

## Education, citizenship and community engagement.

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Traditionally, the image of higher level education could perhaps be defined as ‘removed’; with a campus at a physical distance from surrounding neighbourhoods and a teaching staff at a psychological distance from students and their communities. Increasingly however, higher level education (HE) has developed a strong emphasis on community and civic engagement (variously termed ‘service to the community’ and ‘public engagement’).

But why is community and civic engagement important? What added value does it provide in the higher education world; to learners; to teachers; to college managers; and to the communities in which colleges are situated? What (if any) is the relationship between HE and the creation of strong, dynamic communities with engaged, informed citizens? In other words, how can HE: ‘enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good’ (Carnegie Foundation, 2014)?

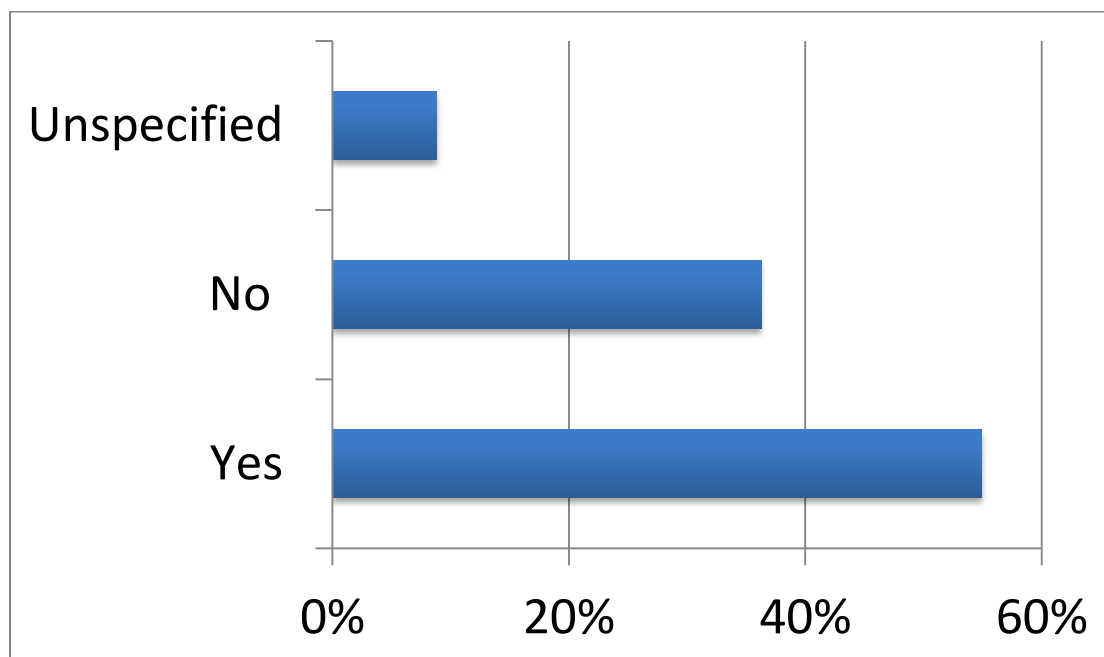
Recognition must go to the on-going work of *Campus Engage*, a National Network which has been set up to promote civic engagement as a core function of Higher Education in Ireland, so that HE institutes can engage with the needs of the communities they serve. In June, 2014, 22 Presidents of HE Institutions signed the 10 point *Campus Engage Charter on Civic and Community Engagement*. This CE Charter is a crucial step to improving this role.

It is also in keeping with the *National Strategy for Higher Education 2030* (also known as the Hunt Report) which stresses the renewal of the ‘civic mission’ of HE and stresses that: ‘higher education institutions need to become more firmly embedded in the social and economic contexts of the communities they live in and serve’ (National Strategy for Higher Education, 2011:77). It is clear, therefore, that HE recognises the value of a: ‘two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit’ (National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement -NCCPE- UK, 2014). But a crucial step in the engagement process is to find out the views of the key stakeholders in the process; that is, the learners and teachers? Is community engagement and citizenship, firstly, known, and secondly, valued? The results of a two-phase full-census survey in DkIT carried out from in 2014 and 2015 by DkIT researchers, Dr. Bernadette Brerton and Attracta Coleman, identified some interesting attitudes.

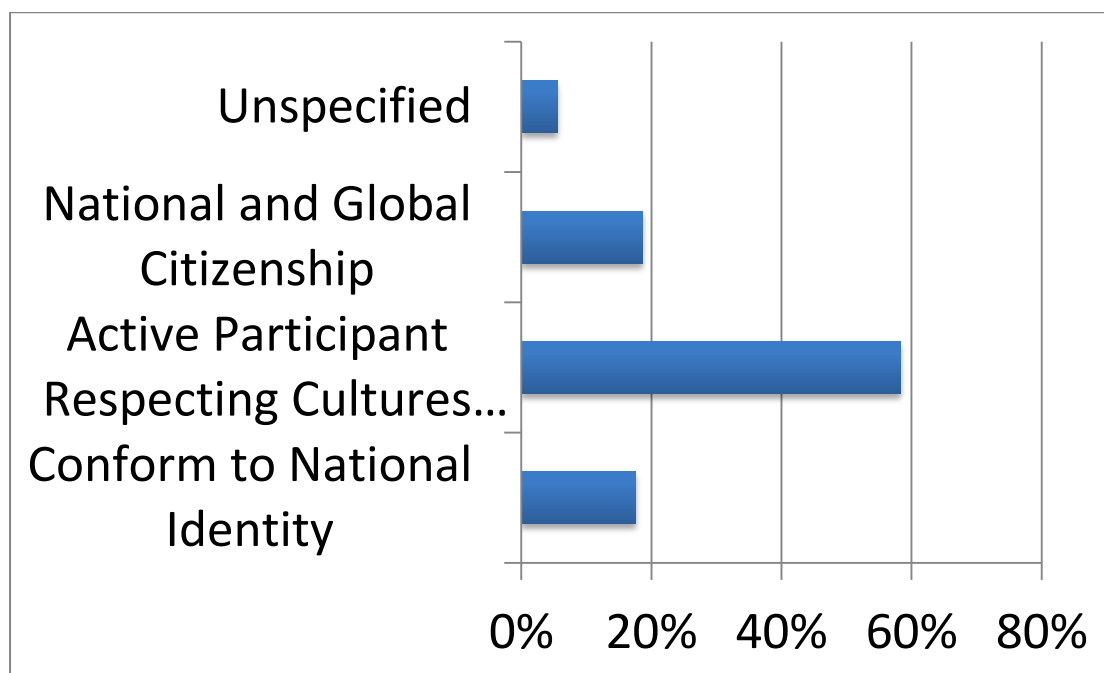
Phase 1 of the survey was predominantly composed of staff (88%) while Phase 2 of the survey had a much lower age profile – predominantly (77%) students with 57% comprised of First Year students. The marked increase in student interest in completing Phase 2 of the survey may have been linked to increased promotion and dissemination of the survey by the researchers. The majority in Phase 2 being students in the first year of their HE journeys may also point to high levels of engagement by newer students – a fact which may perhaps play a part in the future development of the role and promotion of citizenship within DkIT.

In answer to the open question: ‘What does democracy mean to you?’ respondents used words like ‘freedom’, ‘equality’ and ‘having a say’. In answer to the question: ‘What does citizenship mean to you?’ the key themes which emerged were ‘belonging’ and ‘community’ with some respondents defining citizenship as ‘a spirit of community and shared experience’; ‘belonging to a community and country’ while others focused on ‘rights – to vote, to live, to

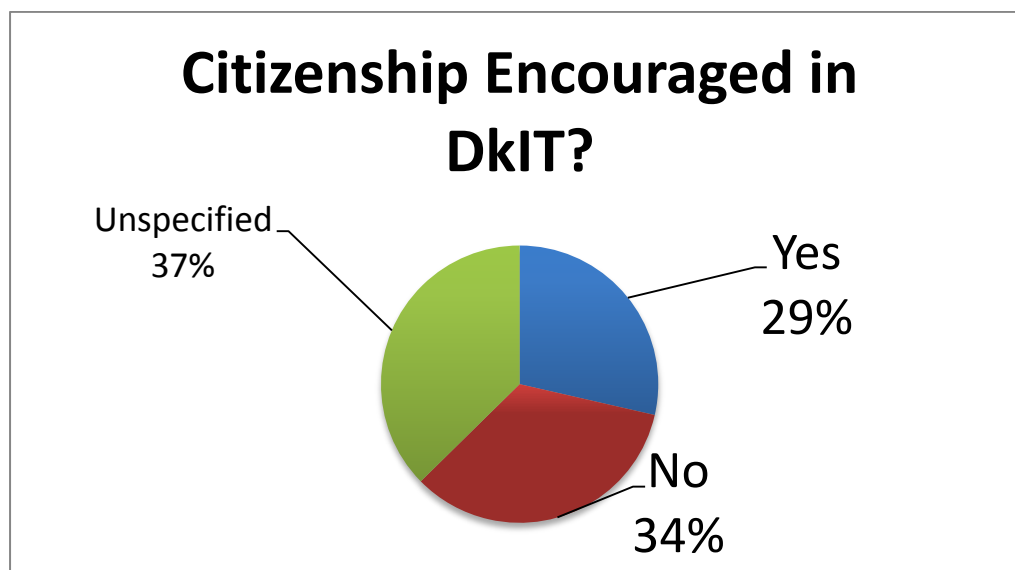
belong'. Regarding civic engagement, the majority of respondents stated that while they may be involved in community groups, they struggle to feel 'engaged'.



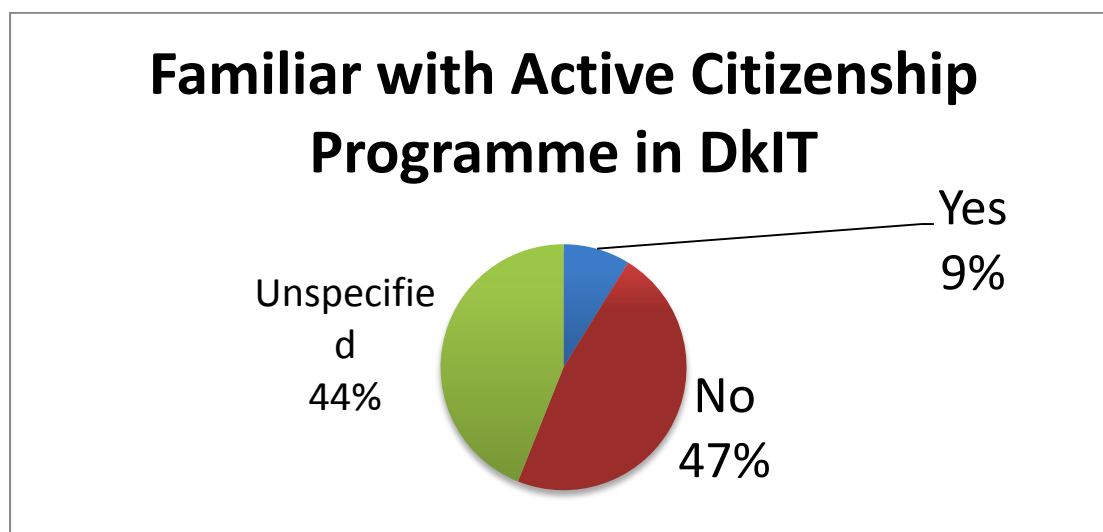
The varied ways in which respondents defined 'Citizenship Education' provide an interesting insight into attitudes in this area. The majority (58%) felt that a good citizenship education would promote 'active citizenship' while respecting different cultures. This openness to diversity is a positive aspect of community life within DkIT and should be harnessed in future citizenship education programmes.



When asked whether citizenship was encouraged, the majority (37%) were unable to be certain in this regard.



This negative result was also seen in response to the probe on respondents' familiarity with the 'Active Citizenship' Programme currently in place in DkIT, with only 9% of respondents stating that they were familiar with the programme.



One key difference from Phase 1 to Phase 2 of the survey was the respondents' description of 'ideal citizens' which saw a drop of 'responsible individuals' to second from first position with 'confident individuals' moving into first place in Phase 2. Again, understanding the implications of this result could be key in helping DkIT and other HE institutes to deliver the best standard of active citizenship education programmes.

Overall, the survey highlighted the key outcomes of a 'citizenship' approach to education as fostering successful learning, confident individuals, responsible individuals and active citizens. It was stated by respondents that these results could actively be achieved through the regular holding of campus promotional events and information sessions. Respondents also referred to the need to link citizenship education to the accrual of academic credits in HE. This is clearly a key finding. However, it is important to note that Phase 2 of the survey differed strongly from Phase 1 in a key regard: i.e. Phase 2 (mainly student respondents) included no mention of volunteering activities or multicultural and

diversity aspects of HE. A possible interpretation of this result could focus on the need to actively promote and highlight such activities throughout the student body as a whole. It will be essential to increase the profile of such activities within the community of DkIT if we are to see an increased and more successful engagement between DkIT and the community it serves.