



LOCUS

The Labs of Contextualized Social Work Recommendations for Policy Makers





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





WHAT IS LOCUS?

The Labs of Contextualized Social Work (LOCUS) program, funded by the Erasmus+ Programme, is a collaborative initiative focused on educational innovation within social work training across five European cities: Amsterdam, Antwerp, Oslo, Tallinn, and Madrid. The program, which ran from May 2022 to May 2025, partners five Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with five community organizations to bridge the gap between academic learning and practical application in urban social work. The key point is that LOCUS focuses on improving social research methods and the observation of urban environments in Social Work bachelor programs.

LOCUS aligns with the "third mission" of universities, emphasizing community engagement and social responsibility. The program seeks to connect university and field partners with community problems and potentials through a model of co-determination and horizontal collaboration. It promotes a co-creation of knowledge approach, integrating students, academics, social workers, and local residents to address socioeconomically challenged urban issues. The program aims to foster collaboration among stakeholders to propose solutions to social challenges from an international and comparative perspective.

LOCUS aims to enhance social work students' research competencies and understanding of urban environments by involving them in direct engagement with local communities. The LOCUS model is a three-year framework that cultivates research skills through a tripartite collaboration of students, faculty, and community-based social workers. This model integrates academic training with fieldwork, emphasizing co-creation of knowledge and community involvement in identifying and addressing social challenges. Students utilize social science methods to conduct research and produce various outputs that are shared in community meetings to foster dialogue and collective problem-solving. Along these lines, students conduct observations and generate various outputs like videos, photovoice projects, and community meetings to share their findings and foster dialogue.



HOW TO LOCUS?

The LOCUS model is a framework designed to develop research competencies through active engagement with urban challenges and resources. It is characterized by a tripartite collaboration involving students, faculty from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and community-based social workers. The model begins with students receiving academic training in research methods and techniques as part of their degree programs. This foundational knowledge prepares them for the subsequent fieldwork phase. In the second phase, social workers from field partner organizations play a crucial role in facilitating students' access to the community and its resources. They act as guides, connecting students with residents and key local organizations such as neighborhood associations, social services, NGOs, and cultural groups. This on-the-ground support is coordinated with the academics from the university who are overseeing the LOCUS project.

Following this initial immersion, students conduct semi-autonomous fieldwork, applying social science research methods and tools. These include questionnaires, in-depth interviews, direct observation, and ethnographic approaches, to analyze the social dynamics within urban contexts.

A key component of the LOCUS model is the emphasis on generating diverse outputs from the fieldwork. These deliverables are designed to communicate the understanding and analysis of social issues in the urban environment. LOCUS encourages creativity in these assignments, with students producing videos, photovoice projects, posters, murals, and other visual and performative pieces. The combination of these varied products represents a collective effort in the co-creation of knowledge, involving the community and residents in the examination of social problems and the identification of local resources.

Culminating each LOCUS cycle is a community meeting, open to all residents and stakeholders, where students present their findings and engage in dialogue about the issues and resources explored during the project. This meeting serves to validate the research and facilitate a collaborative discussion on potential solutions and actions.

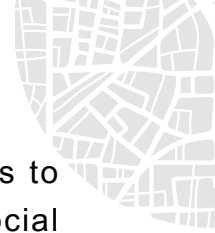


To support the implementation of the LOCUS framework, a toolkit of resources has been developed. This includes "LOCUS Voices from Neighborhoods," a collection of student-generated materials; a training program for academics and field-based social workers; the "LOCUS Manual - Life World Perspectives," which provides guidance on the LOCUS methodology; and "LOCUS Recommendations - for Policy Makers," which translates the research findings into actionable policy suggestions.

This comprehensive model not only enhances students' research capabilities but also fosters a collaborative environment where academic knowledge and community expertise converge to address pressing social issues in urban settings.

WHY LOCUS?

LOCUS offers several benefits to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including its role as a policy instrument for social responsibility, enhancing the quality of Social Work education, and improving internationalization objectives.



For cities, field organizations, and the local community, LOCUS contributes to a more detailed understanding of professional practice, involves social organizations in training future social workers, and fosters a stable relationship between the professional and academic fields. It also promotes social citizenship by increasing civic awareness and strengthening citizenship values.

For academics and social workers, LOCUS enhances the teaching experience, allows for curriculum updates, encourages innovative pedagogical approaches, and provides opportunities for international collaboration and reflection. It also fosters a model of cooperation between HEIs and field partners, promoting mutual recognition and building trust.

SUMMARY OF LOCUS BENEFITS

TARGET	BENEFIT
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIs)	LOCUS is a policy instrument related to third mission and social responsibility LOCUS enhances the overall quality of Social Work education LOCUS improves the internationalization of participating institutions
FOR CITIES, FIELD ORGANISATIONS AND LOCAL COMMUNITY	LOCUS contributes to a more detailed understanding of the context of Professional practice LOCUS involves social organizations in the training of future social workers LOCUS contributes to a sustainable and horizontal relationship between the professional and academic fields LOCUS contributes to building social citizenship



FOR ACADEMICS	LOCUS enhances the overall teaching experience LOCUS allows for updating the curriculum and course content LOCUS encourages the development of innovative pedagogical approaches
FOR SOCIAL WORKERS	LOCUS allows for comparing ways of working in an international context. LOCUS offers informational input capable of fostering reflection
FOR SOCIAL WORKERS AND ACADEMICAS	LOCUS allows for taking a leading role in the training of future social workers LOCUS as a model of cooperation between HEIs and field work partners

WHERE TO LOCUS?

In conclusion, LOCUS is an innovative program that connects students, social workers, academics, public administrations, and HEIs to address social problems through practice-based research and shared knowledge production, placing residents and citizens at the center of the process. The experience accumulated over the three years that have enabled its design and piloting suggests that it can be applied in various urban contexts, including different national contexts. In this sense, the program allows for innovative international cooperation in the field of Social Work and a mutual enrichment of all parties involved in transnational cooperation. Furthermore, the LOCUS model is likely to be applied in other disciplines interested in community work.

LOCUS is an easy-to-implement and efficient program, as it is not necessary to invest a large amount of resources for its development. In this regard, the low cost associated with the benefits described in this document suggests that LOCUS is a program with great appeal for all parties involved, and especially for HEIs and for associations, foundations, and public administrations involved in the challenges and social problems in urban contexts.

RECOMENDATION FOR POLICY MARKERS

1

INTRODUCTION

2

KEY CONCEPTS, POLICIES AND DEFINITIONS

2.1 THE THIRD MISSION AND LOCUS

2.2 SOCIAL WORK AND THE CITY: URBAN PROBLEMS AND SOCIAL WORKER EDUCATION

2.3 INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON - A SHIFT IN THE PARADIGM

3

THE LOCUS MODEL

3.1 INTRODUCTION TO LOCUS

3.2 LOCUS: A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING RESEARCH COMPETENCIES THROUGH COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS.

4

BENEFITS OF THE LOCUS MODEL

4.1 BENEFITS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIS).

4.2 BENEFITS FOR CITIES, FIELD ORGANISATIONS AND LOCAL COMMUNITY

4.3 BENEFITS FOR ACADEMICS and SOCIAL WORKERS

5

FINAL REMARKS



1. INTRODUCTION

Labs of Contextualized Social Work (LOCUS) is a cooperation program for educational innovation funded by the Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2: Partnerships for Cooperation, under agreement number 2021-2-NL01-KA220-HED-000049717. The design and implementation of the program took place between May 31, 2022, and May 30, 2025. Five HEIs (Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Artesis Plantijn Hogeschool Antwerpen, Oslomet - Storbyuniversitetet, Tallinn University, and Universidad Complutense de Madrid) and five community partners (Stichting Eigenwijks, Samenlevingsopbouw Antwerpen Stad, Oslo Kommune Bydel 15 Søndre Nordstrand, and Provivienda) participated. In this way, LOCUS was implemented in five different cities (Amsterdam, Antwerp, Oslo, Tallinn, and Madrid).

The aim of LOCUS was to improve training in social research methods and observation of urban neighborhoods in Social Work bachelor programs at the five HEIs. Furthermore, the objectives of LOCUS included the development of a co-creation of knowledge program involving students, academics, social workers, and residents in the neighborhoods. This knowledge of the problems, challenges, and issues specific to socioeconomically challenged urban contexts is, therefore, practice-based knowledge. As a result, LOCUS offers not only a teaching innovation process but also a cooperation program between stakeholders to propose solutions to social challenges from an international and comparative perspective.

In the following pages, the main concepts and principles on which LOCUS is based are developed. Next, the proposal is described in detail, emphasizing the results of the program's implementation and the documents that shape it. After describing the program in detail, the benefits obtained by all the stakeholders involved are detailed.



2. KEY CONCEPTS, POLICIES AND DEFINITIONS

2.1. THE THIRD MISSION and LOCUS

The concept of the University, with a capital "U," has evolved over time. Historically, its primary focus was the transmission of knowledge, with the mission of providing the highest level of education. A second priority soon emerged: the generation of knowledge, leading universities to undertake research at the highest level. More recently, universities have added a third priority: to become a central agent in the growth and development of the society they serve. This priority has given rise to a **third mission**, which encompasses engagement with the community, knowledge transfer, and social responsibility.

The concept of the "third mission" encompasses a variety of objectives and activities. Universities are positioned as key drivers of entrepreneurship, facilitating the transfer of knowledge from research and development to the productive sector (businesses and the public sector). Furthermore, universities have a duty to foster the growth and development of their communities, establishing collaborative relationships in research and development, as well as in broader economic, social, and community issues. This vision of the third mission revolves around the notion of social engagement. In this model, universities become more open to a wider range of social actors through the formation of partnerships that amplify the social impact of university activities while simultaneously strengthening the community itself. The key lies in the community's involvement in defining the content of university activities. This represents a novel way of structuring higher education in relation to its environment. While there is no single model of university, the content and terms of the relationship with the environment vary. However, in all cases, the interaction between universities and community actors generates mutual benefits. Along these lines, universities adopt a social perspective through their community engagement, assuming a role that aligns with the social needs of their local and regional contexts. In this process, universities strengthen their ties with the community and enhance their reputation.



At the European Union level, the Lisbon Strategy (2000-2010) already emphasized the role of universities in contributing to the economy by developing human capital, cooperating with businesses, and driving innovation. Subsequently, the EU2020 Strategy placed additional emphasis on 'societal development'. This recognition of the 'societal' dimension was further strengthened in the EC's Renewed Agenda for Higher Education, becoming the first EU policy document to prioritize broader societal engagement by universities. Indeed, one of the four priorities of the Renewed Agenda is 'building inclusive and connected HE systems', reflecting a strong community engagement focus distinct from innovation. The Renewed Agenda notes that "higher education institutions are not ivory towers, but civic-minded learning communities connected to their communities". It argues that "some institutions are developing their profile as 'civic universities' by integrating local, regional and societal issues into curricula, involving the local community in teaching and research projects, providing adult learning and communicating and building links with local communities".

HEIs should be engaged in the development of their cities, rural areas, and regions, whether through contributing to development strategies, cooperation with businesses, the public and voluntary sectors or supporting public dialogue about societal issues. Parallel to this, the European Economic and Social Committee emphasized the importance of balancing both 'entrepreneurial and civic universities' in its communique *Engaged universities shaping Europe*.

The **LOCUS model aligns with this third mission** of universities. As the following pages will show, LOCUS aims to enhance the training of social work students in analyzing social problems in urban contexts through horizontal collaboration between academia and the urban community. In other words, LOCUS is a cooperative design between university partners and field partners that directly connects with community problems and potentials. A crucial aspect of this mutually beneficial interaction is codetermination, which involves joint participation by the university and the community in shaping activities, including design and operational management. In summary, LOCUS is an innovative teaching model based on codetermination and horizontality in defining the topics of collaboration between universities and community partners.



As a result, the resources it offers can generate benefits for all stakeholders, namely the university (embodied in its students and academics) and the community (embodied by local governments, associations, social entities, and the third sector in general).

2.2. SOCIAL WORK AND THE CITY: URBAN PROBLEMS and SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION.

LOCUS focuses on Social Work that takes place in urban contexts. This does not imply that urban problems are the only ones where social work professionals can carry out their work. However, social work education faces one of its greatest challenges in urban contexts, given the increasing complexity of the problems and the potential of the populations residing in European cities. Therefore, the LOCUS proposal has been piloted and deployed in city neighborhoods, selecting in each of the participating cities neighborhoods with relevant socioeconomic and cultural challenges. The objective of LOCUS is for students' training in the methodological field to delve deeper into the analysis of both the challenges and the potential of these neighborhoods and their residents.

Below are some of the urban problems and the social and psychosocial resources to address them that have been analyzed by the groups of students who have participated in LOCUS in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Tallinn, Oslo, and Madrid.

 **Stigma of underprivileged communities.** In this area, students (with the supervision of academics and field partner professionals) analyzed the following aspects:

-  Reputation vs. reality.
-  Self-fulfilling prophesies.
-  Identity development.



Achievements in terms of competencies were broad, so that students deepened their knowledge about identity formation (individual and as a community), theoretical perspectives on stigma, anti-oppressive work, discrimination factors as well as open and hidden racism. In addition, emphasis was placed on adjusting the narrative through fieldwork in neighborhoods, survey data and qualitative inter views.

✱ **Housing.** This is one of the main problems in European cities for several decades. Therefore, students paid special attention to the problem of **affordability**. Social work students are introduced to how the housing market and related policies work and contribute to creating underprivileged communities. The national housing policies highlight that all people can own their own house. Nevertheless, in all the participating cities, we found a large group of people who can be regarded as disadvantaged in the housing market as they cannot afford to buy their accommodation. The rental market is highly privatized and contributes to frequent move-ins and move-outs. This is a permanent transition (**turnover**). In fact, people in the rental market experience stigma and instability in their living conditions. Frequent move-ins and move-outs undermine local community programs.

✱ **Immigration.** Migration processes have one of their main results in the formation of multi and intercultural neighborhoods. This diversity is one of the great assets of the population living in cities in Europe. However, it is important to note that migration processes are often characterized by situations of inequality, socioeconomic difficulties. In other words, the formation of intercultural societies is one of the great challenges of neighborhoods and cities in Europe.

Therefore, LOCUS has emphasized the following aspects in student training. Firstly, empowerment. Efforts can be undertaken to support people in underprivileged communities by focusing on their resources as opposed to perceived deficiencies. Mobilizing citizens to meet informally in their local neighborhoods, improving outdoor areas or meeting places may contribute to unification and feel-good attitudes. Secondly, inclusion processes. Which forms of inclusion are productive? Are certain approaches universally applicable?



How do we engage the community in positive inclusion practices? Engaging students in neighborhood work, building on local resources and activities may entail inclusion practices. Thirdly, *intervention*. How are immigrants “on-boarded” in the local community? Are there best practices in the field? The education program should learn from preventive work in the field. A growing number of organizations assist and advocate for irregular immigrants, but it can still be difficult to know who is actually “irregular” in a local community, and what actually characterizes their opportunities in European cities. Their living conditions are diverse, but at a local level health services, housing, work and protection against violence, abuse and exploitation are particularly important and rise challenges to professional as well as voluntary workers.

The students involved in LOCUS adopted a community-based, global view of the challenges facing the neighborhoods or districts where they carried out their observation and analysis. In other words, the challenges related to the stigmatization of at-risk populations, housing problems, or the growing sociocultural and ethnic diversity were addressed taking into account the potential of the community and its residents to respond and generate spaces for inclusion and encounter. Moreover, this community perspective also allowed addressing other challenges, such as **homelessness**, **loneliness**, or **aging** of the population in cities.

2.3. INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON – A SHIFT IN THE PARADIGM

One of the key aspects of the LOCUS model is the comparison between cities located in different countries of the European Union. This comparison allows students, social workers, and academics to understand in a deeper and more detailed manner the challenges we must face both locally and within the framework of the European Union. The LOCUS team truly believe that the project contributes to the development of European citizenship. As will be seen in the following pages, the model proposed by LOCUS articulates local work with transnational work throughout its development, so that the awareness of working in an international framework arises early among students, social workers, and academics.

It is worth noting that some of the products that LOCUS makes available to interested entities are built through transnational cooperative work, so that the idea of European citizenship is present in the very design of the project.



3. THE LOCUS MODEL

3.1. INTRODUCTION TO LOCUS

LOCUS: Labs of Contextualized Social Work is an Erasmus+ partnership connecting five European cities (Amsterdam, Antwerp, Madrid, Oslo, and Tallinn). This international collaboration among higher education institutions and fieldwork partners addresses three core questions:

- How can we better understand the needs and perspectives of diverse urban residents, particularly those whose voices are often unheard?
- How can we actively involve residents in shaping the future of their neighborhoods?
- How can we prepare social work students to contribute to social inclusion and community building in 21st-century cities?

LOCUS aims to answer these questions by:

- Sending students into diverse neighborhoods: To observe local dynamics and engage with residents.
- Collaborating with local partners: To identify key issues and prepare students for fieldwork.
- Encouraging student-led research: Using social science methods to gather and analyze data.
- Organizing community meetings: To share findings, discuss neighborhood needs, and involve residents in decision-making processes.

In essence, LOCUS seeks to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world practice, fostering collaboration between educators, researchers, and practitioners while empowering students with valuable skills for social work in the 21st century. LOCUS bridges the gap between theory and practice by providing students with hands-on experience conducting research in real-world settings. This approach not only develops research skills but also fosters a deep understanding of social issues. In addition, the LOCUS model seeks to empower communities to actively participate in generating knowledge about their own local challenges and assets – a co-production of knowledge.



3.2. LOCUS: A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING RESEARCH COMPETENCIES THROUGH COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS.

LOCUS is a three-year-tested model that promotes the development of research competencies through direct engagement with urban challenges and community resources. Central to the model is a tripartite collaboration involving students, faculty, and community-based social workers.

In its initial stage, students receive academic training, within the framework of their degree, in research methods and techniques. This knowledge is an essential starting point for maximizing the benefits of LOCUS. In a second phase, social workers in field partner organizations facilitate access to the territory and the community, accompanying students and building bridges with residents and key organizations in the neighborhood (neighborhood associations, social resources and services, NGOs, cultural associations, etc.). This work is carried out in coordination with the academics in charge of LOCUS at the university. Once the students have become familiar with the neighborhood, they can conduct their observation in a semi-autonomous manner, applying the techniques and tools of social sciences research: questionnaires, in-depth interviews, direct observation, ethnographic approach, etc. The LOCUS model establishes the need to generate products derived from fieldwork, that is, deliverables that generate an understanding and analysis of the social in urban contexts.

LOCUS proposes assignments that allow incorporating creativity in their design: videos, photovoice, posters, murals, photographic compositions, theatrical works, etc. The combination of the different products generated by the students summarizes in a choral way the co-creation of knowledge and the participation of the community and the residents in the analysis of social problems and the resources of the neighborhood to address them. Therefore, the knowledge generated and embodied in the final products must be used for the celebration of a community meeting, open to the entire community, the neighborhood and its residents, so that a dialogue can be established around everything generated during the deployment of LOCUS.

The following figure summarizes the "LOCUS cycle".



Figure 1. LOCUS cycle.



The LOCUS resources are designed to support any HEI through the process of setting the LOCUS Framework for developing research competencies in social work students. The toolkit is comprised of the following resources:

- LOCUS Voices from neighborhoods.
- LOCUS Training programme with two modules: for academics and for social workers in the field.
- LOCUS Manual - Life world perspectives.
- LOCUS Recommendations - for Policy Makers (this document).

The next paragraphs will illustrate the function of each of these tools.

LOCUS Voices from Neighborhoods

Students involved in LOCUS develop their competencies in research methods and techniques through direct field observation. This facilitates a situated analysis of information and generates situated knowledge. One of the challenges posed to students is to incorporate the community, the neighborhood, and the residents into the creation of this knowledge. A second challenge - perhaps an obligation - is to share the results of the analysis with the community, the residents, and society in general.



To address both challenges, students generate products that serve to present the knowledge generated and the information collected in formats that are recognizable and appropriate for the general population, for the community, for the residents, and for anyone interested in analyzing reality. These formats cannot be the same as those of scientific communication but rather must be closer to the idea of dissemination and public debate. They are diverse materials and results, including posters, infographics, videos of different lengths, photomontages, photovoice, and participatory murals.

Therefore, each academic year LOCUS organizes a closing activity called a community meeting. This is a meeting with the community and residents of the neighborhood where LOCUS has been developed. During the community meeting, the students, accompanied by academics and field partners, present the result of their analysis of the neighborhood's reality - that is, they present all the products they have generated from the observational work carried out in the community. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, these products are of diverse nature, many of them visual or audiovisual. These meetings allow all attendees to exchange impressions and dialogue about the material presented and shared.

To enable cross-city comparisons, students also contribute to a centralized database using a standardized questionnaire. In other words, students generate a more academic product. This is a database based on the application of a common questionnaire in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Tallinn, Oslo, and Madrid. This database allows for a comprehensive analysis of urban challenges and provides valuable insights for both researchers and policymakers.

The project culminates in a publicly accessible website showcasing the diverse outputs generated by students across the participating cities: [LOCUS](#)

LOCUS Training Programme

A very important aspect for the successful implementation of LOCUS consists of a specific design (adapted to the social and cultural context in which it is implemented) that considers the various aspects to be taken into account for the project to achieve its objectives. Collaboration between HEIs and field partners is vital for this. Collaboration between HEIs and field partners is vital for this.



For this purpose, one of the resources that LOCUS offers and makes freely available is a training program aimed at professors/academics working in HEIs and professionals working in social intervention. It is, therefore, a training program composed of two modules, with specific information of interest for each of the aforementioned groups.

The module aimed at professors focuses on four fundamental aspects:

1. **How to identify a neighborhood** with characteristics that fit the LOCUS philosophy. This task is of particular importance, as the characteristics of the neighborhood are a key element for the development of student observation and analysis. Identifying the neighborhood necessarily involves contacting a partner who carries out their work in the community (the field partner) and who has social workers on their staff. Both aspects are addressed in the training program. In addition, suggestions are offered on how to get to know the neighborhood, tools to approach the community and residents in an appropriate and respectful manner.

2. **How to prepare students for the community work.** Students will face highly relevant challenges, situations that will help them grow academically and develop skills in the direct practice of research and social analysis. However, it is very possible that LOCUS will be one of their first direct contacts with the community from a Social Work perspective. Therefore, it is important to ensure that they are adequately prepared, both from the point of view of their initial skills and from the point of view of their social skills. Therefore, this module offers concrete suggestions, as well as training material that can be used by professors interested in the development of LOCUS.

3. **How to do community meetings.** As described above, each LOCUS cycle culminates in a community meeting where the results of the work carried out by students during the second semester are shared with the community and residents. Organizing the community meeting is a challenge, as it is the moment when the co-creation of knowledge is shown in concrete products developed by the students.



Organizing the community meeting involves choosing a suitable place both to display the products and to ensure a productive meeting with the neighborhood residents. The training program offers key insights, based on the experience accumulated during the piloting of LOCUS in the five cities involved.

4. International community. It should not be forgotten that LOCUS incorporates the international dimension, including the transnational comparison of the results of its development and their joint analysis, preferably through intensive programs. The training program analyzes strategies for international cooperation to be realized in the development of LOCUS itself and in its results.

The module aimed at social workers in the field includes three aspects:

1. Field research basics. The LOCUS proposal is to connect university and community in cooperation with field partners to increase competencies in research methodology and analysis of social reality for Social Work students. Therefore, it is important that social workers in the field and academics involved in the project have a common perspective regarding research. In this way, the module aimed at social workers includes a chapter on the potential benefits and basic elements of social research (for example, how to develop a survey or how to conduct qualitative research).

2. How to guide students in the field. One of the distinctive elements of LOCUS is that students are guided in the community by social workers from the field partners. Therefore, it is important to reflect on how to create connections between citizens, volunteers and students. For example, how to plan and design initial meetings and how to articulate walks in the neighborhood.

3. Community meetings. As has been reiterated throughout this document, the project contemplates community meetings as milestones of special relevance, since in these meetings the knowledge generated is shared, condensed in the products that are shared with the community to obtain feedback and establish a dialogue between all the parties involved in LOCUS.



Therefore, the module dedicated to social workers in the field partners offers tips on key elements for the successful development of the community meeting: How to engage citizens in showing up? How to organize the community meeting? How to make it relevant for the professional practice?

LOCUS manual: Life World Perspectives

The LOCUS model involves complex and innovative cooperation between HEIs, field work partners, and the community itself. It is a model where, within each involved party, different actors are found. Thus, in HEIs, the participation of lecturers, students, and authorities is essential. Field partners involve their social workers, but also program coordinators if necessary. Finally, in the community, the participation of residents, neighborhood, cultural, and social associations, etc., and eventually, municipal technicians and professionals is fundamental.

It is, therefore, a fruitful collaboration with benefits for all parties involved and, at the same time, complex. For this reason, it is necessary to articulate the mechanisms needed to ensure that these benefits actually occur. In this regard, the **Life World Perspectives manual** describes in detail and with precision all aspects that make up LOCUS:

1. The manual describes the **origins, motivation, and aims** of the innovation and cooperation model, as well as its relevance and potential positive effects for all parties involved. These positive effects are mainly achieved by building solid relationships between education, research, and field work.
2. The manual also describes in detail **how to implement** LOCUS: the different steps to take to design and implement it, the possible variations of its development, the conditions under which it can be successfully developed, practical tips and suggestions, etc. This description emphasizes how we can assemble all players (students, fieldworkers, and academics), jointly decide on topics and methods, and prepare students for fieldwork in the community or neighborhood.



3. The manual offers suggestions and examples of results and products generated by students as a result of their cooperation and involvement with the neighborhood and its residents. It also addresses the organization of community meetings, which constitute milestones of each LOCUS cycle. In this regard, the essential feedback to fieldworkers and residents is emphasized.

4. Finally, the manual analyzes the possible uses that can be given to the results and findings obtained by the students in their research. LOCUS offers added value derived from the international cooperation of HEIs and field partners, so that the potential for a solid comparative exercise is outstanding.

Life World Perspectives is available in digital format LOCUS and also in physical format.

4. BENEFITS OF THE LOCUS MODEL

4.1 BENEFITS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIs).

Three main benefits are identified for Higher Education Institutions when they adopt the LOCUS model:

Benefit 1. LOCUS as a policy instrument.

Strategic plans of HEIs often include references to Sustainable Development Goals, Third Mission objectives, and the institution's social responsibility obligations towards society. In the case of Social Sciences in general, and Social Work in particular, the need to address the requirements of sustainable development and civil and social engagement with the community and the neighborhoods where the profession operates is evident. The LOCUS model is a practical exemplar model that is ready to be adopted to meet this policy aim. Furthermore, LOCUS offers a model for **addressing a university's need to engage with external stakeholders**, providing an institutional tool to respond to social responsibility obligations through the curriculum.



LOCUS can be implemented through collaboration with several types of external community actors (local government/municipalities, NGOs, foundations, social enterprises, associations). It is designed to support university engagement with public institutions, agencies, and organizations, as well as civil society and 'third sector' organizations. It thus represents an effective policy tool to operationalize HEI 3rd mission and social responsibility policy objectives.

In this context, one of the potential benefits is to **enhance the external reputation and accountability** to society of **academic institutions**. Indeed, to the extent that LOCUS involves direct contact between HEIs and society and citizens, its reputational impact can be significant. Moreover, it is important to note that LOCUS allows for an objective measurement of achievements related to the social impact produced. In fact, measurable indicators can be easily achieved. Examples of these indicators include: the number of students involved in LOCUS; the number of agreements signed with local associations and community partners to implement LOCUS; the number of international students working with the local community; the academic performance of participating students; the satisfaction of social and neighborhood groups with the results obtained; the number of people/residents reached by students (through questionnaires, interviews, etc.) and the number attending community meetings, etc. Measurable indicators for third mission goals are gaining increasing importance. Along these lines, international rankings for Higher Education Institutions often include Third Mission elements. In recent times, some traditional HEI rankings have developed a special classification for impact on society, while new rankings focused solely on third mission activities have been created. Some examples include the Times Higher Education “Impact Ranking” and the “UI Green Metrics World Ranking”.

Benefit 2. LOCUS enhances the overall quality of Social Work education by improving the overall student experience and learning outcomes in Social Research.

Including the LOCUS model in Social Work curricula is a means of enhancing the quality of education within the discipline. This assertion is threefold. Firstly, LOCUS is designed to improve competencies in the use of social research techniques, specifically tailored to the needs of Social Work.

LOCUS points to the increasing relevance of research methods and techniques training within the Social Sciences. Graduates in Social Work with more and better competencies are increasingly valued by employers, whether they be private or public entities. Moreover, the growing importance of research in Social Work means that academia increasingly demands potential candidates to join research groups and/or to develop doctoral theses.

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 (Oslo, Norway)

Secondly, participation in LOCUS not only enhances students' research competencies but also **improves their overall capacity for observing and analyzing situations** through direct **involvement in the community**, in neighborhoods, and in the urban contexts where the profession is central. It involves students working with stakeholders to define a challenge and collaboratively develop a solution that is environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable. In general, the LOCUS experience enables students to develop and improve their understanding and analysis of the social problems they will face as professionals upon graduation, while simultaneously enhancing their ability to identify community and psychosocial resources to address these problems.



And all of this takes place in direct contact with urban social reality and with professionals who have accumulated years of experience in the field.



Testimonial: *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, Belgium)

Thirdly, LOCUS includes a **comparative experience** with other European cities, which represents an additional element in enhancing the quality of Social Work education, as well as a factor that improves the student experience.



I would say LOCUS is an experience you would still talk about in years. It's interesting to do research when knowing people in Spain, Norway, Estonia and the Netherlands are doing it to. Knowing the hard work, you put in something is being used for something.

Inas El Akel, student at AP Hogeschool (Antwerp, Belgium)



It is worth noting that LOCUS can be incorporated into Social Work curricula. Due to its flexibility, it can be offered as an elective activity with associated credits or can be incorporated as a key and mandatory activity in the training of future social workers.

Benefit 3. LOCUS can improve the internationalization objectives of participating institutions.

Through LOCUS, it is possible to **foster the internationalization** of HEIs in several ways. Firstly, LOCUS involves valuable international collaboration between academic institutions. In fact, LOCUS includes the implementation of intensive programs that allow students to work collaboratively with students from other European cities. This contact can encourage Erasmus+ placements and increase student exchange between participating universities.

Furthermore, LOCUS can contribute to **internationalization at home**. Indeed, LOCUS involves a further enhancement of transnational student mobility. The traditional mobility for study approach is enriched through engagement with the local community and neighborhoods, meaning that the Erasmus+ experience includes direct contact with the social reality of the city and the surrounding community of the host university. In addition, international students work closely in teams with local students, bringing their cultural background to the projects and making the local experience intercultural and international.

4.2 BENEFITS FOR CITIES, FIELD ORGANISATIONS AND LOCAL COMMUNITY.

Collaboration between HEIs and field work partners is the axis around which LOCUS is articulated. This collaboration takes place within a neighborhood or community. Therefore, the benefits of LOCUS affect both the organizations involved (the field partners: social organizations, NGOs, etc.) and the municipality itself. This section emphasizes the potential benefits for field work partners, including a final reflection on the benefit for the community in general and, indirectly, for local authorities.



Benefit 1. LOCUS can contribute to a more detailed understanding of the context of professional practice.

The improvement in research and social analysis skills of students involves two processes that contribute to creating quality and useful information for field work partners. Firstly, this information is generated through research methods and techniques that ensure rigorous, valid, and relevant data. In other words, training in research methods and techniques involves the use of proven and innovative methodological tools developed rigorously. Therefore, the information generated can be especially useful for organizations and community partners. Secondly, the design of each LOCUS cycle involves a joint definition of the objectives and topics on which students will work. In this design, it is possible (even desirable) to direct the information gathering based on the interests of the field work partner.

Benefit 2. LOCUS involves social organizations in the training of future social workers.

Undoubtedly, the social workers participating in LOCUS see their workload slightly increased. However, this means that there is an active participation of field work partners in the training of future social workers, something that should certainly be considered as an enrichment of the profession.

Benefit 3. LOCUS contributes to a stable and horizontal relationship between the professional and academic fields.

The aspects that define the cooperation between HEIs and field work partners allow establishing a relationship characterized by co-participation, co-creation of objectives, co-definition of strategies, and co-creation of knowledge. This is a very relevant aspect, since a horizontal relationship of both parties in the development of each LOCUS cycle is defined from the first moment. It is likely that this type of relationship will lead to a broader collaboration, which may involve research projects, design of content for the education of future social workers, and transfer of knowledge derived from the activity of HEIs. In addition, LOCUS offers materials (free and open access) that may be relevant for the training of social workers in the field work partners. It is very important to highlight that these materials have been designed and made with contributions from both academics and social workers in the field.



Benefit 4. LOCUS contributes to building social citizenship

Cities and municipalities have an interest in creating strong local ties, based on social justice, the reduction of inequalities, and the involvement of citizens in the strengthening of democracy and its institutions. LOCUS contributes to this work. In effect, by sending Social Work students (especially from the first courses) to observe, analyze, and contribute with knowledge to the neighborhoods in which it is developed, the program allows increasing awareness and interest in social problems and the importance of institutions for their resolution. We are referring to an increase in civic awareness and a strengthening of citizenship values. To a large extent, LOCUS can be seen as a civil engagement, in which students and academics themselves are incorporated in some sense into the citizenship of the neighborhood in which it is developed. A student working in a city or social organization is not only learning and helping out, but most likely also taking interest in the social structure and its improvement as a whole.

4.3 BENEFITS FOR ACADEMICS and SOCIAL WORKERS.

When presenting the benefits of LOCUS for professors and social workers, we will differentiate between those that are specific to each of these groups and those that are shared by both.

FOR ACADEMICS

Benefit 1. LOCUS enhances the overall teaching experience

LOCUS offers a high-quality experience in the field, within the neighborhood or community where it takes place. However, this experience also has an impact on daily teaching activity. In other words, the impact of LOCUS extends to "traditional" teaching, so that **the classroom interaction becomes significantly more intense and richer in content.**

This is largely because LOCUS generates an **increasing awareness of the realities and needs of the surrounding communities** due to the stronger and closer connection between both parties. Normally, daily academic activities hinder the possibility of taking a deeper look at the social problems happening in the real world and are neither included nor discussed in the common curricula. Therefore, direct interaction with communities and their main concerns provides firsthand problems that can be further discussed and analyzed in class.



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, lecturer at Tallinn University (Tallin, Estonia)

Benefit 2. LOCUS allows for updating the curriculum and course content

LOCUS provides a broader perspective of real needs in urban contexts. In this way, LOCUS gives academics the possibility to update and shape the curriculum content according not only to theory-based cases but **also to real worldwide challenges** reflected in the challenges of **community partners and the neighborhood**. As a result, practical and situated content will allow students to perform better during their future professional careers.

LOCUS also provides the possibility to develop skills for both lecturers and students. Lecturers, on their side, **broaden competencies in teaching in the classroom**, bringing two perspectives: from the university and from the real world. These competencies include the development of leadership and management skills in terms of coaching, supporting, and motivating students.

Furthermore, lecturers and students engaged in LOCUS often experience personal or self-development benefits, as they collaborate together with community partners to develop solutions to urban challenges that are socially relevant, in turn contributing to an educational experience that is more relevant and humanistic.



As a teacher, LOCUS strengthens my belief in the added value of 'sending students outside the classroom, on the streets, to talk to real people in the places they live.' This provides them with experiences that will make them reflect about their ability to connect with people, professional skills and the fun side of research. Thanks to my LOCUS experience I started to organize more fieldwork assignments in other courses as well, with success!

Pieter Cools, lecturer at AP Hogeschool (Antwerp, Belgium)

Benefit 3. LOCUS encourages the development of innovative pedagogical approaches.

LOCUS provides an **invaluable real-life experience for students**, including confrontations with language issues, discrimination, and having to find solutions. We can speak of a positive "shock" among students, in relation to what impresses them, what catches their attention, and leads them to develop competencies to manage that "shock." In this way, in terms of teaching activities, LOCUS may help to transcend the classic dichotomy between theoretical teaching/learning and practical teaching/learning. To a large extent, this change takes place because LOCUS modifies the traditional roles in the teacher-student relationship by introducing a new agent: the field partner.



It definitely has changed my view and perspectives on that particular neighborhood and urban life and development overall. It definitely changed my own bias I had about the neighborhood before, the outcomes of the project were so much more positive than I maybe expected.

The area has been known in the 90s and 00s as criminal, dirty and full of people struggling with their lives, but it has gone through a very drastic change and now it is so good to see how it has a completely different reputation. This shift in social narrative about this neighborhood is an important learning moment to understand how our understandings and beliefs have been influenced by history, social discourses, media and personal experiences.

Lisett Marmei, student at Tallinn University (Tallin, Estonia).



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 (Antwerp, Belgium)

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 I Corchado, lecturer at Universidad Complutense (Madrid, Spain)

FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Benefit 1. LOCUS allows for comparing ways of working in an international context.

LOCUS offers a space to **reflect on the positions as social workers** in a social, political, economic, and urban context. This includes updated knowledge about international efforts in social work, access to an international network of academic and professional partners in the field of social work, as well as insight and awareness regarding local approaches to social work across the international partner cities.



It has been a rich experience despite the initial difficulties in understanding the role of each actor. Once we had clarified the way we were going to work, it was a pleasure to see and hear the students' views on issues that perhaps we take for granted or no longer contemplate as intervention objectives. Their fresh look brings us back to intervention issues that we had already forgotten.

Carmen Acero, Municipality of Coslada (Madrid, Spain)

Benefit 2. LOCUS offers informational input capable of fostering reflection

Students can be considered an extension of social workers in the field, as their work primarily consists of collecting relevant information to understand the challenges, potential, and problems of the neighborhood where their observation work takes place. The information obtained by the students, guided by their teachers and social workers, can be of great value in several ways. Firstly, the work of the students involved in LOCUS can facilitate contact between social workers and stakeholders, other entities, residents, and the community processes in the neighborhood. Secondly, it can be a factor in challenging the view of social workers. Indeed, the latter guide the students' incorporation into the observation of the neighborhood, but the information collected by the students is generated from a different perspective than the information collected by social workers. Thirdly, one of the results of collecting information from the residents' point of view can be their empowerment, the recognition of their central role in the community intervention and support process.

FOR SOCIAL WORKERS AND ACADEMICS

Benefit 1. LOCUS allows for taking a leading role in the training of future social workers.

LOCUS provides spaces for mutual recognition between academia and the professional field, highlighting the importance of generating knowledge collaboratively. As mentioned earlier, social workers involved in LOCUS have their workload slightly increased.



However, this means that there is an active participation of field work partners in the training of future social workers, something that should undoubtedly be considered as an enrichment of the profession. Indeed, it is common for HEIs to try to incorporate social workers with experience and prestige in their field of intervention into the teaching work. Generally, this incorporation occurs in the classroom or in internships. LOCUS offers the possibility that the **participation of professionals in the training of future social workers** takes place in a situated and transversal way, which evidently **increases the scope of their participation**. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to point out that LOCUS contributes to improving the training of students (future social workers), systematically incorporating a role for social workers in the field.

The collaboration in LOCUS has been both stimulating and encouraging. Stimulating in the sense that social work theory, practices and student interaction are important ingredients in the project and have direct implications on the quality of social work services locally. Being able to discuss these topics create regular occurrences of new insight. Encouraging because being able to collaborate with such passionate and competent colleagues both energizes and inspires. Furthermore, the collaboration between the universities, students and field work partners strengthens both local collaboration, international collaboration and helps create the great social workers of tomorrow.



Brynjar Uddu, social worker, Oslo Kommune Bydel 15, Søndre Nordstrand (Oslo, Norway)



Benefit 2. LOCUS as a model of cooperation between HEIs and field work partners.

LOCUS offers the possibility of establishing an equal and mutually beneficial relationship between HEIs and field work partners. In general terms, LOCUS can contribute to building trust among community social workers, academics, and students. Indeed, LOCUS facilitates academics and social workers getting to know each other, providing time to develop a good quality relationship. This relationship is an opportunity to work on an equal footing (i.e., horizontally) between academics and social workers in the field. This is not very common, as there are often perceived differences in the positions from which knowledge creation is produced. For example, universities tend to be unresponsive to potential contributions from social entities, or academics feel that their position in knowledge production is higher than social organizations’.

Testimonial: 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, social worker, Stichting Eigenwijks, (Amsterdam, the Netherlands)



This type of cooperation can lead to community-engaged interdisciplinary research with novel insights into the urban problem(s) under study. Research-based teaching, at the intersection of community-engaged research and social work practice, is deeply enriched through faculty and students co-researching, and doing so in a co-creative manner with community partners.

The cooperation with social workers and other employers in the field was particularly important when it came to the introduction of the field and what the students should be aware of in the neighbourhoods. Apart from these aspects which was significant, the students' interaction with the local community and citizens in the neighbourhood were particularly useful in turning the focus from individual approaches to more collective methods. Overall, the cooperation with the field partner and associated partners was a decisive factor to the students' entrance to the neighbourhoods.



Dag Jenssen, lecturer at OSLOMET (Oslo, Norway)

On the other hand, LOCUS contributes to increasing and developing networks for both academics and social workers, through ongoing interaction that paves the way to develop further alliances with other partners and stakeholders. In this way, positive project results generate a snowball effect to reach out to new actors for the LOCUS model.



During their interactions with both citizens and community partners, faculty members often create engagement scenarios that can provide new opportunities for community-engaged research with community partners, as opposed to research about them or for them.

6. FINAL REMARKS

LOCUS is an innovative program that offers new things based on processes that are not so new. Not all innovation processes are based on digitalization, the use of social networks, the incorporation of artificial intelligence in the educational process, etc. In fact, LOCUS proposes a practice-based research model that links students with the direct observation of reality as it unfolds in urban environments. It is about facilitating a connection with the community inspired by the conviction in the existence of a shared and, therefore, community future. This model includes knowledge, trust, experiences (a common destiny) that goes in both directions: from the community to the students and from the students to the community. This principle is based on the idea that social workers are the first contact with the community, the "access door" that allows the involvement of students (and academia in general) with the neighborhood. In this way, LOCUS goes beyond teaching research methods based on practice. In fact, LOCUS helps connect students, social workers, academics, public administrations, and HEIs to solve social problems. And it does so both locally and in transnational cooperation, using a central mechanism in our societies: the production of knowledge shared by all the parties involved, placing residents and citizens at the center of the process.



