Introduction to the Special Issue on International Community-Engaged Learning

Hana van Ooijen, Paul Schöpfer, and Melissa Pellis

Throughout the years, international community-engaged learning (ICEL) has established its presence in higher education worldwide (Hartman et al., 2023). ICEL has evolved from incidental initiatives aimed at delivering service to communities to experiential education that involves collaborative efforts among students, educators, and community partners to address global challenges. This development is timely, given the urgent call for educating people equipped to address today's complex problems (UNESCO, n.d.). ICEL goes hand in hand with community-engaged research (CER). That said, there is still very little academic research on ICEL—a point addressed in a contribution to this special issue, highlighting the absence of viewpoints from the Global South (Singh et al., 2025, p. 10).

This special issue responds to this gap. It results from the collaboration between the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* (*JHEOE*) and the ICEL team of Utrecht University's Centre for Global Challenges (UGlobe). This team promotes global engagement for societal issues, focusing on ICEL (https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/centre-for-global-challenges/education/meet-the-icel-team). It advances this cause by developing hands-on tools for ICEL and promoting ICEL among university teachers and students, nonuniversity students (including working students), and societal partners. The team also works on the development and coordination of ICEL courses, facilitating matchmaking between educators and societal partners or communities interested in participating in or joining an ICEL course. The focus of the ICEL group is also well-aligned with the mission of the JHEOE, which is dedicated to advancing theory and practice related to outreach and engagement between higher education institutions and communities on a global scale (JHEOE, n.d.).

In line with the team's focus and the journal's mission, this special issue seeks to gather insights on how ICEL can be shaped to benefit students, teachers, and communities across cultures equally and equitably. This aim presupposes that ICEL is an inherently valuable form of education. In pursuing this aim, the special issue has broken down this big, complex question into four subthemes (further described in the Appendix), which were central to the call:

i.   Conceptualizing ICEL;

ii. Navigating cross-cultural challenges;

iii. Promoting equality and reciprocity in transnational ICEL partnerships;

iv. Unveiling the benefits of ICEL.

In a way, these subthemes embody the task of creating a deeper understanding of the what (i), how (ii and iii), and why (iv) of ICEL. By addressing these topics, the special issue contributes to broadening the understanding and awareness of ICEL by examining its various definitions, practices, and purposes in different regional and societal contexts. The subthemes also serve to categorize the contributions substantively. As to form, the contributions are research articles, reflective essays, or projects with promise. Although most contributions touch on multiple subthemes, they have been categorized within the subtheme they discuss most prominently. In the next section, we highlight the main findings for each contribution, organized by subtheme.

Conceptualizing ICEL

Despite its increased recognition and implementation, a clear definition, description, and implementation guidelines for ICEL are lacking. Rather, ICEL can encompass a continuum of many shapes and forms. To begin with, the sheer duration of ICEL projects can range from a one-time 10-week tutorial

involving collaborative learning and a field trip to a course-based ICEL collaborative process between academia and four Indigenous communities that has evolved over more than 12 years. Furthermore, the size of an ICEL project can vary immensely. For instance, the number of students can vary from a small group of six to a cohort of up to 132 students. Finally, the interdisciplinary character of ICEL is equally diverse, with projects spanning fields as varied as artificial intelligence and planetary health education.

So, the various projects highlighted in this special issue alone show a remarkable diversity, but they also include common components that were part of the call for proposals' broad working definition of ICEL: (i) [a form of] experiential education, encompassing (ii) collaborative efforts among students, educators, and community partners, working with (iii) global challenges.

The first contribution presented in this special issue is a research article by Singh et al. (2025), which includes interesting results on the first two components. These results were obtained from a qualitative inquiry at eight Indian higher education institutions (HEIs), which involved interviews with 50 academics. These HEIs collaborate with broader communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources. One of the findings highlights that across different contexts, community-engaged learning (CEL) fosters (i) enhanced knowledge by combining theory and practice, alongside (ii) the development of social awareness and consciousness and (iii) the acquisition of critical 21st-century skills like reflection, communication, problem-solving, and interdisciplinary thinking. In their framework, the authors emphasize that CEL is tied to applying theoretical knowledge to address community needs, fostering deep engagement between learners and their learning. This approach differs from traditional scholarship in that it is participatory, reflexive, and socially accountable. Essentially, in this case, CEL is the educational outcome of intentionally incorporating community engagement (CE) into the core activities of higher education (Singh et al., 2025, p. 11).

Another dimension of CEL, as demonstrated in the article, is the potential for fruitful interaction between research and education. CE is embedded in diverse ways within the functions of the HEIs, transforming these functions into engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship can also result in various CEL opportunities, including introducing socially relevant courses, immersive pedagogies, the cocreation of new knowledge for community welfare, and social outreach interventions. In other words, in the context of the contribution, and based on Furco's (2010) description of an engaged campus, CEL emerges from embedding CE within the academic functions of teaching, research, and service.

Other contributions demonstrate how the global nature of the challenges can be shaped in different ways. As also mentioned in the call for proposals, it can be shaped by cross-border collaboration (e.g., De Santis et al., 2025) and the global nature of the challenges addressed (e.g., McGonigle Leyh & Christiaanse, 2025).

Navigating Cross-Cultural Challenges

Moving beyond the conceptualization of ICEL, the subsequent contributions delve into the practical realities of its implementation, highlighting the inherent cross-cultural challenges that demand careful consideration and innovative strategies. Two contributions have been positioned in this subtheme.

The reflective essay by Addison et al. (2025) directly addresses the challenges of implementing ICEL projects, particularly in the context of planetary health education. The authors detail their experiences in developing and delivering a course that integrated challenge-based learning, community-engaged learning, and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) between universities in the Netherlands and the Philippines. A central theme is the necessity of flexibility, adaptability, and open-mindedness from both educators and students in ICEL projects. The authors emphasize that effective stakeholder engagement and transdisciplinary collaboration require educators to equip students with essential competencies, including collaboration skills, problem-definition abilities, and research ethics. They note that navigating the inherent complexities of ICEL often involves flattening traditional classroom hierarchies in order to foster a continuous exchange of learning and expertise between students and educators (p. 40).

The article also identifies strategic, structural, and administrative challenges in

building cross-university collaborations. These challenges include aligning academic schedules, addressing curriculum variations, and the need for new mechanisms to financially support resource-intensive, interuniversity, interdisciplinary collaborations. The authors suggest that although there is general support for innovative courses and seed grants, sustainable financial models are crucial for these collaborations to thrive (p. 43).

Furthermore, the authors stress the importance of equitable partnerships in ethical COIL courses. They emphasize the importance of educators continually and critically reflecting on equity in course design and their collaborative work. The authors also note that the bidirectional exchange of knowledge and skills extends to the institutional level, where educators from diverse backgrounds collaborate and learn from one another (p. 37).

Another contribution to the subtheme on navigating cultural challenges is the ICEL project Making Bonairean Heritage Together by Smit and Plets (2025). This contribution illustrates the benefits of ICEL that emerge from navigating cross-cultural challenges. Their project with promise, "Teaching Decolonial Heritage in Bonaire: Cultural Reflexive Learning in Practice," describes how students, faculty, museum staff, and local community members engaged in a collaborative effort to develop intercultural competencies and promote an inclusive approach to heritage preservation. In the project, students experienced their positionality and, for instance, encountered confusion due to differences in local working cultures. Throughout the project, the students kept logs, which enhanced their reflexive learning. Smit and Plets (2025) describe the students' development as follows:

> Our exploration of student engagement revealed professional and personal transformations across four areas: learning through misunderstandings and confusion, acquiring intercultural competencies, personal and social development through reflexivity on interculturality, and awareness of professional growth as intercultural heritage practitioners. On all four fronts, students experienced both professional and personal transformations. Across these modes of learning, two overall skills were acquired. First, through hands-on work, students became aware of the positionality of their profession and the inescapable Eurocentrism in many elements of existing heritage practices. Second, through active engagement and conversation, they learned to understand the context of the client better and gained insights into ongoing colonialism in the Netherlands. (p. 62)

Promoting Equality and Reciprocity in Transnational ICEL Partnerships

A critical dimension of effective ICEL lies in fostering genuine equality and reciprocity among all partners involved. This section examines various strategies and approaches used to foster balanced and mutually beneficial transnational collaborations. This subtheme includes three contributions. In the reflective essay "*Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji*: 'United We are Stronger': Reflections on a Decade of Transformative Community-Engaged Learning and Research With Indigenous Shuar Communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon," Brenton et al. (2025) recount a decade-long partnership between U.S.-based Saint John's University and four Shuar Indigenous communities. As part of the 4-year Ozanam Scholars program, students can participate in an ICEL project that includes a 2-week trip to an Indigenous community in Ecuador.

This project aims to create a more inclusive and equitable narrative of ICEL, one that resonates with the core values of the communities. Through years of experience, the authors have observed that the key to such a narrative lies in understanding that the relationship between community members and students is about mutual benefits and building collaborations rather than focusing on labor and resources. Moreover, the authors describe how integrating Indigenous epistemologies and participatory action research contributes to fostering trust, accountability, and shared responsibility in ICEL partnerships. In this way, the different partners involved in the ICEL partnership can navigate the complexities of maintaining equitable and mutually beneficial relationships. The necessity to promote equality and reciprocity in their partnership became all the more pressing during the COVID pandemic. At the same time, because the existing bonds were already so solid, the partners managed to maintain their collaboration during

the pandemic through virtual engagement. Moreover, when the project resumed in-person engagement, the partners decided to integrate the digital tools and platforms into the project as a whole. As a result of the combination of in-person and virtual engagement, the partnership has become even more resilient and dynamic. Accordingly, the authors would recommend such a blended approach. For this particular project, the Indigenous principles of "strength in unity" and "solidarity" reinforced the positive impact of combining virtual and in-person engagement.

In the second contribution to the theme, "Community-Engaged Learning in a European University Alliance: Reflections on Equality and Reciprocity Across Europe and Africa," Vijge et al. (2025) examine the complexities of balancing power dynamics in community-engaged learning (CEL) projects involving partners from Europe and the Global South. Their reflective essay describes the transdisciplinary Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability program, a joint endeavor of nine European universities. They offer their students a capstone project for which students work on a challenge submitted by diverse stakeholders from Europe and beyond. The article builds on the autoethnographic logs of the authors, who have all been involved in the capstone project. By using Gibbs's reflective cycle, the reflections highlight the need for gradual institutional change to achieve true reciprocity and equality in these collaborations. One of the key findings is that although achieving full equality in ICEL across the Global North and Global South may be highly challenging, if not impossible, generativity (or reciprocal institutional and collaborative transformations) is crucial in fostering equality and reciprocity in ICEL. Moreover, adding reflective activities to ICEL exercises holds promise as an avenue toward such transformation.

The third contribution, "Building Bridges Through International Community-Engaged Learning: Intersections of Education, Collaboration, and Social Change," by De Santis et al. (2025), presents a project with promise. It explores the characteristics of the authors' BEA Project, an initiative promoting interaction and exchange between Italy and Brazil. The project with promise explores best practices for promoting equality and reciprocity in the international exchange between these nations. The stark intercultural differences between the regions, fur-

ther influenced by factors such as economic inequality, racial tensions, and the complexities of engaging with diverse cultural norms, make the BEA Project an interesting case study for exploring building and ensuring reciprocity (p. 66). These characteristics highlight the importance of developing intercultural skills when interacting with local communities, particularly in cross-cultural international collaborations.

The BEA Project has achieved its goals by, inter alia, establishing partnerships with local actors through a "glocal" perspective (p. 66) and following a bottom-up approach (p. 72). Further best practices for sustainable international collaborations, with notable takeaways for ensuring reciprocal exchanges between participants, are also presented. The examples of best practices also highlight the importance of reflective practices in fostering cultural competencies.

Unveiling the Benefits of ICEL

Ultimately, the value of ICEL is evidenced by its multifaceted benefits for all stakeholders. The contributions in this final thematic section illuminate the diverse impacts of ICEL experiences on students, educators, and the communities they engage with across different international landscapes.

To begin with, in the qualitative study "The Impact of International Service-Learning on Students' Development in Intercultural Sensitivity," Lee et al. (2025) have thoroughly examined the intercultural sensitivity of Hong Kong undergraduate students participating in service projects for an international service-learning (ISL) course in five locations: two in Africa (South Africa and Tanzania), two in Southeast Asia (the Philippines and Vietnam), and in Mainland China. It is worth noting that the authors consider service-learning closely related to community-engaged learning and define it as an experiential pedagogy widely adopted in higher education for its potential to nurture civic responsibility as well as academic, personal, and social outcomes. The partners were NGOs, universities, and primary or secondary schools in the host countries. The ICEL project included several components, including a 10-day trip. Before and after this trip, students executed an open-ended writing task in which they described their view of the people and country in their ISL project.

The research article reveals significant postexperience improvements in students'

intercultural sensitivity, particularly among those who engaged with Africa and Southeast Asia, highlighting the role of ISL in cultivating global competencies and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. Accordingly, the authors point out that location is a critical factor for reaping the benefits of this improvement; furthermore, the number and quality of interactions in the host communities also significantly affect improvements in intercultural sensitivity.

In another project with promise, "New Forms of ICEL: Unveiling the Benefits and Limitations of a Digital Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab," McGonigle Leyh and Christiaanse (2025) explore and reflect on the experiences and reflections of students and societal partners that took place in the first iteration of their Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab. As McGonigle Leyh and Christiaanse (2025) highlight, CEL is a special form of education that requires "special attention to learning objectives, activities, assessments, and outcomes, with an emphasis on learning through experience" (p. 112). The contribution offers a qualitative analysis of existing scholarship and empirical data collected throughout the course in the form of student surveys and reflections. McGonigle Leyh and Christiaanse (2025) demonstrate the added value of student reflections, not only in student learning development, but also for the analysis of educational impact and the greater development of (I)CEL education at large. Among the conclusions drawn from the collected data, the authors note that students experience a greater awareness of their positionality within complex environments through reflection and that reflection moderately deepens their understanding and interest in the topic of global justice (p. 112).

Overall, the contribution concludes that the Global Justice Investigations Lab demonstrated significant learning outcomes through the structural and curricular integration of reflexivity, positionality, and reciprocity. These benefits are, however, limited by the perceived need for mutual communication and coordination in fostering reciprocal relationships between students and partners, highlighting yet again the value of reciprocity in (I)CEL (pp. 121–122). McGonigle Leyh and Christiaanse's (2025) analysis of the benefits and limitations of (I)CEL, through the case study of the innovative Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab, offers plenty of food for thought on best practices, the implementation of frequent reflections, possibilities for course impact analyses, and future lines of research.

Another initiative focusing on reciprocity, diversity, and social justice is the FLY program, analyzed for its benefits and limitations by Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2025) in their contribution "Unlocking Global Perspectives: International Service-Learning, Volunteering Networks, and Social Justice Through the European Interuniversity FLY Program." This project with promise analyzes evaluation and reflection results collected over three iterations of the project between 2021 and 2023. As in the Open-Source Global Justice Investigations Lab, student reflections were conducted at various stages throughout the project, encouraging self-reflection and reflection on the program itself. The preexperience reflection and reflections during the program were mostly group-based, whereas the joint final evaluation required a structured self-reflection. Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2025) also analyzed the community partners' evaluation of the program. From the data, it is concluded that students revealed broadened perspectives, increased cultural intelligence, and a heightened sense of empathy and social responsibility (p. 142).

Reflections also provided insights into the limitations of and possible future improvements to the program, for instance, the strong desire on the part of students for increased preexperience orientation and training in the form of detailed information, logistical support, and language preparation (p. 142). Additionally, a clear desire for improved monitoring and support throughout the program was documented, with students also expressing the desire for posttravel reflection and continued engagement with the local community.

Beyond the research carried out thus far, future lines of research for the FLY program are also identified throughout the contribution. Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2025) conclude by emphasizing the strong value of impact assessment, not only for the development of the FLY program itself, but also for the development of further initiatives like FLY across universities, highlighting, yet again, the importance of reflecting in and on (international) community-engaged learning.

Conclusion

As is the case for many research areas, a majority of the existing contributions to the ICEL literature are shaped by perspectives from the Global North (Habashy et al., 2024). This special issue seeks to promote the development of ICEL into a more inclusive and globally relevant practice by including contributions from diverse global perspectives.

Across the different contributions, several recurring themes emerge: the centrality of reflexivity and reciprocity, the ongoing negotiation of cross-cultural challenges, and the need to foster equitable collaborations that move beyond extractive or one-directional models of engagement. Together, the articles highlight how ICEL, in its many forms, can support students in developing intercultural competencies, positional awareness, and a deeper understanding of global justice. They also demonstrate that embedding community engagement meaningfully within the structures of higher education requires institutional adaptability and commitment at both the curricular and administrative levels. Additionally, reflection as a (pedagogical) tool and a means of evaluating impact emerges as a critical practice throughout these initiatives.

In a world increasingly shaped by transnational crises and cultural interdependence, ICEL stands as a vital educational frontier, capable of reimagining global learning as inclusive, transformative, and justice-driven. The insights in this issue are not only contributions to academia but also invitations for sustained, reciprocal engagement across borders.

Despite this promising trajectory, the issue also reveals areas that demand further scholarly attention. The need remains for more rigorous impact assessments, strategies to better support long-term partnerships, and further conceptual clarity around the diverse practices encompassed by ICEL. More contributions from underrepresented contexts, especially from the Global South, remain crucial to deepening the field's understanding of what equitable international community engagement can and should entail.

We are grateful to the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* for the opportunity to curate this special issue and for providing a platform to share these important perspectives.

About the Guest Editors

Hana van Ooijen is an assistant professor (education) at the International and European Law Department of the Law School, Utrecht University. She is experienced in educational innovation and legal skills. Her research interests focus on human rights in international, European, and Dutch law. She received her PhD in law from Utrecht University.

Paul Schöpfer is a junior researcher at the Utrecht School of Economics and the Utrecht Centre for Global Challenges (UGlobe). His research focuses on evaluating programs that aim to enhance child well-being and educational outcomes, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. He is also passionate about incorporating community-engaged learning into his teaching. Paul is currently pursuing a PhD at Wageningen University & Research.

Melissa Pellis is a master's student in legal research at Utrecht University with a background in global law and political philosophy. With an eye on interdisciplinarity and open-source research, her research interests gravitate toward the intersection of ethics, politics, and law.

References

Addison, J., Mangnus, E., Cunanan, D. J., Downward, G. S., de Jong, L., van de Kamp, J., Llamas, C. A., Guinto, R. R., & Browne, J. L. (2025). Advancing societally engaged and international planetary health education: Innovations, lessons, and recommendations for educators. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29*(2), 35–50.

Brenton, B. P., Sanchez, P., Antunish, F., & Vega, R. (2025). *Iruntrarik Kakarmaitji*: "United we are stronger": Reflections on over a decade of transformative community-engaged learning and research with Indigenous Shuar communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29*(2), 97–110.

Brozmanová Gregorová, A., Culcasi, I., Olías, M. A., & Valero, A. A. (2025). International service-learning, volunteering networks, and social justice through the European Interuniversity FLY program. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29*(2), 127–146.

De Santis, C., Zucchini, F., & Andrian, N. (2025). The key is in the other: Analyzing global interconnection in a service-learning project. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29*(2), 65–80.

Furco, A. (2010). The engaged campus: Toward a comprehensive approach to public engagement. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 58*(4), 375–390. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2010.527656

Habashy, N., Webster, N., & Hunt, C. A. (2024). Decolonizing or Re-colonizing? Community members' perspectives of global service learning programs. *World Development Sustainability, 5*, Article 100190. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wds.2024.100190

Hartman, E., Kiely, R. C., Friedrichs, J., & Boettcher, C. (2023). *Community-based global learning: The theory and practice of ethical engagement at home and abroad.* Taylor & Francis.

Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement. (n.d.). About the Journal. Retrieved May 16, 2025, from https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/about

Lee, P. B. Y., Luo, Z., Camus, R. M., Ngai, G., & Chan, S. (2025). The impact of international service-learning on students' development in intercultural sensitivity. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29*(2), 147–167.

McGonigle Leyh, B., & Christiaanse, K. (2025). New forms of international community-engaged learning: Unveiling the benefits and limitations of a digital open-source global justice investigations lab. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29*(2), 111–126.

Singh, W., Bhagwan, R., & Singh, M. (2025). Embedding community engagement within Indian higher education institutions' functions: Insights on community-engaged learning. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29*(2), 9–34.

Smit, C., & Plets, G. (2025). Heritage in practice: Cultivating critical reflection and intercultural communication in Bonaire. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29*(2), 51–64.

UNESCO. (n.d.). *What you need to know about global citizenship education.* Retrieved May 16, 2025, from https://www.unesco.org/en/global-citizenship-peace-education/need-know

Vijge, M. J., Gallagher, S. E., Byrne, J. R., Tschersich, J., Tager, J., Brijitha Madhavan, U., Boshoff, H., & Triyanti, A. (2025). Community-engaged learning in a European Universities alliance: Reflections on equality and reciprocity across Europe and Africa. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 29*(2), 81–96.

Appendix

Subthemes Addressing International Community-Engaged Learning:

I. **Conceptualizing ICEL:** How is ICEL defined, and what motivates its existence across different countries and contexts? Definitions of ICEL are welcomed as they are sparse in academic literature. Focus on the "international" element of ICEL is particularly lacking. Contributions may encompass both case studies and regional/national perspectives.

II. **Navigating Cross-Cultural Challenges:** What are the practical challenges when implementing ICEL projects, and how do these depend on the specific context? Contributions should emphasize the dynamics of cross-cultural interactions and their impact on project success and may include suggestions for possible solutions to ongoing challenges.

III. **Promoting Equality and Reciprocity in Transnational ICEL Partnerships:** What are strategies and approaches employed to foster equality and reciprocity within (global) ICEL partnerships (e.g., capacity building, resource sharing, joint decision-making, etc.)?

IV. **Unveiling the Benefits of ICEL:** What are the benefits of participating in ICEL, and how do they impact communities, teachers, and students differently across countries and contexts? We welcome contributions exploring the broader impact, also on a meta-level, for example, by focusing on institutional or environmental impacts.