



Ecology Awareness of Sustainable Green Development: Collaboration of
Universities and Local Actors

2023-1-SK01-KA220-HED-000161639

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW REPORT

SLOVAKIA



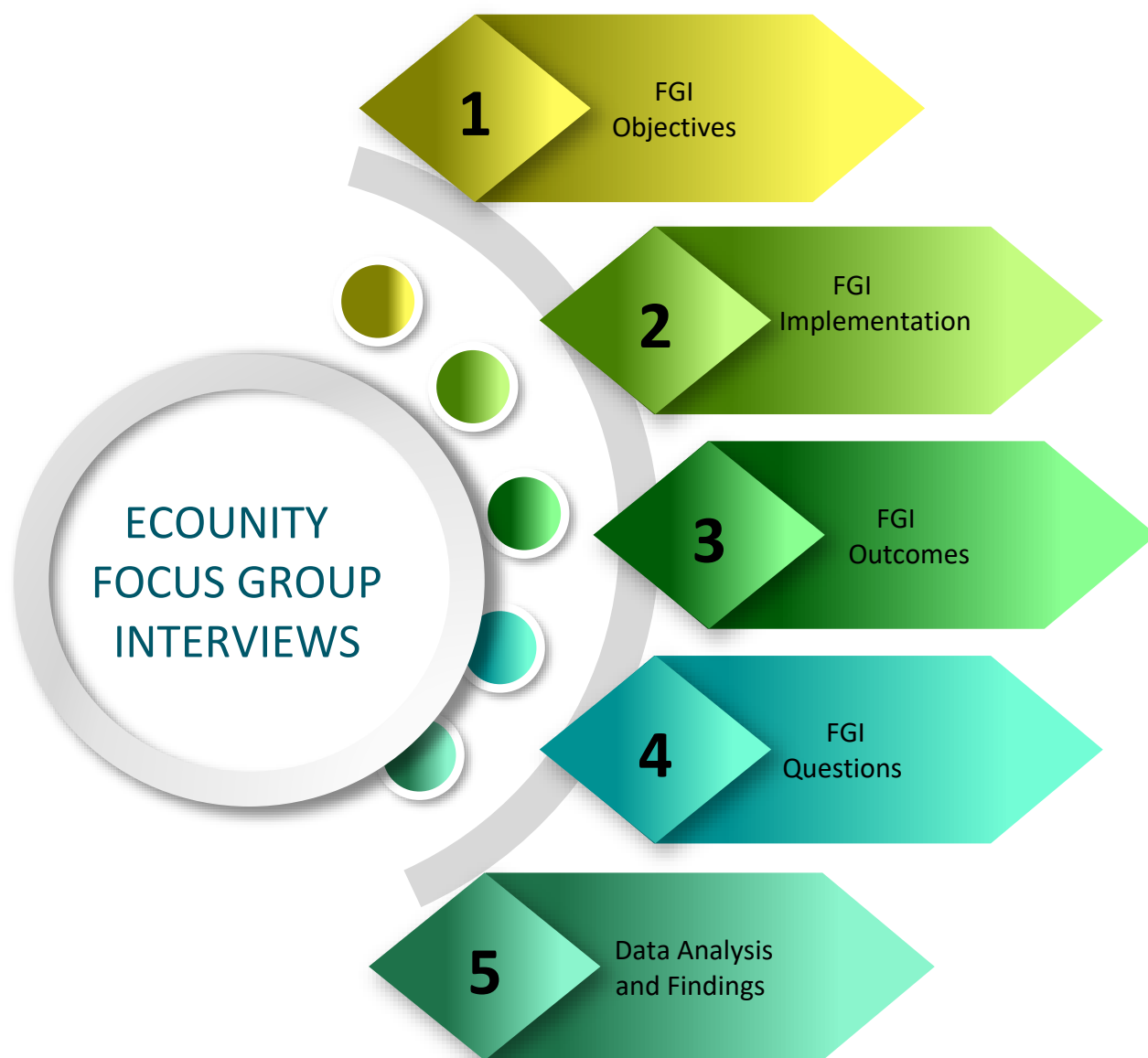
Co-funded by
the European Union



UNIRI



FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW REPORT



FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW OBJECTIVES

The data collection and content development processes for ECOUNTRY GUIDE AND ACTION PLAN include three focus group interviews and a comparative analysis based on the country-based legal practices regarding environmental protection and SGD.

The first leg of the data collection process comprises Focus Group Interviews with:

- University employees who work with external stakeholders (NGOs, local authorities) daily in researching and disseminating knowledge on environmental issues
- External stakeholders who cooperate with project team members
- Undergraduate students to identify areas where the cooperation between universities and external stakeholders, including NGOs and local authorities, can be improved and to determine the expectations from universities about the forms and content

Focusing on organising 3 focus group interviews with HEI employees, NGO and local authority representatives and students the data will be collected regarding the inquiry about what should universities do and how should they take action to contribute to more interactions with other local actors to ensure sustainable green development.



WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

Focus Group Interviews:

- **Welcome and introductions:** Focus Group Moderators briefly introduce the project, focus group interview objectives, and participants.
- **Presentations:** FGI moderators deliver brief presentations on relevant topics as follows:
 - o A better understanding of the expectations of stakeholders in relation to universities' collaborations with local actors.
 - o Insight into the motivations and barriers to university local actor collaborations in environmental protection and sustainability activities, and the potential strategies for increasing cooperation.
 - o University student engagement in local actors' SGD activities.
- **Brainstorming and group discussions:** Participants encourage participants for focused discussions based on prepared questions.
- **Data collection:** Participants capture key insights and ideas from discussions using designated note-takers, voice recorders, or collaborative online tools.
- **Wrap-up and feedback:** Participants summarize key points and answer questions.

Post-FGI:

- **Data analysis and report writing:** Each partner institution uses the pre-defined templates to prepare a FGI report summarizing discussions, findings, and insights.
- **Dissemination**
- Share FGI reports internally and externally through project website, publications.

EXPECTED FGI OUTCOMES

Process-Oriented Outcomes:

Focus on the workshop experience itself and how it facilitates interaction and learning:

- Facilitating the dynamics of discussions within groups
Creating a safe space for open communication
- Highlighting successful initiatives and approaches already implemented by different stakeholders
- Revealing barriers to university local actor collaborations and students' engagement within the scope of SGD.

Results-Oriented Outcomes:

Focus on the tangible outputs and impacts of the workshop:

- Generating 3 detailed FGI reports containing data analysis, key findings, and actionable recommendations for university and local actors collaborations in each partner country
- Fostering ongoing communication and exchange of best practices between stakeholder groups through networking platforms or joint projects
- Influencing local policies or university regulations to incorporate collaborations
- Encouraging broader community participation in sustainable green development efforts
- Contributing to the literature to provide scientific data and inspire further research.



WORKSHOP QUESTIONS

Discussion threads with Students (Including NGOs, municipalities, city councils, business communities)

1. Identification of the university's cooperation with the environment and its awareness among students?
 - *Do you identify the entities with which the university collaborates? What are they?*
 - *What are the thematic areas of cooperation? Did they concern climate and environmental policy?*
 - *What are the forms of this cooperation?*
2. Identified benefits and added value from this collaboration:
 - *Does such cooperation produce results / is it effective?*
 - *What are the key benefits of such cooperation?*
 - *Could these benefits be greater? How do you assess this?*
 - *Does this collaboration enhance your knowledge and competence? How does such education differ from classes in the university halls?*
3. Barriers identified:
 - *What are the most important barriers to cooperation?*
 - *Does anything hinder such cooperation?*
4. Desired future directions:
 - *If the cooperation of universities with various organisations and companies has not taken place so far, with whom do you think universities should cooperate to make the courses you study more attractive?*
 - *Which of the following areas of cooperation will be most important in the future (ask participants to rank and justify their prioritisation):*
 - o *smart cities*
 - o *sustainable finance*
 - o *green economy*
 - o *green agriculture*
 - o *healthy cities*
 - o *other*
5. Closing the discussion – *ask two questions to wrap up the discussion:*
 - *Are universities still needed for environmental protection? To what extent and in what area?*
 - *What knowledge and competences can modern universities teach?*

DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

FGI Process and the Data Collected

FGI with Students

FGI Date: 26.2.2025

Venue: SUA in Nitra, S Building, ground floor, Meeting Room of Institute of Economic Policy and Finance

Online/Face to Face/Hybrid: Face to Face

Number of Participants: Female (22) Male (6) Total (28)

Findings:

1. Identification of the university's cooperation with the environment and its awareness among students?

Do you identify the entities the university cooperates with? Who are they?

Summary of student responses:

Yes, we know that the university collaborates with various companies and organizations, but honestly, we often find out about it only shortly before a specific event or lecture. Based on our experiences and what we know, the university mainly collaborates with companies in the fields of auditing, marketing, finance, food industry, logistics, and banking. These companies either come directly to the university, or we go on excursions to visit them. For example, we participated in a business breakfast with an auditing company, where we could ask about the work of an auditor, career opportunities, and the skills expected from us.

Apart from companies, the university occasionally collaborates with non-profit organizations or professional associations, but such collaborations are much less visible. Most of the collaborations are with commercial companies or large enterprises that seek to present themselves as potential employers.

What are the thematic areas of cooperation? Did they concern climate and environmental policy?

Summary of student responses:

So far, most of the collaborations we know of or have participated in have been more focused on areas like marketing, finance, accounting, human resources, or logistics. Regarding sustainability and climate policy, there are far fewer activities. We only know of one event that dealt with ESG reporting, but it was more from the perspective of reporting and regulations for companies rather than a real discussion about environmental protection. We perceive that ecology and climate topics are mostly discussed theoretically in some subjects but are rarely reflected in direct cooperation with companies.

If we had a choice, we would definitely appreciate more cooperation in the field of sustainability, green economy, and ecological innovations, as we know this will be increasingly important for our future careers. Many companies today already talk about green certifications, carbon footprints, or the circular economy, so it would be great to be better prepared for this.

What are the forms of this cooperation?

Summary of student responses:

We had the opportunity to participate in various forms of cooperation with companies and external partners, and we generally evaluate them very positively. The most popular ones are probably business breakfasts, where we can have informal conversations directly with employers. These meetings are very friendly, and we can ask anything that interests us, from working conditions to tips on how to succeed in the job market.

Another form is guest lectures, where professionals from practice present specific topics, such as marketing, finance, or accounting. We also had an excursion to a food processing company, where we directly saw how logistics and production management work. These excursions are great because we can see the reality with our own eyes.

An interesting experience was a workshop where we simulated a job interview with HR professionals, received feedback, and could ask how to best prepare.

There were also company visits where we were shown their departments, processes, and solutions they implement. One of the most practical projects was the design of a new banking product, where our student team received a brief directly from the bank and had to come up with our own solution.

Additionally, open days are organized for companies to present themselves directly at the university, giving students the chance to engage in conversations.

A significant opportunity for cooperation is also the university's CoWork Center for collaboration with companies.

2. Identified benefits and added value from this collaboration

Does such cooperation bring results/is it effective?

Summary of student responses:

From our perspective, definitely yes. Every visit from industry representatives or cooperation with external organizations gives us a completely different perspective on the things we learn. It helps us understand how theory works in the real world and what the real challenges are that companies and organizations face. Although there are not many of these meetings yet, each one provides us with something new that we can't find in textbooks.

What are the main benefits of such cooperation?

Summary of student responses:

For us, the biggest advantage is that we come into contact with real people from the field who can directly tell us how things actually work. We don't have to just imagine everything or read it from textbooks — we see firsthand how theoretical knowledge is applied in specific companies or projects. Additionally, we gain contacts with potential employers, which is a huge advantage, especially when we think about where we'll work after graduation.

Another advantage is the different style of communication. People from the field often communicate with us in a more informal, natural way and give us space for questions, discussions, or practical demonstrations.

We also appreciate that cooperation with companies and organizations helps us better understand how we can use what we learn in real life. Often, it's only during these meetings that we realize why we study certain things and what relevance they have for our future careers.

Could these benefits be greater? How do you assess it?

Summary of student responses:

They definitely could be. We would really appreciate having more of these meetings — even double the amount we have now. For example, business breakfasts with companies are a great idea, but if only 20 students can attend, it's inaccessible for most of us. On the other hand, when there is an open lecture for everyone, where anyone can attend, it has a much greater impact, and more of us can benefit from it. We would really welcome it if companies and organizations were more directly involved in teaching — for example, through guest lectures or workshops within specific subjects.

We also think the university could help us more in finding mandatory internships. In the third year of the bachelor's program, we have a 4-week internship, but we have to find it ourselves, which can be quite stressful for some of us. If the university better connected its partner companies and organizations with students, it would be easier for us, and companies would also have a clearer idea of what kind of students are interested and in which areas.

Does this cooperation increase your knowledge and competencies? How does this kind of learning differ from teaching in university lecture halls?

Summary of student responses:

Yes, definitely. Thanks to such collaborations, we learn not only facts and theory but also practical skills — how to solve specific problems, how to look at things from different perspectives, and how to think critically. We really value when professionals show us real case studies, discuss specific projects with us, or let us come up with our own solutions. It's a completely different type of learning than just sitting in a lecture hall and taking notes.

This direct contact with reality also teaches us communication, teamwork, and presentation skills. Moreover, when we see that companies are dealing with the exact issues we study — like how to reduce their carbon footprint or how to finance sustainable projects — it gives these topics a whole new meaning. They're no longer just theoretical concepts but real challenges.

3. Barriers identified

What are the main obstacles to cooperation? Is there anything that hinders such collaboration?

Summary of student responses:

From our perspective, we don't see any fundamental reason why cooperation between the university and companies, non-profits, or municipalities couldn't be much more intensive. On the contrary, we would welcome such cooperation because it would help us connect theory with practice and show us how what we learn actually works in companies or real-world situations.

We would really like it if every subject had at least one lecture or discussion directly with industry experts. Whether they are managers from companies, people from non-profits, experts from local governments, or analysts dealing with environmental or economic issues. These meetings motivate us, give us the opportunity to ask about things that interest us, and often show us new career options we hadn't considered before.

On the other hand, we realize that it's not always just up to the university. We notice that some companies or organizations are not interested in cooperating with universities. Often because they don't see the need — if they have enough employees or don't feel pressured to seek young talent, cooperation with students is not a priority for them. We think it's a shame when companies view the university only as a "diploma supplier" rather than as a partner who can bring new ideas and energy.

There can also be issues on our side. Not all students are active and willing to participate in extracurricular activities or collaborate with companies. After COVID, we may have gotten used to participating less, communicating less, and often expecting everything to come to us.

It also happens that there is less interest from students in certain types of cooperation, especially if they are not directly related to our field of study. We don't always see the connection between what a company or organization does and what we study. That's why it's important for the university and companies to show us that sustainability, ecology, and green innovations are relevant to all fields of study.

Another factor is that when unemployment is low and companies have enough employees, they are less motivated to cooperate with universities and invest time in working with students. On the other hand, when there is a greater competition for talent in the labor market, companies suddenly have much more interest in coming to students, presenting themselves, and demonstrating that they are attractive employers. We perceive that this often depends on the situation in the labor market.

4. Desired future directions on Universities' role in shaping environmental policies

If there has been no collaboration between universities and various organizations or companies so far, who do you think universities should collaborate with to make the subjects you study more attractive?

Summary of student responses:

We believe universities should definitely work more with companies, especially those already addressing sustainability, green technologies, or reducing environmental impact. It's essential for us to see how these things work in practice, not just hear about them in lectures. Knowing that a company we might work for in the future cares about sustainability and works on real projects motivates us to learn more and shows us that our studies have a purpose.

At the same time, we think that collaboration shouldn't be limited to companies. Non-profits and various organizations dedicated to environmental protection, climate change education, or sustainable development can also provide valuable insights. These organizations often give us a different perspective — not just economic, but also environmental and social.

It would also be interesting to connect with local communities, municipalities, and cities. Significant environmental projects often happen at the regional level — whether it's renewable energy, waste management, or green space protection. If we could work directly on such local projects, it would definitely help us better understand how to link theory with practice.

Which of the following areas of collaboration will be the most important in the future (ask participants to rank and justify their priorities)?

Green Economy

This is our top priority because it directly affects us. As future economists, managers, or entrepreneurs, we need to understand the connection between the economy and the environment.

Sustainable Finance

This area is fascinating. We haven't explored it deeply in our classes yet, but we know that money has a significant impact on how companies behave. We want to understand how green investments, ESG ratings, sustainable banking, and environmental taxes work. All of this will be increasingly important for our future careers.

Green Agriculture

Also very interesting. We realize that agriculture has a massive impact on the environment. We'd like to learn more about sustainable farming practices that protect soil, water, and biodiversity. We believe economists should also understand how sustainability affects the food supply chain and the entire agri-sector.

Smart Cities

While interesting, we feel that this topic is already well-covered by technical education.

Healthy Cities

Students did not express interest.

5. Conclusion

Are universities still necessary for environmental protection? To what extent and in which areas?

Summary of student responses:

Definitely yes. We believe universities still play a crucial role in this area because it is here that our views and attitudes are shaped. Universities should be a place where we not only learn theory but also practical things — how to treat nature responsibly, how various ecological solutions work, and why it is important to think about sustainability.

We appreciate when the university leads by example. When we see real measures in our own environment — like waste sorting, EV chargers, green space care, or building insulation — it sends a clear message that these are not just empty words.

Universities are also vital in research; they can find new ways to protect nature, save water, conserve energy, or manage waste. And this doesn't just apply to environmental faculties. Topics like climate change, green economy, or sustainable business should be addressed in economics, engineering, and even humanities.

Universities have a vast impact on society — they educate thousands of people who later work in businesses, local governments, or politics. Therefore, universities should be leaders in sustainability and show that it makes sense.

What knowledge and competencies can modern universities teach?

Summary of student responses:

In our opinion, modern universities should not focus solely on specialized knowledge. They should teach us how to think critically and understand connections — for example, between the economy, the environment, and quality of life.

They should teach us how to navigate information, how to form our own opinions based on facts, not just what we see on social media. It is also crucial for us to learn collaboration skills — for example, economics students could work on projects with environmental or IT students because real-world problems are never confined to just one field.

Lastly, universities should give us values. We should graduate not just with a diploma but with a sense of responsibility for our actions — how we live, where we work, and what decisions we make.

Confidential Annexes (Uploaded to the Archive Folder)

- 1- Participant List
- 2- Presentation/s
- 3- Audio recording from FG
- 4- Transcription records (in English)