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

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## UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVES FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW REPORT

**SLOVAKIA**

Co-funded by the European Union

# FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW REPORT


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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:(21.02.2025)

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

Online/Face to Face/Hybrid: Face to Face

Number of Participants: Female ( …) Male (...) Total (...)

Participants Experience Year: 1-5 (2)  6 -10 (1) 11 and above (19)

Administrative Position: Rectorate (8) Coordinator (3) Dean (1) Vice-dean (1) Head Institute (1) Head of Study programmes (2) Administrative staff (6)

On February 21, 2025, a group discussion was held among university representatives on the topic of collaboration with external entities, with a partial focus on sustainability and ecology. The goal of this discussion was to identify current challenges, positives, and barriers in collaboration between the university and external entities, as well as to explore opportunities for deepening this cooperation and its impact on sustainability.
The meeting took place in the form of a focus group and was aimed at discussing effective collaboration models that could contribute to better connecting the academic environment with businesses, governmental institutions, and the nonprofit sector. The discussion was opened by Ján Pokrivčák, who emphasized the importance of this issue in the context of faculty and university evaluation, as well as from the perspective of the university's long-term competitiveness. The attendees, according to the attendance list.

### Findings:

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

The discussion focused on existing collaborations with external entities and businesses, as well as differences in approaches between Slovakia and abroad. Experience has shown that cooperation with industry is often based on personal contacts, which can lead to a lack of systematization in the process.
Despite certain challenges, positive examples of collaboration were also identified, such as partnerships with companies in technological innovation projects, where the university participates in technology transfers and applied research. The need for long-term strategic partnerships rather than one-off collaborations was particularly emphasized.

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Collaboration with external entities is not currently fully optimized. We distinguish between entities that are partners in scientific research and those that operate in practical fields.
In 2018, we coordinated a large-scale data collection project for University-Business Cooperation. From experience, a common issue is that companies often expect universities, as public institutions, to have funding for everything. Abroad, companies naturally consider investing their own resources into research.
It frequently happens that a company commissions an analysis from a foreign institution, even though it could be conducted in Slovakia. Another challenge, which is gradually improving, is the individualization of outreach. Companies tend to approach universities expecting someone to directly point them to relevant experts. This process often relies on personal connections.
Since 2015, we have been working to establish a more transparent system. It is always necessary to formalize collaboration through contracts and clearly define the form of cooperation. For example, the Faculty of Engineering has joint study programs with businesses.

## 2. Identified benefits and added value from this collaboration

- Enhancement of students' practical skills through involvement in real-world projects.
- Opportunity to finance research through partnerships with companies.
- Contribution of applied research and innovative solutions to businesses.
- Development of environmentally-oriented projects and solutions for sustainable development.
- Establishment of joint study programs and professional seminars.

The university’s largest financial collaboration amounted to approximately one million euros. We also hold patents in the food sector. These collaborations are recorded separately as applied research.

Analysis showed that 80% of companies collaborate on a one-time basis. Companies can evaluate students, but it is not mandatory. Internships and lectures are monitored, but lecture evaluations are not conducted systematically.

We strive to identify environmental collaborations as well. We have a catalog of internship opportunities, which will be regularly updated. The goal is to explore the potential of interdisciplinary teams. This catalog will also be available in English.

Many companies welcome collaboration with students, as they bring fresh perspectives and creativity. Collaboration also helps students gain practical experience and better prepare for the real job market. Some companies allow students to write their thesis on specific industry problems, improving the connection between theory and practice.

## 3. Barriers identified

- Lack of motivation among companies.

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- Administrative complexity and challenges in contractual collaboration.
- Short internship periods that do not allow sufficient student involvement.
- Absence of systematic evaluation of internship effectiveness.
- Lack of interdisciplinary projects integrating sustainability aspects.

Companies often expect students to work for free, which is not common practice abroad. Businesses complain that if a student comes for only two weeks, it is of little use to them. They need a minimum of three months—one month for training, the second for starting actual work, and the third for independent tasks.

Another issue is that students can only attend internships one day a week due to their class schedule. As a result, the internship gets stretched out, offering little benefit to the company. In other countries, internships are often conducted during summer months.

There are also administrative challenges, such as structuring the internship system, contractual agreements, and logistics of collaboration. Many companies lack the time or capacity for mentoring and supervising students.

**4. Desired future directions on capacity building**

In the future, it will be essential for all collaborations to be contractually secured, which will be part of the new regulations effective from 2027. Contracts for work and commissioned research agreements will be key.

Ideally, our students should have the opportunity to participate in longer internships at companies. A summer internship would be meaningful—not on a massive scale, but at least in some firms. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, they have three-month paid internships.

Internships should be better integrated with studies. Companies and universities could collaborate on creating joint research projects. It is also important to involve industry professionals in teaching and increase the number of practical courses based on case studies.

**The most important areas of collaboration in the future will be:**

- **Sustainable finance**
- **Green economy**
- **Green agriculture**

Less important:

- Smart cities
- Healthy cities

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

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Universities play a key role in promoting the concept of sustainable development, not only through research and education but also through their own operations. During the discussion, proposals were made to integrate environmental and sustainability issues into all study programs, rather than offering them only as elective courses.

The need to establish a Sustainability Council was also emphasized. This council would coordinate university activities in this field and support the active involvement of students and the academic community in projects focused on green innovations.

The university has the potential to become a leader in sustainable finance and green agriculture. Examples include collaboration on the development of ecological strategies for urban areas and participation in European grants supporting green technologies and environmental sustainability.

Universities play a crucial role in environmental protection, not only in education but also in research and the application of innovative solutions.

The Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Biotechnology and Food Sciences are essential for technological collaborations, which often relate to intellectual property protection and environmental solutions. Many projects focus on sustainable development and ecological innovations.

Slovak University of Agriculture (SPU) ranks as the top Slovak university in the Green University ranking.

Economic factors also significantly influence environmental decisions. It is essential that sustainability and ecology become an integral part of education to ensure that graduates are prepared for the challenges related to environmental protection.

Universities should place greater emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches and stronger connections with practice in areas such as environmental policy, sustainability, and ecological management. The involvement of businesses and the public sector in addressing environmental challenges will be crucial in the future.

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## Confidential Annexes (Uploaded to the Archive Folder)

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

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