



UNIVERSITÀ
DI SIENA
1240



OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES FOR CONSORTIUM PARTNERS:

Guidelines for the Administration of the Survey on Epistemic Resilience to Misinformation and the Implementation of Focus Groups on Civic (Dis)Engagement

- **Lead Institution:** University of Siena (UNISI) — Prof. Alessandra Viviani & Prof. Alessandra Romano
- **Co-Developing Institutions:** University of Cambridge (CRASSH) — Dr. Steven Watson; University of Galway — Prof. Michal Molcho; Maynooth University — Prof. Ted Fleming.
- **Document Classification:** Operational Task Guidelines
- **Target Audience:** All I-CIVIC Consortium Project Partners and Institutional Researchers. Please, note that all the academic partners (UPV, UNISI, UoC, UoG, JYU, TU) are invited to conduct at least one focus group with university students, and distribute the survey and collect at least 100 respondents per country; the non-academic partners (ALDA, VABAMU, EUDEC, Government of the Basque Country) can conduct at least one focus group with young persons or educators/social workers/stakeholder, and, if possible, can circulate the survey with their contacts.



Introduction

As part of Work Package 1 (WP1), Task 1.3 of the I-CIVIC project, partner institutions are invited to contribute to a coordinated data collection process aimed at investigating two closely interconnected dimensions of contemporary democratic participation: civic engagement and resilience to misinformation:

T.1.3: Design and Administer Surveys and Focus Groups to Gather Data on Misinformation Resilience and Civic Engagement (UoC, UNISI). UoC and UNISI will collaboratively design and implement surveys and focus groups targeting educators, students, and community stakeholders. These data collection tools will assess levels of misinformation resilience, civic engagement, and inclusivity within educational settings. UoC will focus on the methodological design, while UNISI will oversee the implementation in diverse cultural contexts to ensure representativeness and inclusivity (I-CIVIC Proposal, p. 113).

The activities described in this document have been designed to generate both quantitative and qualitative evidence regarding how university students experience, interpret and navigate complex social and informational environments. Particular attention is devoted to understanding the conditions that foster or hinder civic participation, students' perceptions of agency and recognition within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and the ways in which individuals interact with information, uncertainty and digital media in their everyday lives.

1. Research Design and Data Collection Strategy

The present document provides partner institutions with the conceptual framework, methodological guidelines and operational instructions necessary for the implementation of both activities. Partners are encouraged to follow the procedures outlined below in order to ensure consistency across participating institutions while remaining attentive to local linguistic, cultural and institutional contexts.

WP1/T1.3 adopts a mixed-methods approach combining a questionnaire on epistemic resilience to misinformation and focus groups on civic (dis)engagement. The two instruments are designed to provide complementary evidence on how young persons navigate contemporary information environments and experience civic participation within higher education settings.

- **The questionnaire** examines epistemic resilience from a non-deficit and ecological perspective, focusing on the capabilities, practices and contextual conditions that support responsible information navigation. Rather than framing resilience as an individual trait, the instrument considers how information practices are shaped by interactions between personal judgement, social support, institutional resources and digital environments.
- **The focus groups** complement the survey findings by exploring students' experiences of engagement, recognition, agency and participation through narrative and transformative dialogue. Among academic partners of the project, special attention is placed on understanding how university students interpret their role within HEIs, how they navigate institutional expectations and how they experience inclusion, exclusion and participation in university life.



Together, the two activities contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between information practices, democratic participation and education, while also supporting the refinement and contextualisation of the research instruments across participating institutions.

2. Consortium Timeline, Data Governance, and Feedback Reporting

2.1 Chronoprogramma / Activity Schedule

To secure cross-site data harmony and facilitate seamless data aggregation across all participating institutions within the I-CIVIC consortium, the Task T1.3 workflow is scheduled as follows:

By July 30, 2026 - Consensus Stage	Each partner will review the survey and the focus group protocol and will provide feedback/comments to icivic@unisi.it Each partner should also indicate how many respondents it will be able to collect per country and by when it will be able to carry out the administration of the survey and the conduction of the focus group.
By 30 August 2026 - Translation Phase	Translate tools in your own country language.
By 15 September, 2026 - Pilot Deployment Phase	Start of the questionnaire distribution
By October 15, 2026 - Pilot Deployment Phase	Simultaneous cross-country deployment of the fixed 14-item Pilot v1 survey paired with localized qualitative focus groups for consensus checking across all partner sites. ○ Each partner is expected to collect at least 100 questionnaires among university students in the age of 18 - 35 years per country by October 15, 2026. ○ Each academic partner is expected to conduct at least one focus group with 5-7 university students per each country. The transcription of the focus group plus additional observational notes should be uploaded in the appropriate google folder by October 15, 2026. The thematic analysis will be conducted by the Unisi Team.
Pilot and Fine Tuning Window	Assessment of site-specific implementation indicators, including completion times, drop-off rates, cross-language clarity checks, and internal reliability data required for the consensus check will be shared among partners in dedicated online meetings of 1-hour.

Please pay careful attention to the data collection timeline. If you need to apply for ethical approval from your institution for this research activity, please ensure that you prepare the relevant documentation in advance to ensure that the timeline is met.



3. Target Participants and Survey Administration

The questionnaire is intended for **university students** enrolled in the HEIs participating in the I-CIVIC project. Academic partners must ensure that participation is voluntary and that students receive clear information regarding the purpose of the study, the use of collected data and the anonymous nature of their responses.

The questionnaire should be administered individually through the Google Form or any other platform of your choice. Whenever possible, Partners should encourage the participation of students from different degrees and disciplines. Attention should be devoted to the participation of students with special educational needs.

Participants should complete the questionnaire independently and without external assistance. The estimated completion time for the pilot version of the instrument is approximately **5–7 minutes**. To improve comparability across partner institutions, respondents should be invited to answer the questionnaire with reference to their everyday use of digital information environments, particularly social media platforms, messaging applications and video-sharing platforms, rather than formal academic activities.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, administrators must present respondents with the following **mandatory introductory prompt**:

“Please answer thinking mainly about your everyday digital information use on your phone/laptop (especially social media, messaging apps, and video platforms), outside formal coursework.”

Partners are encouraged to monitor completion rates, identify any technical difficulties experienced by participants and collect observations regarding the clarity, accessibility and comprehensibility of the questionnaire items.

3.1 Pilot v1 Questionnaire on epistemic resilience to misinformation (developed by Steve Watson, University of Cambridge, in collaboration with prof. Alessandra Romano & Alessandra Viviani, University of Siena)

To ensure data harmony and streamline process, a centralized official Google Form has been created. Partners do not need to build separate survey layouts; they must distribute the centralized Google Form link provided below directly to their students.

Official Survey Link: <https://forms.gle/g3bdmw3syR9q3gk58>

→Partners from non-academic institutions may contribute to the survey dissemination in English or in their own language. If a partner translates the survey in its own language, it should send the dataset to icivic@unisi.it by October 15, 2026. **Data analysis will be carried out by the University of Siena and University of Cambridge.**



4. Operational Track and Session Composition for Focus Group with University Students

- **Cohort Composition:** Small group configurations consisting strictly of **5 to 7 participants per session, university students** for the academic partners. In case of non academic partners educators, youth workers, teachers and representatives of civil society organizations should be targeted with modifications of the protocol of questions.
- **Expected outcomes:** Each partner should carry out **at least one focus group** per each country **by October 15, 2026**. The focus group should be transcribed and the transcriptions plus observational notes should be uploaded in the appropriate folder [on the google drive](#) ⁽¹⁾. If necessary, each research unit can ask for an informed consent to participants according to their regulation. The Unisi Team will carry out the thematic analysis of the focus group.
- **Methodological Approach:** Driven by Transformative Listening (TL) and non-linear narrative storytelling, deliberately moving beyond straight-line, traditional questioning.

The facilitators will collect sociodemographic information about the respondents, including their age, nationality, country of residence, family background and level of education. Please ensure you explain whether the students are in the first, second or third year. Participants' consent to collect sociodemographic information should be ensured.

Please note that the following description is meant to be a guideline that facilitators should adjust depending on their different contexts and on the participants' engagement in the focus groups discussions. After this preparatory phase, they implement the four core phases of the official protocol:

I. Narrative Opening: The Personal Journey

Purpose: To establish a safe environment and move away from restrictive institutional scripts.

Ice-break (to be modified and adapted according to the context and the national basis).

Think about how your journey to this university actually began. Beyond the application forms, what were you truly searching for when you decided to enter this space?

- *If you had to describe your life as a student not as a 'career path' but as a complex, circular story, where are you currently situated?*
- *Which metaphor would you use to describe your university journey?*
- *How do you feel about belonging to your university?*

II. Challenging the Institutional Narrative

Purpose: To address the "unquestioned constructs" of higher education and neoliberalism.

- *Would you consider the main goal of Higher Education to be a tool to enter the job market?*
- *What are the messages coming from university about employability?*
- *What does engagement in university life mean for you?*

¹ I-CIVIC MAIN → WORK PACKAGES → WP1 → DATA COLLECTION T.1.3. → FOCUS GROUPS T.1.3.



- *How and when do you feel engaged in university life?*
- *How and when do you remain disengaged from the student community?*
- *How do you trust university institutions and people that are representing the institutions (professors, staff, institutional bodies) in your everyday experience?*
- *Which examples of equality (treating everyone the same) and equity (providing resources based on need) do you find within your daily campus life?*
- *Which examples of inequity do you find within your daily campus life?*

III. Recognition, Agency, and Power

Purpose: To explore "misrecognition" and the collective search for epistemic justice.

- *When you speak in academic spaces, do you feel you are being heard, or are you experiencing any feeling of being dismissed?*
- *Is there a moment when you have felt listened to in the academic context? If yes, what happened? Who did what?*
- *Have you ever felt dismissed because your voice doesn't fit the 'standard'?*

IV. Radical Re-Imagining and Transformation

Purpose: To co-create definitions of social justice and identify catalysts for systemic change.

- *If you could name one 'hidden' problem in this situated place that no one talks about, what would it be?*
- *What would have to change for you to define this university not as a "service provider" but as a space for social justice?*
- *What means for you to be truly engaged with someone/in a situation related to your university life?*
- *What are spaces for participation that you find in HEIs?*
- *How the integration of AI and digital platforms in your education is changing the relationship with your devices and the connection with peers?*
- *What transforms within you when you engage with other people in this space? Is there a version of yourself that only appears when you move 'off the straight line' of your degree?*

4.2. Strict Procedural Guidelines for Facilitators

1. **Embrace Non-linearity:** Be prepared to follow "tangential" or "circular" paths in the conversation; the goal is to "get off the straight line" of traditional research. Facilitators must deliberately provoke reactions and touch upon what makes students "uncomfortable," ensuring that underlying issues (including gender constructs) emerge naturally.
2. **The Researcher's Role:** Facilitators must recognize that the research is "always about you" as well; researchers should be academically and emotionally engaged, reconnecting with the reasons why this topic matters for them as a person and researcher.
3. **Focus on "The Why":** Constantly look for questions that help unpack underlying motives—carefully distinguishing between external motives to do something and internal motives driving personal satisfaction and agency recognition. .



APPENDIX A: Theoretical Framework of the Questionnaire on Epistemic Resilience to Misinformation

Working title

Resilience to Disinformation as Ecological Capability: A Non-Deficit Instrument for Epistemic Agency, Metacognitive Calibration, and Contextual Support (I-CIVIC WP1/T1.3)

Plain-language summary (for consortium use)

This instrument measures how people navigate information responsibly in everyday digital environments (e.g., social media, messaging apps, video platforms), and what supports or constrains that navigation (time pressure, language, accessibility, trust/correction pathways). It avoids framing people as “gullible” and instead treats resilience as a capability that depends on the wider ecology.

Purpose

WP1/T1.3 requires surveys (and focus groups) on resilience to disinformation (and civic engagement). This note proposes an instrument that avoids a deficit model (“susceptibility”, “gullibility”) and instead measures *capabilities and practices* through which people navigate complex information environments.

Platform scope and specificity (to improve comparability)

Because “platforms” differ substantially in *immersion, speed, social pressure, and data-extraction*, the survey distinguishes between common digital environments and asks respondents to answer with a clear reference context.

Autopoietic Ecology (AE) Framing

From an Autopoietic Ecology (AE) (Watson and Brezovec, 2025) perspective, “resilience to disinformation” is not primarily an individual trait. It is an **ecological accomplishment** emerging from:

- The person’s **recursive sense-making operations** (how they make and revise meaning),
- Their **structural coupling** to platform affordances, institutions, and trusted networks, and
- **Viability constraints** (time pressure, language, disability access, stress, socio-economic conditions) that shape what can realistically be done.



Many platforms are also **extractive infrastructures** (attention optimisation and data harvesting), which shape what becomes visible, salient, and shareable. The instrument therefore measures **epistemic agency under constraints**, not “deficits.”

Survey Dimensions

For the purposes of the pilot phase, the questionnaire focuses on four interconnected key dimensions of epistemic resilience:

- **Metacognitive Calibration** explores participants’ ability to recognise uncertainty, reflect on the limits of their knowledge, monitor confidence, revise beliefs, and evaluate the relationship between confidence and available evidence.
- **Social and Institutional Support** investigates the extent to which participants can rely on trusted individuals, information sources, norms for checking, and supportive environments when evaluating claims and seeking clarification without being judged.
- **Inclusion and Access Conditions** examines the structural factors that may facilitate or constrain access to reliable information, including language barriers, disability accommodations, time-related pressures, and privacy.
- **Epistemic/Systemic Fatigue** addresses the challenges associated with navigating increasingly complex and saturated information environments, including information overload, conflicting information, and the emotional or exhausting burden associated with verification practices under pressure to react quickly.

Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how students engage with information and how contextual factors influence their capacity to navigate contemporary digital environments responsibly and critically.



APPENDIX B: Theoretical Framework of the Focus Group Protocol

Investigating Civic (Dis)engagement

Methodological Integration and Qualitative Triangulation

Focus groups serve three methodological functions simultaneously within the WP1/T1.3 architecture. The theoretical justification for the focus group involves civic engagement as predicated on four pillars: education, **social recognition** (drawing on Honneth's theory), student **perception of agency**, and **epistemic resilience** to disengagement.

For the purpose of the project, the theoretical framework uses **Transformative Learning (TL)** to challenge unquestioned social constructs and the role of **misrecognition** in producing youth disengagement. Furthermore, the theoretical framework counts upon how **digital capitalism**, misinformation about online contexts may affect student disengagement, as it maintains social divisions and asymmetries of power and keeps individuals unaware of their rights. To counter this, the research proposes a **non-linear, narrative-based approach** to focus groups, aiming to move beyond straight-line education and facilitate “radical conversations” that allow students to co-create definitions of social justice and power. The aim of the focus group should be to discuss what makes students “uncomfortable”, what they consider as difficult questions, with the facilitator “provoquing” the reaction making sure that students speak about what they really consider relevant. In doing so also issues/barriers related to gender, socioeconomic factors, special needs may emerge.

Literature References

- Finnegan, F. & Cox, L. (2023). Thinking social movement learning, again: Choudry, Freire and the conversation between popular education and social movements. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 21(5): 595-608.
- Finnegan, F., & Fleming, T. (2023). *Adult education and critical democratic citizenship: Revisiting key concepts in a time of crisis*. In T. Mabrey, T. Hoggan-Kloubert, & C. Hoggan, (Eds.), *Civic education across ever-changing societies: Transforming lives, cultures, and nation states* (pp. 19-44). Michigan State University Press.
- Fleming, T. (2023). Education and democracy: The public sphere reclaimed for educational study. In M. Pulsford, R. Morris and R. Purves (Eds.), *Understanding Education Studies: Critical Issues and New Directions* (pp. 105-111). London: Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781003296935-17
- Fleming, T., Connolly, B., McCormack, D., Ryan, A. (2007). *Radical Learning for Liberation*. Publisher: MACE National University of Ireland Maynooth.
- Marsick, V. J., Melacarne, C., Romano, A., & Sabic-El-Rayess, A. (2025). Role of Transformative Learning in Addressing Pathways to Radicalization. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 23(3), 255-269.
- Watson, S. (2026). I-CIVIC and the turn to an ecological narrative. Narrative Post, retrieved from <https://www.crashh.cam.ac.uk/blog/i-civic-and-the-turn-to-an-ecological-narrative/>