



EngageComp - A Competence Framework for Student Civic Engagement

Concise Version



September 2025

Authors

Jörn Allmang, Laura Eigbrecht, Monica Gago Garcia, Agurtzane Martinez Gorrochategui, Ane Urizar Zugazagoitia, Ana Duplava, Ulf-Daniel Ehlers

Contributors

Jeanne Cuny, Thomas Farnell, Heathcliff Schembri, Claire Sciberras, Christianne Gatt Fenech, Yasmine Goossens, Arno Schrooyen, Manushan Nesari, Nik Heerens, Lisa Schivalocchi

Layout

Nuša Karo

Copyright

(C) 2025, EngageAll

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International



EngageComp - A Competence Framework for Student Civic Engagement

This concise report introduces the EngageComp framework as a competence framework for student civic engagement, intended for higher education institutions, policymakers, civic education practitioners, volunteer organisations, and teachers. It outlines competences that emerge through student civic engagement and offers practical guidance in addressing these and has been developed within the EngageAll initiative. It is complemented by the full report version, outlining more thoroughly the theoretical framework, methodology and findings.

Context and purpose

Civic engagement is essential for strengthening democratic societies, fostering active citizenship, and promoting social cohesion. Higher education institutions have a pivotal role in supporting students to engage actively in civic and community activities, enhancing both their personal and professional competences. Student civic engagement activities strengthen students' ability to take socially responsible action, contribute to positive social change, and participate actively in democratic societies. Despite this potential, competence gained through student civic engagement remains underdeveloped, particularly in Professional Higher Education (PHE). The EngageAll Project addresses this gap by developing an inclusive competence-based approach that creates structured opportunities for participation across institutional initiatives, local community projects, and wider societal challenges, recognises PHE's diverse student body and the difficulty of balancing study with extracurricular engagement, and supports institutions to foster broader, more inclusive active citizenship. To achieve this, the project first develops a framework that outlines competences emerging through student civic engagement and offers practical guidance.

Research Question and Theoretical Background

This report asks how higher education institutions can conceptualize and foster *student civic engagement* as a distinct domain of competence development. The guiding question is how such engagement not only strengthens democratic societies through social cohesion and active citizenship but also builds social capital, and which civic action translates into measurable learning outcomes and community impact.

Pedagogically, civic engagement resonates with experiential (Kolb, 1984), transformative (Mezirow, 1991), and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These theories explain how active participation in real-world contexts deepens reflection, develops critical awareness, and embeds learning in authentic practices. From a sociological perspective, civic engagement creates and mobilises social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000), while Bourdieu's (1986) extended capital framework clarifies how engagement simultaneously generates social capital (networks and trust), cultural capital (civic literacies, public discourse competences, habitus), and symbolic capital (recognition and legitimacy). Structured opportunities for engagement thus yield not only skill development but also an accumulation of multiple capitals that strengthen both students and their institutions.

To capture these dynamics, competences are understood as *action competences*—self-organised dispositions that integrate knowledge, skills, and values into effective, responsible performance in unpredictable contexts (Weinert, 2001; Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel, 2003; European Commission, 2022). Future Skills provide an appropriate framework: they describe the ability to solve complex problems in emergent contexts in a self-directed way, grounded in values and social responsibility (Ehlers, 2020; Ehlers & Eigbrecht, 2024). Civic engagement exemplifies such contexts, as it addresses societal transformation, requires ethical reasoning, and builds collective agency.

In sum, civic engagement in higher education is both a domain of competence development and a generator of multiple forms of capital. By emphasizing civic engagement, institutions can strengthen students' capacities to contribute to democratic life, build resilient communities, and act as agents of change. The EngageComp framework outlines the competences that emerge through student civic engagement and offers practical guidance in addressing these.

Methodological Design

In order to create the framework, a comprehensive, mixed-methods approach was applied.

Methods summary

1. **Exploratory workshop & persona development.** One-day kickoff with faculty, students, and partner organisations. Pre-reads on definitions. Small-group tasks surfaced experiences and expectations. Output: six personas capturing motivations, barriers, and engagement patterns. Personas anchored initial competence identification.
2. **Systematic literature review.** PRISMA 2020 protocol. Scopus search: “civic participation” AND (university OR “higher education”). Inclusion: English/Spanish, 2000–2024, peer-reviewed studies and systematic reviews. Exclusion: non-peer-reviewed, grey literature, incomplete reports. 113 records screened; 67 excluded; 46 included plus one project-related article = 47 empirical studies for analysis.
3. **Identification of existing frameworks.** Partners applied a shared protocol across databases, policy repositories, search engines, and grey literature (2000–). Multilingual keywords covered engagement, volunteering, student roles, service-learning competences, and skills. Results catalogued in a common template. Output: 39 frameworks/reports from 6 countries and EU level; full table in Annex. Reflexive notes captured novel terms and documented methodological choices.
4. **Identification of relevant competences.** Open, bottom-up coding of frameworks by multiple researchers. Non-competence items (pure knowledge/attitudes) removed. Overlaps merged. Output: concise set of action-oriented competences; volunteering activities listed separately.
5. **Competence Clustering & Gap Analysis.** Competences mapped to the NextSkills structure (Ehlers, 2020) as an analytical grid to support comparability and integration. Mappings reviewed to detect under-represented NextSkills categories and competences that did not fit. Unplaced items flagged as potential new domains.

6. **Preliminary framework design.** Draft built on NextSkills plus emergent domains. Intercultural, Entrepreneurship, and central Citizenship competence highlighted. Consortium feedback gathered before and during an on-site meeting.
7. **Focus groups / expert interviews.** 17 Interviews conducted, 60–90-minute online or in-person sessions (1–8 participants in each interview). Audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymised, translated. Topics: definitions, preliminary framework, reflection needs, enabling conditions, future visions.
8. **Qualitative content analysis and validation.** Thematic-structuring content analysis (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020); iterative basic/fine coding and scheme adaptation. Findings integrated into the framework, circulated for feedback, discussed synchronously, and finalised after consensus validation.

For the detailed methodological design, see the full report.

The EngageComp Framework for Student Civic Engagement

The EngageComp-Framework describes the competences that students develop through activities such as volunteering, service-learning, and other forms of civic involvement. Such engagement fosters the enhancement of a broad spectrum of competences across individual, practice-oriented, and societal domains, equipping students to address emerging societal challenges and complex demands in both personal and professional contexts and take action towards desirable futures. Within this framework, **Civic and Democratic Competence** constitutes the central overarching competence, emerging from and reinforced by the competences described herein. However, civic competence cannot be conceptualized as a single competence; rather, it constitutes an overarching competence composed of multiple basic or cross-cutting competences into a cohesive whole, applicable capability to solve complex problems or act in real-world situations.

Civic and Democratic Competence is defined here as an action competence that enables democratic participation. It encompasses the ability and readiness to engage actively, responsibly, and ethically in democratic and civic life through engagement in societal, practice-based, and individual contexts. This includes valuing democracy, human rights, cultural diversity, and equality, and combining participation skills with the motivation to contribute to democratic processes and social transformation.

The EngageComp framework comprises three interconnected dimensions:

1. **Societal Context – Collaboration & Social Responsibility**
As a domain of the competence framework, this area emphasizes civic engagement as a means to foster responsibility, collective action, and contributions to democratic and social progress.
2. **Practice Context – Application & Problem-Solving**
Within the competence framework, this area highlights civic engagement as a means to translate ideas into practice, develop problem-solving capacities, and contribute to addressing societal challenges.

3. Individual Context – Personal Growth & Self-Development

In the competence framework, this area underscores civic engagement as a driver of self-reflection, adaptability, and the development of competences for sustainable personal and professional futures.

EngageComp: A Framework for Student Civic Engagement



In this framework, the 21 identified competences are presented as Competence Profiles. A Competence Profile is a coherent field that aggregates relevant competences. It functions as a structured unit for design, reflection, and assessment. Reference Competences are the skills and competences situated within each profile. They specify the profile through granular, observable elements that express how the broader competence is demonstrated in practice, akin to the use of competence descriptors that operationalize a construct into assessable behaviours.

List of Competences with Descriptions and Reference Competences

| Competence | Reference Competences | Description |
|--|---|---|
| Civic and Democratic Competence | - | Civic and Democratic Competence encompasses the ability and readiness to engage actively, responsibly, and ethically in democratic and civic life through engagement in societal, practice-based, and individual contexts. This includes valuing democracy, human rights, cultural diversity, and equality, and combining participation skills with the motivation to contribute to democratic processes and societal transformation. |
| Societal context: Collaboration & Social Responsibility | | |
| Cooperation competence | Teamworking ability, Negotiation, Conflict resolution, social intelligence, consulting expertise, Ensuring equal participation, collective responsibility, collective commitment | Cooperation competence relates to the ability and disposition to cooperate and collaborate in teams, both face-to-face and digitally across organisations, with the purpose of transforming difference into commonalities. It includes acting in accordance with human rights, social justice, and solidarity, and showing the willingness to invest time and effort to promote collective well-being to the common good. |
| Communication competence | Active listening, Verbal and non-verbal communication, Presentation skills, Persuasion, Negotiation, language proficiency, communication readiness, openness towards criticism, empathy, inclusive communication, public speaking | Communication competence entails not only language skills, but also empathic discourse, dialogue, and strategic communication aspects, which - taken together - serve the individual to communicate successfully and in accordance with the respective situation and context, in view and empathy of her/his own and others needs |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Diversity & Intercultural competence | Cultural awareness and openness, Diversity recognition, Empathy, inclusivity awareness, Bias recognition, perspective-taking | Diversity and intercultural competence refers to the ability and disposition to recognise, value, and engage constructively with human diversity across cultural, social, and linguistic contexts. It entails empathy, perspective-taking, awareness of cultural differences as well as the motivation to embrace intercultural experiences and to contribute to equitable and respectful relations in pluralistic professional and civic contexts. |
| Sensemaking | Self-awareness, meaning creation, value orientation | Sensemaking comprises the willingness and ability to construct meaning and understanding from the rapidly changing structures within engagement, learning, work and life contexts, to further develop existing structures of meaning or to promote the creation of new ones where they have been lost. |
| Leadership competence | Delegation, Conflict management, Team motivation, leader as a coach, Inclusive leadership, Crisis and stress management, Ethical leadership | Leadership competence refers to the ability and disposition to guide individuals and groups toward shared goals in organisational and civic settings. It includes directing, coaching, and leading others, often in teams, by taking responsibility, while acting in ways that motivate and inspire colleagues to follow by example. Leadership competence also entails ethical orientation, inclusivity, empathy, and building trust to foster psychological safety, along with organisational and planning capacities to coordinate collective action. Ultimately, it involves modelling responsibility and integrity supporting others in their success and contributing to transformative change. |

Practice context: Application & Problem-Solving

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Management competence | Delegation competence, Managing diverse perspectives, time management, project management, stakeholder communication, monitoring and evaluation, stress and | Management competence refers to the ability and disposition to structure and steer processes, people, and resources toward defined objectives in organisational and civic contexts. It entails clarity of goals and responsibilities, efficient time and self-management, and a structured, goal-oriented approach that aligns efforts across diverse actors. This competence also covers project and process management, logistics and resource allocation, documentation and reporting, and continuous |
|------------------------------|---|--|

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| | risk management, assertiveness | monitoring to ensure effective and inclusive execution across diverse perspectives. |
| Design- Thinking competence | Data evaluation, Problem analysis, Inclusive problem-solving, Analytical thinking, flexibility and openness, versatility, ability to shift perspectives | Design-Thinking competence comprises the ability to use concrete methods to carry out creative development processes open-endedly with regard to given problems and topics and to involve all stakeholders in a joint problem and solution design process. |
| Innovation competence | Creativity, Innovation, Problem-solving, willingness to experiment | Innovation competence includes the willingness to promote innovation - both technological and social - as an integral part of any organizational object, topic and process and the ability to contribute to the organization as an innovation ecosystem |
| Digital literacy | Media literacy, Responsible digital use, Digital self-reliance, Digital awareness, information literacy, AI Literacy, digital volunteering | Digital literacy is the ability and disposition to use digital media, to develop them in a productive and creative way, the capacity to critically reflect on its usage and the impact media have on society and work, both for private and professional contexts, as well as the understanding of the potentials and limits of digital media and their effects. |
| Future and Design competence | Future readiness, Foresight, Futures Literacy, willingness to change, ability to continuously improve, future mindset, readiness for development, Initiating change | Future and design competence is the ability to envision, negotiate and communicate alternative, open futures and take steps of action toward them. It entails to embrace current and future situations with openness for the new, willingness to change and forward-thinking. To develop situations into other, new and previously unknown visions of the future and to approach these creatively. |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Systems competence | Sustainable thinking, Systems thinking, Structural navigation, identifying levers for impact, analytical competence, synergy creation, application competence, problem-solving, adaptability | Systems competence is the ability to recognise and understand complex personal, psychological, social and technical systems and their interrelations, and to design or support coordinated planning and implementation processes for new initiatives in the system. It also includes critical awareness of political, legal, cultural, environmental, and economic systems and their global interdependencies, using this understanding to assess power structures, inequality, and sustainability, and to engage in informed societal change. |
| Individual context: Personal Growth & Self-Development | | |
| Learning competence | Willingness to learn, Self-reflection, self-directed learning, ability for life-long-learning, metacognitive skills | Learning competence is the ability and willingness to learn in a self-directed and self-initiated fashion. It entails metacognitive skills as well. |
| Self-Efficacy | Self-Confidence, Goal orientation, Professional conduct, Identifying personal contribution, Confidence in one's ability to make a difference, setting (personal) boundaries | Self-efficacy refers to the belief and one's self-confidence to plan, initiate, and complete civic tasks across contexts. It includes setting personal boundaries to sustain effort and well-being, and exhibiting professionalism. Self-efficacy encourages to take initiative and responsibility, much needed in student civic engagement, and can also be fostered through it by perceiving change and impact as a result of one's own engagement. |
| Self- competence | Self-regulation, Self-responsibility, Self-organisation competence, Self-management, Cognitive Load Management | Self-competence is the ability to develop one's own personal and professional capabilities largely independently of external influences. This includes other skills such as independent self-motivation and planning, but also the ability to set goals, time management, organization, learning aptitude and success control through feedback. In addition, cognitive load management and a high degree of personal responsibility. |
| Self-determination | Self-assertion, Perseverance, Endurance, autonomy | Self-determination describes an individual's ability to act productively within the field of tension between external structure and self -organisation, and to create room for self-development and |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | | autonomy, so that they can meet their own needs in freedom and self-organisation. |
| Reflection competence | Self-awareness, Openness to feedback, critical thinking, self-reflection | Reflection competence includes the willingness and ability to reflect, i.e. the ability to question oneself and others for the purpose of constructive further development, as well as to recognise underlying systems of behaviour, thought and values and to assess their consequences for actions and decisions holistically and critically |
| Responsible Decision competence | Decision-making, Problem-solving, Analytical thinking, Participatory skills, responsibility -taking | Responsible Decision competence is the ability to seize decisions and to evaluate different alternatives against each other, as well as making a final decision and taking over the responsibility for it. It includes recognising others' needs, emotions, and lived experiences as part of the decision-making process, ensuring that decisions contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities. |
| Initiative and performance competence | Taking Initiative, (intrinsic) motivation, self-motivation, Resilience, goal-orientation, engagement, persistence, willingness for participation | Initiative and performance competence refers to an individual's ability to motivate him-/herself as well as to his/her wish of contributing to achievement. Persistence and goal-orientation form the motivational basis for performance. A positive self-concept also plays an important role as it serves to attribute success and failure in such a way that the performance motivation does not decrease. |
| Ambiguity competence | Adaptability, Flexibility, Tolerance for uncertainty, Resilience, dealing with uncertainty, ability to act in different roles, dealing with heterogeneity | Ambiguity competence refers to an individual's ability to recognise, understand, and finally productively handle ambiguity, heterogeneity, and uncertainty, as well as to act in different roles |
| Ethical competence | Ethical practice, Sustainable thinking, tolerance | Ethical competence comprises the ability to perceive a situation or situation as ethically relevant. This includes: its conceptual, empirical and contextual consideration (perceive), the ability to formulate relevant prescriptive premises together with the evaluation of their relevance, their weight, their justification, their binding nature |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | | and their conditions of application (evaluate) and the ability to form judgements and check their logical consistency, their conditions of use and their alternatives (judge). |
|--|--|--|

Conclusion

The Competence Framework serves as a foundational component for subsequent project activities. It will underpin the development of practical toolkits, guidelines, and structured reflection materials designed to support students in recognizing, articulating, and enhancing their competences, developed through student civic engagement. Furthermore, the project will implement structured pilot interventions, including a student ambassador scheme and specialized courses, promoting inclusive and active student civic participation within partner institutions and beyond.

The framework may assist stakeholders in:

- designing reflection opportunities for competence development through student civic engagement
- designing training offers and adapting existing engagement programmes
- promoting student civic engagement

EngageComp provides a clear, actionable framework to recognise and develop competences gained through student civic engagement across societal, practice, and individual domains, with Civic and Democratic Competence at the core. Built on a mixed-methods design — literature review, analysis of 39 frameworks, expert interviews, focus groups, and consortium validation — it translates evidence into 21 competence profiles with reference competences for design, reflection, and assessment.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (S. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(Supplement), S95–S120.
- Ehlers, U.-D. (2020). *Future Skills: The future of learning and higher education*. Springer.
- Ehlers, U.-D., & Eigbrecht, L. (Eds.). (2024). *Creating the University of the Future: A Global View on Future Skills and Future Higher Education*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-42948-5>
- Erpenbeck, J., & von Rosenstiel, L. (2003). *Handbuch Kompetenzmessung: Erkennen, verstehen und bewerten von Kompetenzen in der betrieblichen, pädagogischen und psychologischen Praxis*. Schäffer-Poeschel.
- European Commission. (2022). *GreenComp: The European sustainability competence framework*. Publications Office of the European Union.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Weinert, F. E. (2001). *Concept of competence: A conceptual clarification*. In D. S. Rychen & L. H. Salganik (Eds.), *Defining and selecting key competencies* (pp. 45–65). Hogrefe & Huber.