different audiences**.

In a very modest way, using the student research to initiate neighbourhood community discussions is a way of contributing to direct democracy at the local level. Here the focus is not only on how the research was carried out and what results emerged. **It is also about collectively defining the problems, priorities and desirable futures** of what all residents have in common: the area where they live and the public spaces they share. From this perspective we do encourage you to reach out to local policymakers to join the discussion. This has been the case in many LOCUS cities and contributed to the gravitas of the community meetings for students and residents.



Presenting research findings during a community meeting, Antwerpen, May 2024

Picture: Brandpunt 23

The goal of sparking discussion also creates space for creativity. Of course, we believe there is nothing wrong with an accessible description of the main research findings and presenting some advice or questions for discussion. However, students can be stimulated to look for alternative formats that could incite more participation and out of the box thinking.

Two examples on how to spark discussion

In Antwerp students presented three ‘persona’s’ of ideal typical neighbourhood residents based on their survey interviews. For each persona they described a typical day of this hypothetical resident and made claims about what the person liked about the neighbourhood and what could be improved from the perspective of this persona. Afterwards they asked the audience whether they recognized these residents and who was missing in their presentation. This example shows that the community meetings should not only focus on survey results, but also on observations and stories. Depending on the methodologies used, students should use different types of data and perspectives to facilitate discussions about specific aspects of neighbourhood life.

In Madrid, students organized community meetings in a public space close to the townhouse. They used more open and artistic methods like a big wall with post its or a collective drawing to invite residents to provide input and feedback. Some participants were invited in advance, but by passers were approached during the event to join the action and discussion.

3.

3.3 Supporting or challenging gut feelings of social workers and residents

Supporting and challenging our gut feeling. *As a fieldwork partner that knows the neighbourhood, most student findings were not new to us. This is not a bad thing, we are happy that student research confirms many convictions that we know from being in the area and talking to residents ourselves. We welcome these findings, because they support us to convince policymakers of our intuitions. At the same time, some findings did challenge our gut feeling and point towards our blindspots. For instance, we are so convinced that Antwerpen-Noord is a transitional neighbourhood, that we assume that most people do not want to stay there for long. However, the students found a large share of residents want to stay there in the next five years. Thus confronted us with our own prejudices regarding the preferences of residents.*

Ellen Van Doren - SAAMO Antwerp

As the testimony illustrates nicely, fieldworkers welcome the student findings because they are curious to know if the research results confirm or challenge their own ideas about the neighbourhood. Via the student survey they also get **access to the experiences of a large number of residents, including people who are not known to their organisation**. In that sense the LOCUS data expands the (indirect) reach of accessing residents' experiences.

Social workers do not have the time and resources to do research. While they generally have a very accurate and deep understanding of neighbourhood life, it is only logical that they too have some **blindspots or overgeneralizations in terms of neighbourhood needs and strengths**. Research results can challenge them in this regard and the fact their assumptions are challenged is more important than the statistical significance or overall quality of these specific research results. The reflection process is more valuable than determining the 'absolute truth' of these dynamic neighbourhoods with their very diverse and ever changing composition of residents.

Furthermore, the **fieldwork partners are very well placed to challenge the students and ask them questions to explain how they came to these findings**. In that regard, the interaction between students and residents also creates a valuable exchange and **collective learning processes** that complements the support of lecturers and enriches the students' learning process.

Given the experience of our fieldwork partners, it should come as a surprise that **most of the findings will not come as a surprise to them**. In most cases the findings confirm their understanding of the resident needs and experiences. This should not be regarded as a problem. Social workers tend to be happy with research that supports their convictions as it gives them **extra material that they can use in discussions with policy makers and other neighbourhood stakeholders**.

While this paragraph focusses on the fieldwork partners, **the research could have a similar**

impact on residents and even local policymakers if they are sufficiently involved in the project or if fieldwork partners bring the findings to their attention.

Additionally, **we recommend that teachers and researchers evaluate the research findings and research focus together with fieldwork partners and residents to include new questions or topics each year**. This is especially relevant if they stay in the same neighbourhood consecutive years. This way they can broaden and deepen the understanding of neighbourhood life beyond what they already know.

3.4 Comparing findings: seeing your context through the eyes of others

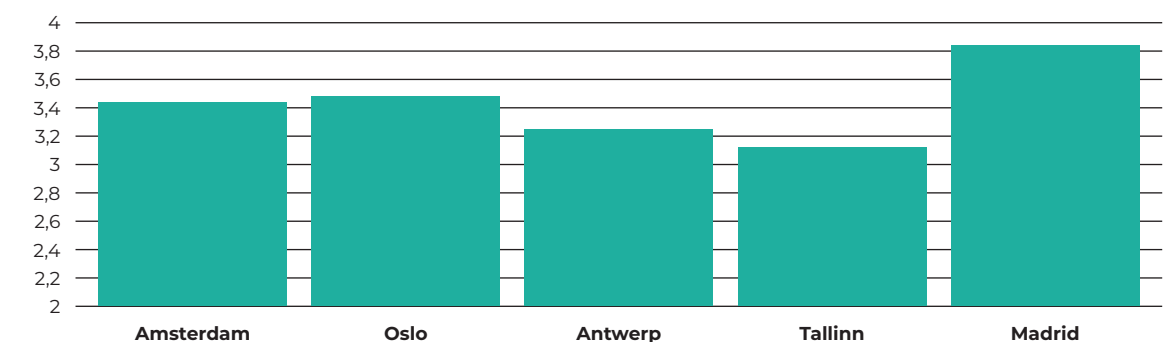
One can learn a lot from comparison and the LOCUS survey provides ample opportunities to do so. For instance, comparison between cities, comparison between consecutive years or comparison between different residents in terms of gender, age or migration background.

Because we have asked the same questions in different cities, we can compare the answers to these questions across cities. Even when the datasets do not meet the standards of statistical representativity, the preliminary findings still **provide a good point of departure for discussing the reality behind the numbers**: *What explains this difference between cities? Do you think these are accidental differences or do they reflect real differences between cities?* Such questions inspired discussion amongst students, but also amongst fieldwork partners, lecturers and researchers.

The joy of comparing cities and coming up with theories. *A great experience from LOCUS was the comparisons of the cities. All cities held surveys with closed end questions. Because we had data from hundreds of people from 5 different cities, we had an enormous amount of (quantitative) data. The fun thing is that in most cases this kind of data is used to test a theory, but in LOCUS, it was the other way around. We saw the graphs and tables and we came to think what could possibly be the reason behind the data. So instead of testing an existing theory, the large amount of quantitative data was suited to develop ideas. Ideas which could be tested in the following years of the LOCUS programme. The discussions we held led to interesting insights.*

Peter Kemper - Teacher and researcher at HvA Amsterdam

I feel connected to the other inhabitants of this neighborhood



Example of a graph that compares survey results from different cities

3.5 Inspiring new ideas for research and education

Last but not least the student research provides teachers, researchers and fieldwork partners with inspiration for future research. The LOCUS activities, survey results, community meetings and the creativity of students can point towards topics that deserve more attention in research and education.

For instance, the research in [Antwerp](#) pointed towards the importance of [neighbourhood stores as important meeting places](#) that can strengthen social cohesion at the neighbourhood level. [Spanish students](#), on the other hand, experimented with [small interventions in public space to increase the political participation of residents](#) while simultaneously using these moments to collect data about resident needs and experiences. In [Oslo](#), the research pointed towards the [relation between neighbourhood stigma and feelings of belonging](#), underlining the importance of positive (self) representation for nurturing feelings of pride and connectedness. In [Tallinn](#), the LOCUS project inspired the idea of [working with student diaries](#) in which they reflect about their experiences with talking to residents.

While these findings and ideas might not be entirely new or groundbreaking, [they inspired teachers and researchers to try new things](#) and discuss these ideas with international colleagues, local colleagues and fieldwork partners. As such, one should not underestimate how such a project stimulates creative thinking and [collective learning, both within and beyond the walls of our universities and university colleges](#).

In social work education literature we often find the diction between theoretical, classroom learning and practical, field learning. In most cases 'field' refers to clearly delineated, institutional workplace settings. [In LOCUS, the neighbourhood becomes the classroom](#). This exposes students and lecturers to different contexts and actors. Such [situated learning](#)⁶ allows knowledge to be acquired through experiential practices by participating in culturally constructed itineraries in a public space.

The educational experience becomes more experiential and participatory when the practice of knowledge is applied to and gained in truly everyday situations [In such a setting, students cannot remain passive recipients, but they become active contributors to a kind of \(temporary\) community of practice that aims to better understand the lifeworlds of residents](#). In this community, learning is a shared responsibility for adapting the learning context to the world of life, and this experience and knowledge does not reside in the heads of individuals in the community, but in the community itself.⁷

On situated learning: when the neighbourhood becomes the classroom. The neighbourhood is a powerful situated learning environment where teachers, students, neighbours and practitioners find opportunities to share, collaborate, understand and support each other and become more aware of each other's weaknesses and strengths. As a result of this interaction, we witness a process of dialogue aimed at collaboration, also between students from different countries, where each party brings its own contribution, leading to the emergence of a practice-centred learning community.⁸ LOCUS provides the context for relevant and meaningful learning in real-life scenarios and helps students find their purpose by allowing them to construct knowledge in a personally satisfying learning style that goes beyond the curriculum as it evolves by creating uncertainty because the limits of exploration are not known.

⁶ Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge university press
⁷ Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT press

⁸ Wenger, E., White, N., & Smith, J. (2010). Learning in communities. *Changing cultures in higher education: Moving ahead to future learning*, 257-283.

4. Added value of the LOCUS project

4.

In this closing chapter, we reflect about the added value of the LOCUS project for the different key partners: students, residents, fieldwork partners and teachers. Additionally, we will also argue that local policymakers can benefit from supporting this collaboration between universities and community oriented social work organizations. These arguments and policy recommendations are developed more extensively in a separate report on 'recommendations for policy makers' that can be downloaded from the LOCUS website.

Here we want to give a more impressionistic overview of what is to gain, in our experience, from the activities that we described in this guide. The main goal of this chapter is to share our enthusiasm and show how this approach can contribute to different goals in terms of education, research and social engagement. We hope we can convince you to give it a try and join our small, but growing international movement for involving social work students in community research and situated learning.

4.1 For students

Learning critical skills. *It is important for future social workers to have real contact with people. Many students find this challenging, but all are very satisfied afterwards. It has helped them deploy and develop different competences. These competences are addressing people, really listening, analysing, looking, letting go of assumptions... It has also made me realise that when we send students to a neighbourhood, we should above all teach them (and make them realise) that they come to learn from the local residents. Above all, they should not provide their own solutions.*

Sven Svensson, Lecturer at AP Hogeschool Antwerpen

LOCUS gives students the chance to dive into hands-on, advanced learning while connecting with local realities like the area's history, economic and social dynamics, cultural diversity and personal and social challenges. Through LOCUS, students engage in **real-world settings** (situated learning), letting them tie their learning directly to the community.

We believe this approach makes their training more relevant and boosts their confidence for their future careers. Through the contact with community social workers they **gain a better understanding of what community work means and entails**. These professionals could be their future colleagues. By interacting with them students can **imagine a possible future as a social worker** and they are already expanding their professional network.

Rediscovering my motivation. *After my first year studying Social Work, I wasn't sure if I wanted to continue pursuing my degree. However, through LOCUS, I have gained a better understanding of what social work entails (at least a part of it), and I am now motivated to keep learning about residents and how to meet their needs.*
Student at Complutense University of Madrid, 2023

LOCUS student activities challenge students to observe, **connect and interact with different people**, which are important skills for social workers. In the process they will be confronted with perspectives and lifestyles that are quite different from their own. They will have to **deal with uncertainty and rejection**. These experiences prepare them for the reality of doing social work, which can be hard and challenging. In the process they learn about others, but also about themselves. These observations and conversations and confrontations will challenge the preconceptions and prejudices students have about the neighbourhood and its residents.

Challenging our prejudices. *During Locus we got to know different parts of a neighbourhood by conducting field work, qualitative interviews and a survey. Our prejudices were challenged, and our opinion of the neighbourhood has changed. We realised that most of the residents were satisfied with their neighbourhood, they were less concerned about crime and youth problems than presented in media. Overall, they felt safe in the area, but they were less satisfied with access to green areas and arenas to meet informally for a cup of coffee and so on.*
Kim Alia, Student at OsloMet, 2025

By going onto the streets and talking to people, students get a first experience and **a broader horizon of what research can be**, compared to learning about it in the classroom. They learn a lot from testing research methods in real-world settings. While these experiences cannot replace an academic course on research methods, it does help to **develop general research skills** and introduces them into the traditions of practice oriented research and community research.

Talking to people. *Talking to people isn't always easy. I expected it to be harder than it actually was. Still, learning how to conduct an interview and truly understanding what it means to look someone in the eye is a completely different experience.*
Student at Complutense University of Madrid, 2023)

The LOCUS assignment stimulates students to **develop a inquisitive attitude** and it nurtures their **curiosity**. It shows them that **research can be fun, relevant and interesting** even if they don't consider themselves to be typical researchers. Because of the community meetings and the contact with fieldwork partners, students see the possible impact of their work and become motivated to take responsibility and **make a contribution to the local community**. They experience that research does not have to be an abstract, theoretical exercise, but can help to tell a different story, spark discussions and contribute to suitable solutions for real life problems.



Students organizing a photo exhibition about the neighbourhood in public space, Coslada Spain 2024.

Think outside the box. *LOCUS makes you think outside of the box, makes you see things you normally wouldn't. For social workers this is an important skill, and this experience encourages problem- solving thinking.*

Lena Cornelis, Student at AP Hogeschool Antwerp, 2025

Through these assignments, students gain a better understanding of complex urban contexts and the **importance of transdisciplinary collaboration for meaningful** interventions in such contexts. It is by doing it and reflecting about it that they develop these insights. As such we are convinced that this approach contributes to their critical and creative thinking.

Reflective work. *Reflective work is one of the most crucial aspects of LOCUS. It's not just about what students think, what teachers explain, what residents feel, or what professionals know. It's about the interaction among these four stakeholders and how the student acts as a bridge connecting them.*

Libertad Pilar Gonzalez Abad, lecturer at the Complutense University of Madrid



Student taking notes during fieldwork, Coslada Spain, 2024.

4.2 For teachers and researchers

LOCUS gives educators and researchers a chance to develop a teaching approach in higher education that focuses on building skills through real-world experiences, encouraging meaningful and practical learning. It creates a **space for innovation**, collaboration, and tackling the challenges of teaching Community Social Work in urban areas.

For lecturers this approach can feel rejuvenating as it **breaks through the daily routines of teaching**. LOCUS offers the opportunity to create original, creative educational materials that can be used for the academic training of students and serve as tools for professionals to encourage and develop active community participation in their work.

Using different resources. *Locus allowed me to use innovative educational resources and deviceful intervention methodologies, as well as stimulating practical tools (Jane's walk, mapping, observation, Space of Care...). All this has resulted in creative LOCUS products that can be used in the classroom and will help me to teach my students how to address specific problems in a practical way, offering intervention models based on experiences and a deep analysis of local social conditions.*

Ana Isabel Corchado Castillo, lecturer at the Complutense University of Madrid

This approach benefits educators and researchers by **bridging the gap between academia and community work**, sparking new ideas for teaching (situated learning), and producing knowledge that helps transform urban communities. The collaboration with fieldwork partners strengthens their **local network** and often spills over to other collaborations such as guest lectures or research projects.

Via the student experiences and outputs and the community meetings teachers and researchers also learn more about neighbourhood dynamics and community social work. This also sparks new ideas for teaching and research (see also section 3.4.).

Thinking about community work. *I believe that thanks to LOCUS, I have started to think more deeply about the meaning of community work, especially in an urban context. While this isn't typically my main teaching area, LOCUS has expanded my understanding of the topic. For example, I now highlight the unique challenges and opportunities of urban community work in discussions with students, being able to give students a broader perspective.*

Ingrid Sindi, professor Social Work at Tallinn University



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In the case of doing LOCUS as part of an international collaboration, teachers and researchers expand their international network and develop friendships with peers across Europe. In our case, this turned out to be very valuable, both in terms of learning and possible collaborations, but also on a personal level.

4.3 For social workers

Telling stories beyond the negative image. *Students that conducted field research in the district of Søndre Nordstrand in Oslo made some very interesting discoveries! Contrary to the image frequently perpetuated by national media, as a district ridden by crime and public unrest, the citizens themselves described the community as one they enjoyed living in and a good place to raise children! These findings were presented by the students, both at a local community meeting (attached picture), as well as on a video interview with the students, posted on the official Facebook page of the district.*

Brynjar Uddu - Fieldworkpartner from Oslo

LOCUS encourages collaboration between social organizations, universities, and communities, creating a hands-on and participatory learning experience. **It brings knowledge to life** by applying it to real, everyday situations outside the classroom, with professionals guiding and supporting students through the process.

Our approach starts from the conviction that social workers should be actively involved in students' assignments and community research in order to **make the research relevant and usable for these professionals and the communities they work in**. As such **it recognizes their expertise** and importance in different ways. We feel they should be included in research and teaching in a way that also suits their needs and aspirations as professionals.

Social work is both a practice-based profession and an academic discipline, but in practice both sides often remain distant. With this approach we try to bridge the gap to a certain extent. LOCUS aims for a **horizontal relationship and participation from the start**. Doing so

our **fieldwork partners contribute to the education of their future peers and can steer social work research** that is carried out at universities and university colleges.

Connecting communities with a university. *Because of our collaboration with the AUAS, our communities came in contact with research and a university. They got the feeling they were the experts of a neighbourhood and their opinion mattered. This is something that is not always available for residents from vulnerable neighbourhoods. The research results were insightful for our organisation. For example: it gave a new perspective on the subject of safety. Residents can say they feel safe, but other factors can show differently (crime rates, amount of locks on doors). It let us look differently to certain subjects in our neighbourhoods.*
Gina van der Linden, Teamleader Eigenwijks Amsterdam

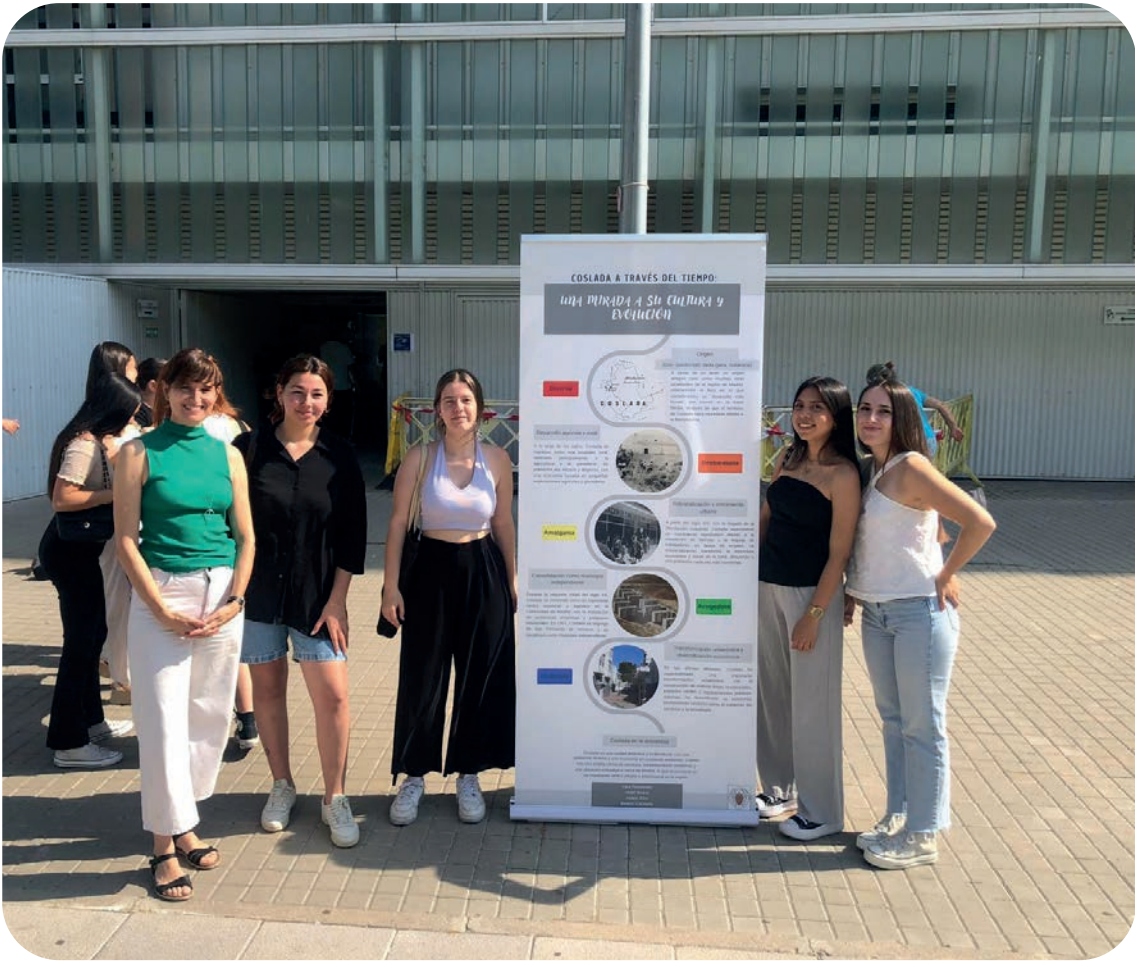
Involving social professionals in student assignments is in no way a new thing. However, we hear from our partners that these collaborations are often ad hoc, without a lot of return for professionals and residents. Asking social professionals to help with student assignments without **sufficient, longer term collaboration and return**, risks to overburden them even more.



A gathering of students, residents, professionals, and lecturers in Coslada, Spain, 2024

In our experiences it is possible to make sure that student **research strengthens to capacity of social work organisations to gain neighbourhood knowledge** and facilitate discussion. This does require time and dialogue. We did not get it right from the first time and we are still learning. **We strongly recommend to collaborate multiple years and invest sufficient time in evaluating the collaboration.** This way you can make sure that the student research offers new and relevant insights, reaching and connecting new people.

If this is done well, LOCUS offers insights and discussions that can confirm or challenge what social workers already know (see section 3.2.). Ideally the student outputs and survey factsheets can be used for reflection, advocacy or other activities in the community.



Infographic on the history of the neighbourhood, Coslada, Spain, 2024.

Similar to teachers and researchers, social workers can also benefit from international collaboration with academics and other community social workers, **exchanging experiences and building friendships across borders.**

4.4 For Residents

Resident reacting to student findings *"I agree 100% with what these girls have said. What has been done is not enough. The situation has improved, yes, but there is still a lot to do. It's not enough to say it was worse before, we want the best for our neighbourhood. And I'm sorry if this is annoying to hear, but sometimes politicians and social services have taken care of things that were not as urgent as having a decent place to live."*
Resident during the Coslada community meeting, Spain, 2024

Residents might also experience an added value of this project when they have [pleasant interaction with student that treat them as an expert of the neighbourhood](#). If they want, they can share their stories and experiences. Doing so they contribute to the learning of future social workers and they provide input for research that will represent the needs and wants of people living in their community.



Open air mural with residents words, Coslada, Spain, 2024.

We think it is important that these residents have [positive experiences with educational institutions and research](#), because this has not always been the case. Many residents of the neighbourhoods where our students conducted research believe that university and research 'are not for them', but we believe that in many cases, it could be. We do not claim that our small project will change this perception of a large scale, but we do hope that to facilitate more positive experiences, showing residents that they can contribute to research and education if they want and that their input is indeed very valuable.

Students offer residents an [outsiders perspective on their own neighbourhood](#). It invites them to reflect deeper about how they feel about their area, living conditions and connection to other residents. To the extent that we succeed in giving our finding back to the community, via closing community meetings and other strategies, these findings could also confirm and challenge the ideas residents have about their neighbourhood. [We recommend project partners to really invest time and resources in giving back the findings and inviting residents to the community meetings](#). The residents that did participate told us it was a meaningful experience to connect with students, professionals and other residents.

4.5 For local policymakers

Lastly, we want to stress that this project also [creates value for local policymakers who want to know about the lives, needs and preferences of their constituents](#). The students outputs offer rich insights into the lived experiences of residents that can help policymakers to understand the real needs of the community.

The community meetings offer a nice opportunity to [interact with residents, students, researchers, teachers and social professionals working their district](#). This might lead to new ideas and collaborations and it gives them access to materials they can use to inform colleagues or make statements about what they think is needed in the neighbourhood.

While the involvement of local officials was not a core aim for our project, we had great experiences with local municipalities being involved as an associated partner and officials participating in the community meetings. As is the case for all partners, these interactions can also spill over to other collaborations and even international exchange.

In conclusion

We sincerely hope that LOCUS inspires policymakers to take participation and the lived experience of residents seriously. After three years of working together on this project we have learned a lot about our often forgotten or stigmatised neighbourhoods. We learned a lot about collaborating beyond university walls and developing new ways of training students and engaging residents. More than ever we are convinced of the importance of community social work and community research. We aim to continue this journey, sending students onto the streets, organizing community meetings and turning neighbourhoods into classrooms. You are most welcome to join us!

