

Research on the GOOD LIFE. Citizens ask questions, collect needs, outline solutions

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Research at universities of applied sciences is characterized by its application orientation and increasing participation of stakeholders. With the mandate to anchor Citizen Science more strongly at Carinthia University of Applied Sciences (CUAS), the idea for the project “Citizens4Science – Living Well in Carinthia” was born. The goal is to investigate the socially relevant question of what constitutes a good life in Carinthia. The participation of citizens in research, especially of vulnerable target groups such as older adults or migrants, started in the project with the elaboration of relevant topics for researching the good life and continued with citizen-led open space and workshop formats for the exploration of needs and recommendations for action. In this paper, on the basis of results collected together with citizen scientists, the questions will be discussed how vulnerable groups can be reached and involved in research processes and what added value is revealed, for the citizen scientists but also for decision makers.

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1. Introduction

Research at universities of applied sciences is characterized by its application orientation and participation of stakeholders. In 2019, the Carinthia University of Applied Sciences (CUAS) set itself the goal of anchoring Citizen Science more firmly in its research orientation. This decision was followed by a scientific conference organized by the Institute for Applied Research on Ageing at CUAS, which focused on the contribution of Citizen Science to enhancing the quality of life of older adults and the establishment of the Citizen Science project “Citizens4Science – Living Well in Carinthia” (C4S) at CUAS.

The motto of the Austrian Citizen Science Conference 2022 was “Citizen Science – Why (actually) not?”. With this in mind, we are going to discuss the role of Citizen Science in applied research and why participation in Citizen Science is also beneficial for vulnerable target groups. However, access to these target groups is not easy to achieve and so we will also reflect on proven participatory methods and their suitability to involve hard-to-reach groups.

2. The Role of Citizen Participation in Applied Research

The University of Applied Sciences Act (Fachhochschulgesetz, FHG) defines in § 10 para. 7 that the maintainer of the respective university of applied science has to ensure “that the teaching and research staff participate in applied research and development work. This can be done at their own institution or through cooperation with other research and development institutions.” (own translation) This results in a mandate and obligation for teaching and research staff to conduct applied research. But what is meant by “applied research” and how does it differ from basic research? OECD (2002) defines as applied research an “...original investigation undertaken in order to acquire new knowledge. It is, however, directed primarily towards a specific practical aim or objective” [1], while basic research is defined as “...experimental or theoretical work undertaken primarily to acquire new knowledge of the underlying foundation of phenomena and observable facts, without any particular application or use in view.” [1] Although the dividing line between basic research and applied research is becoming increasingly blurred [2; 3], it can be said in principle that the focus of applied research is on the practical goal or practical benefit. The aim of the C4S project at CUAS was to investigate the socially relevant question of what constitutes a “good life” in the Austrian province of Carinthia. Therefore, it was central to involve as many different (social) groups of people living in Carinthia as possible in the project. This also meant involving vulnerable target groups, such as older adults or migrants, in the elaboration of relevant issues that can make up a good living. Following that it was not only a matter of asking various population groups what is important to them in terms of a “good life” in Carinthia. In addition it was sounded out together with various social groups, in accordance with the understanding of transdisciplinary and participatory research, which concrete topics they are interested in. This form of participation by those “affected” is an example of how applied research is understood at CUAS. As this example illustrates, applied research at CUAS is about the active participation of stakeholders, who ideally become research partners or co-researchers.

The approach of actively involving stakeholders in research has clear advantages, e.g.:

- Research is done on topics that are interesting to and relevant for the target groups.
- Research is oriented towards the lived experiences, possibilities and limitations of the target groups.

- The active participation of target groups, especially vulnerable target groups, gives people a chance to articulate their own interests [4] and thus strengthens their self-esteem, as espoused by Kurt Lewin [5]. In this respect, participatory research and citizen science promote people's empowerment [4].
- People's acceptance of results as well as the will to initiate further processes of change based on these results and to participate in these change processes increases.

3. Reaching the hard-to-reach

In many cases, applied research at CUAS follows a participatory research style. Participatory research is characterized by the co-creation of the research design, together with those who are affected by the problems being researched [6]. In a variety of research projects, such as in C4S, it is crucial to involve a diverse group of stakeholders, actively targeting older adults, people with physical or mental disabilities, socially disadvantaged groups or migrants. It is well known from various volunteer surveys that a lack of participatory justice can be assumed with regard to these groups. People who are affected by social problems, who are disadvantaged in terms of income and/or education, participate to a lesser extent [7]. The systematic inclusion of hard-to-reach groups as co-researchers in participatory research requires favorable framework conditions, but also accessible meeting spaces, inclusive communication processes and specific support [8]. In the context of participatory research in gerontology, a specific set of criteria to reflect and evaluate the participation of older people in research and practice has been developed [9], and is readily transferable to other vulnerable groups. Amongst others, the criteria catalog includes the following aspects:

- Decision makers give power to participants in order to enable "real" participation.
- The systematic inclusion of multipliers and those directly affected is promoted by using appropriate means of addressing and involving diverse stakeholders.
- The actors work together in the sense of jointly developing, implementing and reflecting on participatory processes.

On the basis of these criteria, experiences from C4S regarding participatory methods are presented and discussed below.

4. Participatory methods in Citizens4Science

In C4S, a wide variety of participation methods was applied: workshops and open space events, methods such as world café, mind mapping, brainwriting per hand or on virtual MURAL boards, clustering as well as tools for priority setting and joint decision making, which were conducted on-site and virtual. Multipliers, working with hard-to-reach target groups, were involved in the co-design of the project and in the entire research process. They were involved in the development of a questionnaire and the distribution of the survey within their target groups. Afterwards, the survey results were jointly discussed and clustered, in preparation of a citizen-led open space event to identify concrete needs and outline options for action. A focus group with multipliers, dealing with the challenges and success factors of participation processes, showed that participatory processes without an action level are largely rejected. People want to be involved, not only in survey processes but also in decision making processes. This important note on avoiding sham participation has been and will continue to be addressed in the project by inviting decision makers to participatory events and to disseminate the project results to the public

and policy makers. In addition to that, the open space event led to the formation of four implementation groups. Based on the networking activities, further projects emerged, such as the participatory development of a Strategy Paper 65+ in Carinthia or the Network for Participatory Research at/with Universities of Applied Sciences, anchored at CUAS. Multipliers also emphasized the importance of reflection loops to see what is actually happening, not only in terms of content but also emotionally.

Promising steps have been taken to foster systematic inclusion, such as a stakeholder analysis, the personal invitation of multipliers to participate and inform their target groups, visits of contact points like dementia or repair cafés. Nevertheless, the participation of members of certain vulnerable groups (older adults, people with disabilities, migrants) was difficult to achieve, not least due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Methods planned on-site and with inclusive meeting spaces had to be relocated to the virtual space, which decreased the accessibility for and engagement of vulnerable target groups. With appropriate resources for training and assistance, a more equitable access for all would be achieved.

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