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

2023-1-SK01-KA220-HED-000161639

UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVES
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW REPORT

CROATIA

Co-funded by the European Union

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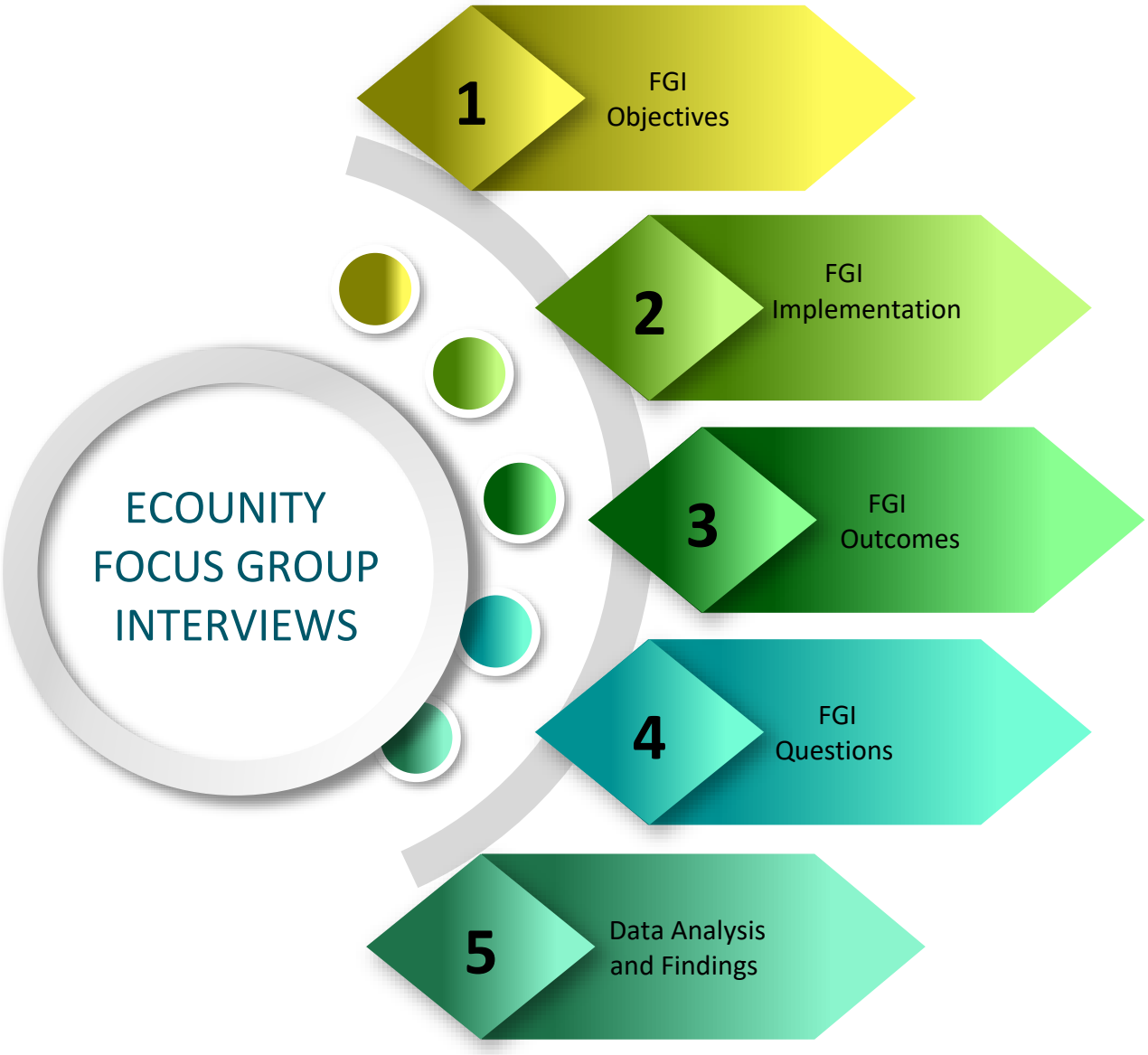

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FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW OBJECTIVES

The data collection and content development processes for ECOUNITY 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:
    - A better understanding of the expectations of stakeholders in relation to universities' collaborations with local actors.
    - Insight into the motivations and barriers to university local actor collaborations in environmental protection and sustainability activities, and the potential strategies for increasing cooperation.
    - 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.

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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.

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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):
     - *smart cities*
     - *sustainable finance*
     - *green economy*
     - *green agriculture*
     - *healthy cities*
     - *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?*

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DATA ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

FGI Process and the Data Collected

FGI with University Representatives

FGI Date:(5/2/2025)

Venue: University of Rijeka (Faculty of Economics and Business; Rectorate of Rijeka; Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management; Faculty of Informatics and Digital Technologies; Faculty of Engineering)

Online/Face to Face/Hybrid: Online

Number of Participants: Female (10) Male (10) Total (20)

Participants Experience Year: 1-5 (1) 6 -10 (2) 11 and above (17)

Administrative Position: Rectorate (1) Coordinator (8) Dean (0) Vice-dean (7) Department Head (4) Administrative staff (0).

On February 5, 2025, a group discussion was held among university representatives on the topic of collaboration with external entities, including sustainability practices and collaboration with local stakeholders. This activity aimed to gather the opinions of employees (especially board members and committee chairs) on practices, opportunities and obstacles in the cooperation of the University of Rijeka and its constituents with the local community, with a special focus on sustainable development, as well as to explore ways to deepen this cooperation and its impact on sustainability.
The meeting took place in the form of 2 focus groups (online) with 10 participants each and lasted 60 minutes. The discussion aimed to discuss effective collaboration models that could help to better connect the academic environment with businesses, government institutions and the non-profit sector. The discussion was opened by Bojana Olgić Draženović, who emphasized the importance of this topic in connection with the evaluation of faculties and university evaluation and from the perspective of the long-term competitiveness of universities. As part of the focus group, the ECOUNITY project was presented and the objectives of the discussion were outlined. Participants exchanged views on the forms, benefits and challenges of UNIRI's collaboration with local stakeholders, with a focus on climate and environmental initiatives and future directions.

Findings:

1. **Experience of working with external parties**

Participants across university faculties reported a long-standing and diverse engagement with external stakeholders, including local government bodies, NGOs, public institutions, businesses, and international organizations. Collaborations are typically initiated either by individual faculty members or through strategic initiatives at the faculty or project level, with a strong emphasis on sustainability, environmental protection, and societal impact.

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Numerous examples of cooperation were provided, ranging from formalized partnerships in EU-funded projects (e.g. Horizon and Interreg programs), to informal, locally-driven initiatives involving public lectures, community training, and consultancy services. Faculties actively support the green transition by integrating stakeholders into teaching activities, offering professional internships in sustainability-focused institutions, and developing lifelong learning and micro-qualification programs in areas such as environmental engineering, ESG investing, and regenerative economics.

Cooperation also extends to joint development of strategies and policy recommendations at local and national levels, as well as interdisciplinary project work aimed at addressing practical challenges such as energy efficiency, circular economy, and digital transformation. One notable institutional platform supporting matchmaking with external partners is RIMAP, which facilitates academic-industry-community cooperation.

Despite the extensive range of initiatives, participants noted that much of the engagement remains fragmented and often reliant on individual motivation rather than systemic institutional mechanisms. There was consensus that deeper integration and formalization of these efforts at the university level could enhance both the visibility and impact of partnerships.

2. Identified benefits and added value from this collaboration

The focus group participants emphasized a wide range of tangible and intangible benefits resulting from cooperation with external stakeholders. One of the most frequently cited advantages is the practical relevance and applicability of academic knowledge when embedded in real-world contexts. Through collaboration with local authorities, NGOs, and the business sector, university staff contribute to the formulation of sustainable development strategies, including local tourism strategies and regional energy transition plans. These engagements strengthen the societal role and visibility of the university.

A significant added value is found in enhancing the employability of students. Faculties have established structured internship programs with over 800 partner institutions, where students not only gain work experience but are also tasked with evaluating the host institution's sustainability practices. This encourages critical thinking and awareness of climate and environmental issues among future professionals.

Participants also noted the benefit of curriculum enrichment through cooperation with practitioners. Guest lectures, mentorships, and applied workshops provide students with up-to-date insights and skills that are aligned with labor market needs. This is particularly evident in new educational formats such as micro-qualifications and lifelong learning programs, which have been successfully developed across faculties—covering topics like ESG investing, regenerative economics, and environmental engineering.

Moreover, external partnerships stimulate interdisciplinary research and innovation. Several participants mentioned that collaboration with stakeholders often leads to the formulation of new research questions and projects, particularly those that address under-researched societal challenges. For instance, cooperation with regional development agencies has resulted in student innovation challenges, while partnerships with tourism boards have led to the creation of digital solutions for heritage preservation and sustainable tourism promotion.

Another benefit lies in institutional learning and capacity building. The interaction with external actors pushes faculties to reflect on their internal practices and governance structures, especially in the context of sustainability integration. Some units, such as the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, have

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formalized this through the establishment of Eco Committees, continuous engagement with NGOs, and participation in drafting national strategies (e.g., Tourism Sustainable Development Strategy 2030).

Finally, tools such as the RIMAP platform were recognized as enablers of structured collaboration. While still under development, the platform is increasingly used to connect academic staff with potential partners from the private, public, and non-profit sectors, thereby supporting matchmaking for project development and implementation. It was noted, however, that greater promotion and updating of profiles would further increase its utility.

Overall, participants agreed that these collaborations not only generate social and environmental value but also contribute to institutional resilience, competitiveness, and relevance, especially in the context of the university's third mission—engagement with society.

3. Barriers identified

Despite numerous positive examples of collaboration with external stakeholders, participants identified several **barriers** that hinder the full potential of such partnerships. These can be grouped into four main categories:

a) Institutional and procedural barriers: A recurring observation was that collaborative initiatives often depend on the individual initiative of academic staff rather than on clearly defined institutional frameworks. While many successful examples exist at the faculty level, there is **no systematic, university-wide mechanism** for initiating, supporting, or scaling such cooperation. Participants pointed out that **administrative procedures are often unclear, overly complex, or time-consuming**, particularly when setting up interdisciplinary programs or joint projects.

b) Legal and regulatory constraints: Participants from technical faculties highlighted that certain sustainability initiatives—such as projects in renewable energy or circular economy—face **regulatory uncertainty or outdated legislative frameworks**. These obstacles can discourage innovation and prevent the realization of technically feasible solutions due to incompatible or insufficient legal provisions.

c) Limited stakeholder engagement and awareness: Some external partners, especially from the public sector or smaller businesses, demonstrate **low levels of engagement or unclear expectations** regarding sustainability. Collaboration is sometimes perceived as fulfilling a formal requirement rather than a meaningful commitment to change. In such cases, sustainability elements are superficially integrated, limiting the impact and authenticity of cooperation.

d) Fragmentation and lack of coordination: Participants noted the **fragmented nature of existing collaborations**, both within and across faculties. While interdisciplinary initiatives exist, they are often short-lived or project-based. There is **limited coordination between faculties** and insufficient communication channels for sharing good practices or building long-term strategic partnerships. This hinders the potential for broader institutional impact and resource sharing.

Despite these challenges, many participants stressed that **barriers are not insurmountable**. In most cases, motivation and willingness to cooperate were seen as more decisive factors than formal limitations. Several examples showed that when strong initiative exists, even complex projects can be successfully implemented.

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4. Desired future directions on capacity building

Focus group participants outlined a number of recommendations and strategic directions for enhancing the University of Rijeka's capacity to collaborate effectively with external stakeholders in the context of sustainable development:

a) Institutionalization of cooperation mechanisms:
There is a strong need to formalize cooperation frameworks, both at the faculty and university levels. Suggestions included creating clearer procedures and criteria for partner selection, establishing university-wide guidelines for stakeholder engagement, and providing legal and administrative support for developing joint programs and initiatives.

b) Strengthening interdisciplinary collaboration:
Participants emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary and inter-faculty cooperation, particularly in designing and delivering curricula that address complex sustainability challenges. Joint micro-qualification programs and interdisciplinary study modules were seen as promising formats that should be expanded and systematized.

c) Enhancing stakeholder mapping and engagement platforms:
Building on tools such as the RIMAP platform, it was suggested that the university develop a comprehensive, dynamic stakeholder map—covering NGOs, local authorities, enterprises, and international partners—to facilitate proactive outreach, matchmaking, and the development of strategic partnerships.

d) Promoting visibility and integrated reporting:
It was proposed that the university adopt a more transparent and coordinated approach to communicating its sustainability-related activities, for example through integrated reporting frameworks (similar to the University of Udine). This would enhance both internal coordination and external visibility, positioning the university as a leader in sustainability education and research.

e) Fostering a culture of collaboration and social responsibility:
Several participants noted that capacity building should not be limited to procedures and tools, but should also involve developing a mindset of openness, proactivity, and civic responsibility among university staff and students. This includes better promotion of community-engaged learning, citizen science, and volunteering activities that link academic work to real societal needs.

f) Supporting lifelong learning and flexibility in education models:
As societal challenges evolve, so must the university's educational offerings. Expanding lifelong learning programs, short-format qualifications, and micro-credentials was highlighted as a key direction for building capacity and engaging both students and professionals in sustainable development.

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Participants also expressed their views on the desired future direction of sustainable green development cooperation, choosing between: 1) Smart Cities, 2) Sustainable Finance, 3) Green Economy, 4) Green Agriculture, 5) Healthy Cities and 6) Other (please specify). **Based on their choices, the focus group concluded that the most important areas of cooperation in the future will be:**

- **Green economy**
- **Healthy cities**
- **Green agriculture**

Less important areas:

- Sustainable finance
- Smart cities
- Other: Biodiversity

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

Based on the discussions from both EcoUnity EFRI focus groups, universities remain not only necessary but essential actors in environmental protection. Their relevance lies in three interconnected domains: education, research, and stakeholder engagement.

First, universities contribute through the integration of sustainability into curricula. The development of micro-qualifications, interdisciplinary programs (e.g., Environmental Engineering, ESG investing), and living labs exemplifies how universities can adapt education to address green transition challenges. These efforts equip students with competencies in regenerative economics, circular economy, and sustainable finance, directly influencing future policy and business practice.

Second, universities act as research hubs that generate knowledge applicable to local and regional sustainability strategies. Collaboration with NGOs, ministries, and local governments — such as drafting strategies for sustainable tourism or urban biodiversity — demonstrates that universities can inform and evaluate policy through both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Third, their societal role is vital. Universities serve as connectors between civil society, business, and public institutions. Internships, citizen science initiatives, and public lectures enable mutual knowledge exchange and raise environmental awareness. Moreover, platforms like RIMAP show potential for institutionalizing cooperation, although challenges remain in terms of administrative inertia and fragmented coordination.

In sum, universities are indispensable for environmental protection — especially in knowledge production, skills development, and systemic stakeholder collaboration. Their impact is most significant in areas such as green economy, sustainable urban development, biodiversity, and public policy support, provided they continue to foster interdisciplinary approaches and overcome internal and systemic barriers. Participants agreed that the University of Rijeka holds significant potential to become a central actor in regional sustainable development, provided that strategic steps are taken

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to strengthen internal coordination, remove procedural bottlenecks, and foster long-term partnerships grounded in mutual benefit and shared responsibility. Overall, the university is encouraged to position itself as a central knowledge and innovation hub in the regional green transition, by aligning its teaching, research, and engagement activities with sustainable development priorities.

Confidential Annexes (Uploaded to the Archive Folder)

1. Participant List
2. Presentation
3. Audio record
4. Transcription records (in English)

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