



Ecology Awareness of Sustainable Green Development: Collaboration of
Universities and Local Actors
2023-1-SK01-KA220-HED-000161639

UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVES
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW REPORT

POLAND



Co-funded by
the European Union



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:** Partners encourage participants for focused discussions based on prepared questions.
- **Data collection:** Partners capture key insights and ideas from discussions using designated note-takers, voice recorders, or collaborative online tools.
- **Wrap-up and feedback:** Partners 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 University Staff on capacity building

1. Experience of working with external parties
 - *With which entities does your university collaborate?*
 - *Since when has there been cooperation? Who initiated it?*
 - *What are the thematic areas of cooperation? Did they concern climate and environmental policy?*
 - *What were the forms of this cooperation?*
 - *Is cooperation formalised?*
 - *Does the university make any form of selection of partner choices? What are the criteria of such selection?*
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?*
 - *What are the biggest costs (problems) of the cooperation undertaken?*
3. Barriers identified:
 - *What are the most important barriers to cooperation? What are these barriers (legal, organisational, administrative, mental)?*
 - *How do you manage to overcome these barriers?*
 - *Do the barriers motivate you to improve it, or to stop cooperation?*
 - *How do you avoid these barriers? Can you share your experiences in this area?*
4. Desired future directions:
 - *If cooperation has not taken place to date, what are the expectations regarding the scope and forms of cooperation?*
 - *What current partners should change to make cooperation work better?*
 - *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 University Representatives

FGI Date: 10.02.2025

Venue: Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz

Online/Face to Face/**Hybrid**:

Number of Participants: Female (15) Male (5) Total (20)

Participants Experience Year: 1-5 (2) 6 -10 (7) 11 and above (11)

Administrative Position: Rectorate (3) Coordinator (14) Dean () Vice-dean () Department Head ()

Administrative staff (2), other (1)

- ✓ Director, Center for Cooperation with the Environment and University Social Responsibility, University of Lodz
- ✓ Deputy Director, Center for Education and Student Affairs, University of Lodz, responsible for coordinating tasks related to the course of studies, quality of education, distance learning, postgraduate studies, and other forms of education
- ✓ Deputy Director, Center for Education and Student Affairs – Career and Student Activity Office Team, University of Lodz
- ✓ Section for Cooperation with the Environment and Sustainable Development, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz
- ✓ Manager for Educational Offer and Sustainable Development, Section for Cooperation with the Environment and Sustainable Development, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz
- ✓ Former Director, Institute of Spatial Economy, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz
- ✓ Professional Internship Managers (field internship supervisors), Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz

Findings:

1. Experience of working with external parties

The University of Lodz engages extensively in cooperation with entities from the socio-economic environment. Three interrelated areas of collaboration can be distinguished: the educational process, science popularization, and the implementation of scientific and applied projects. As a result, the key objectives of this cooperation include:

- ✓ Improving the educational process through active forms of knowledge transfer and skill development for students, along with practical experience (classes organized in cooperation with external entities)
- ✓ Expanding the range of elective courses on topics such as environmental protection, green transformation, participatory urban adaptation to climate change, eco-innovation, and ESG
- ✓ Initiating cooperation with socio-economic entities to promote knowledge and disseminate good practices
- ✓ Applying knowledge and acquiring qualifications through practical activities



➤ Educational Process

Implementation of two educational profiles in higher education—academic and practical—has opened up opportunities for broad collaboration in both the development and implementation of study programs (curriculum). Practical-profile programs require a minimum of six months of professional internships for students and include classes delivered by representatives from the socio-economic environment. This structure enables the establishment of close cooperation.

Nonetheless, such collaboration is also present in academic-profile programs through lectures, study visits, and other activities. At the Faculty of Economics and Sociology, each degree program—regardless of its

profile—establishes a Study Program Advisory Board, which includes practitioners from the private sector, public administration, and NGOs. These members co-create the curriculum, approve thesis topics, and propose subjects or elective classes.

Cooperation also includes postgraduate programs, which are co-developed and implemented in collaboration with socio-economic partners, such as Fintech (Faculty of Economics and Sociology), Anti-Money Laundering, and EcoLaw (Faculty of Law and Administration).

Collaboration takes both institutionalized and informal forms. A key organizer and coordinator of cooperation at the University of Lodz is the Center for Education and Student Affairs – Career and Student Activity Office Team. This team supports students in entering the labor market by organizing university-wide and industry-specific job fairs (with companies and public institutions such as the police, government offices, etc.) and by preparing training sessions and workshops tailored for students.

At the Faculty of Economics and Sociology, the Center for Training and Professional Internships was established with the goal of coordinating and professionalizing the Faculty's cooperation with business and institutional partners. Its aim is to support practical education and the professional development of students.

The Center's members—internship managers for specific fields of study—are responsible, on one hand, for managing the quality of internship operations and improving the internship system in terms of relevance, adequacy, and effectiveness. On the other hand, they are tasked with initiating agreements and maintaining direct contact with key employers for their respective programs. The internship managers emphasize that small and medium-sized enterprises are more cooperative and open to partnership, recognizing mutual benefits. The initiation of cooperation, particularly with public entities and NGOs, often relies on informal networks.

The Center for Training and Professional Internships also organizes student training on a variety of topics, such as:

- ✓ Collecting, processing, and sharing statistical data, and the use of geoportals – Central Statistical Office (GUS)
- ✓ Financing pro-environmental investments and available support programs for eco-innovation – Provincial Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management in Lodz

At both the Faculty of Economics and Sociology and the Faculty of Management, a Business Council operates, bringing together economic entities that promote and reward top-performing students. Additionally, at the Faculty of Management, the Public Managers Council is active. Its mission is to strengthen cooperation between public administration (both governmental and local) and public utility sector organizations with the Faculty in the areas of teaching and research needs.

➤ **Science Popularization**

The educational process is based on interaction, which is why students are actively involved in science popularization activities organized by the University of Lodz and its individual faculties. This cooperation primarily consists of organizing events in partnership with external entities, such as:

- ✓ Academy of Music in Lodz – musical concerts
- ✓ Museum of the City of Lodz – the event "Year of Lodz Women 2025"
- ✓ EC1 Science and Technology Center – Researchers' Night, Youth Climate Conference, Megabit Bomb, PROM (a collaboration of 26 universities from across Poland)
- ✓ Foundation of Visual Education (FEW) – Photo Festival
- ✓ Lodz Academic Partnership – the campaign "Studied in Lodz"
- ✓ Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz – painting and photography exhibitions

Collaboration with primary and secondary schools takes place both at the university-wide level and within individual faculties. The University of Lodz carries out several initiatives, including:

- ✓ University Always Open – organizing classes, lectures, and meetings for students and teachers
- ✓ Patron Schools – providing academic supervision and support for primary and secondary schools
- ✓ Children’s University – educational engagement for younger students
- ✓ Talented Pupil – Excellent Student – a program of individual academic mentoring for school students, including joint research projects between students and University mentors

Additionally, the Faculty of Management runs the Young Economist Academy, aimed at introducing economic knowledge and skills to school students. At the Faculty of Economics and Sociology, debates, lectures, discussions, and presentations are regularly held. Recent events include:

- ✓ Debate: "Greenery in the Revitalization Process of Lodz ", co-organized with the Socially Engaged Association – Map of Trees in Lodz
- ✓ "Green Activism – A Path to Urban Change", held as part of the implementation project "Participatory Adaptation of Cities to Climate Change – A Practical Guide for Effective Action by Authorities and Citizens in Polish and Eastern European Cities"
- ✓ Congress: "Digital Regeneration of Cities", devoted to the impact of digitalization on urban development—addressing both new opportunities and challenges stemming from technological and environmental transformation; organized in collaboration with the Foundation for Economy and Public Administration and the City of Lodz Office.

➤ **Implementation and Scientific Projects**

The EkSoc startUP! competition is a form of support for students and doctoral candidates in developing innovative business ventures. Under the supervision of mentors from the business world and public institutions, students design and test their solutions in practice. The goal of the competition is to promote innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity. A special track within the competition has been launched for projects aligned with the “smart city” concept, which allows for recognizing and rewarding projects aimed at environmental and climate protection and promoting eco-innovation.

[Link: <https://www.eksoc.uni.lodz.pl/strefa-studenta/rozwoj/konkurs-eksoc-startup>]

In recent years, collaboration with local government administrations has resulted in numerous projects in the field of sustainable urban development and the development and implementation of innovative urban policy tools. A key project was the organization of the Second Lodz Citizens’ Panel, aimed at developing recommendations for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the city and building climate neutrality. Students from the Faculty of Economics and Sociology were involved at every stage of the project’s implementation. Additionally, students participated in the design, testing, and implementation of an innovative tool for social participation — the Eco-budget for Lodz.

The launch of the ministerial program “Implementation Doctorates” enables the combination of third-cycle (PhD) studies with practical work experience, allowing for the preparation of dissertations that directly respond to the needs identified by the private or public sector. This creates new opportunities to pursue practice-oriented doctoral projects in the field of environmental protection.

2. Identified benefits and added value from this collaboration

Collaboration enables the identification of the needs and expectations of both parties—practitioners and academics—and, above all, creates a foundation for joint educational, scientific, and implementation activities. Additionally, it provides a platform for knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer, and building relational capital. Constant contact with stakeholders allows the cooperation to be optimized administratively, organizationally, and substantively, which increases the likelihood of effective student internships and placements.

This collaboration fosters the development of both formal and informal relationships between the academic and professional communities. The professionalization of such cooperation leads to new initiatives and areas of activity. It supports the development of interests, the promotion of achievements, and the dissemination of outcomes produced by researchers, practitioners, and students alike.

Cooperation enhances the attractiveness of the educational process and acts as a motivator and stimulus for updating and adjusting study programs and elective course offerings. In the teaching process, broad collaboration with external partners and the use of active learning methods help develop critical skills such as the ability to recognize and analyze cause-and-effect relationships and the complexity of phenomena, the ability to search for, filter, apply, and synthesize information from diverse sources, the ability to self-improve, openness, and flexibility in responding to change.

It also enables the acquisition of skills in organizing and designing work, and mastering professional techniques and tools. The resulting outcomes stimulate the development of attributes that give graduates a solid foundation for lifelong learning and continuous development. Direct exposure to professional practice enhances and complements competencies with practical aspects, thus facilitating graduates' entry into the labor market. It provides a solid starting point for career development. Awards and scholarships granted to students also build the prestige of partner institutions and encourage further collaboration.

For academic staff, collaboration with entities from the socio-economic environment provides opportunities to gain new professional experiences, promotes academic achievements, and helps bridge the gap between academia and practice.

3. Barriers identified

Among the barriers and limitations to cooperation reported by both external stakeholders and university staff (academics and administrative personnel), the most significant issues relate to student internships. These can be grouped into two main categories:

- ✓ Organizational and institutional limitations on the part of both the university and external entities, stemming from differing systems of work organization
- ✓ Generational changes

Within the first category, the following challenges can be identified:

- ✓ External entities often complain about the lack of flexibility in university and faculty procedures. Meanwhile, academic staff point out the lack of agreement regarding the structure and requirements of internships, even though these are essential to the educational process.
- ✓ Cooperation with large organizations is often hindered by the formalization of contact, complex management structures, and long, complicated procedural paths that do not always lead to successful outcomes.
- ✓ Staff turnover in external organizations results in a lack of continuity in cooperation pathways.
- ✓ Four-week internships are not sufficient for effective learning or for understanding the nature of professional work. However, longer internships are not always accepted by students.
- ✓ Students are often treated merely as a labor force—the focus is on the benefit to the company, not on the educational process. The company's interest takes priority over the learning objectives.

- ✓ There is a pretense of cooperation without meaningful outcomes or further development.

The second group of barriers arises from social changes, the attitudes of young people, and the development of new technologies, including:

- ✓ Students lack motivation for active engagement and often treat internships as just a formality within their studies, rather than a path to a professional career.
- ✓ Many students display an entitled attitude, with a lack of openness and independence.
- ✓ Students become easily discouraged when faced with initial failures.
- ✓ The number of engaged, proactive students who initiate and coordinate activities is steadily decreasing.

The study also strongly highlighted the issue of undervaluing the efforts of academic staff in building networks of cooperation and initiating new projects. Staff evaluations often fail to sufficiently take this area of activity into account, and there is no formal motivation system in place to encourage academic staff to engage in the development of external collaboration.

4. Desired future directions on capacity building

To increase the effectiveness of cooperation, it is essential to develop a strategy that addresses the following issues:

- ✓ Dissemination and broad promotion of the outcomes of collaboration, clearly outlining the mutual benefits for both sides
- ✓ Leveraging existing experiences and relationships to achieve cumulative substantive, organizational, and other effects, as well as expanding and deepening areas of cooperation
- ✓ Reducing communication problems and improving the flow of information between cooperation partners and within the university itself
- ✓ Limiting and eliminating superficial or symbolic cooperation
- ✓ Mitigating organizational risks and threats

A desired direction of change is the organizational and substantive improvement of professional internships, including:

- ✓ Systemic solutions regarding the division of responsibilities between administrative staff and academic teachers to prevent the overburdening of academics, who should focus on the substantive aspects of cooperation rather than on administrative procedures
- ✓ The de-bureaucratization of internship processes, since learning outcomes often impose rigid structures that lead to excessive formalization and sometimes cause the core idea of practical training to be lost. Therefore, greater flexibility and adaptation of learning outcomes to the specific characteristics of the internship provider is crucial
- ✓ Moderation and support by the University of Lodz to increase the chances of offering interesting, valuable internships that effectively contribute to skills development
- ✓ Opening up to new themes and areas of internships related to specific projects or challenges, such as climate change adaptation, migration issues, poverty, and social justice

The study clearly emphasized the need to find common ground for collaboration that yields mutual benefits, particularly in light of pressing civilizational challenges such as climate change, the migration crisis, and passive social attitudes.

A crucial area is the development of customized curriculum, training courses, and postgraduate studies, including the advancement of micro-credentials that respond to the needs of the external environment. It is also essential to implement a motivation system for academic staff involved in external cooperation, to

encourage engagement in such initiatives, and to ensure that this type of activity is properly recognized in performance evaluations, research assessments, and other institutional metrics.

5. Closing the discussion

Universities play a key role in building knowledge capacity on:

- ✓ sustainable production and consumption
- ✓ just transformation
- ✓ non-financial reporting of the SDGs
- ✓ urban climate policy
- ✓ resource efficiency
- ✓ civic engagement on environmental issues

Confidential Annexes (Uploaded to the Archive Folder)

- 1- Participant List**
- 2- Presentation/s**
- 3- If possible, video records
- 4- Screenshots (showing the number of participants)**
- 5- Efficient practices that the participants offered
- 6- Transcription records (in English)