



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

UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVES
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW REPORT

ROMANIA



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: 5.05.2025 and 8.05.2025

Venue: at the National University of Science and Technology Politehnica Bucharest, Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Business Engineering and Management

Online/Face to Face/Hybrid: Face to Face

Number of Participants: Female (11) Male (11) Total (22)

Administrative Position: Rectorate (1) Dean (1) Vice-dean (3) Department Head (3) Administrative staff (4) Teacher (10)

Findings:

The focus group discussion was conducted within the framework of the EcoUnity project, funded by the European Union Erasmus+ Programme. The session gathered university representatives from academic and administrative structures to discuss the university's collaboration with local stakeholders (NGOs, companies, public institutions) in the field of sustainability and civic engagement.

The discussion addressed four main areas:

1. Experience in working with external stakeholders
2. Identified benefits and added value
3. Barriers and structural challenges
4. Future directions for strengthening cooperation

Participants reflected on existing mechanisms, institutional gaps, and the strategic potential of strengthening university–community partnerships, particularly in the fields of environmental sustainability, circular economy, and civic engagement.

Key Topics Highlighted by Participants:

- University–community collaboration
- Sustainability integration in academic programs
- Internships and applied learning
- Institutional coordination structures
- Bureaucratic procedures
- Green campus initiatives
- Strategic alignment with EU sustainability policies
- NGO selection and accountability

Most Frequently Used Terms:

Collaboration: partnership, protocol, cooperation agreement, local actors, institutional framework

Sustainability: sustainable development, green transition, circular economy, environmental responsibility

Students: employability, practical skills, internships, volunteering, civic engagement

Barriers: bureaucracy, limited funding, administrative procedures, workload

Institutional Development: accreditation, rankings, visibility, strategic planning

1. *Experience of working with external parties*

Participants reported that collaboration with external stakeholders exists but varies significantly across faculties and departments. Engagement is often dependent on individual initiative rather than a centralized institutional strategy.

Three main patterns of collaboration were identified:

a) Internship and Practice-Based Collaboration

Internships remain the most structured and widely used mechanism for collaboration. Faculties with applied programs (economics, administrative sciences, environmental sciences, social sciences) reported partnerships with:

- Local municipalities
- Environmental agencies
- NGOs
- SMEs and larger companies

One participant noted:

“Internships are the most consistent form of collaboration. Through them, students gain real exposure to institutions and companies.”

However, coordination and monitoring systems were described as inconsistent across departments.

b) Project-Based and Research Collaboration

Some faculties engage external stakeholders through:

- Erasmus+ projects

- Research partnerships
- Community-based projects
- Sustainability initiatives (waste management, awareness campaigns, green campus actions)

Participants emphasized that such collaborations are usually linked to externally funded projects rather than institutional policy.

One representative stated:

“When there is a funded project, collaboration becomes more structured. Outside project frameworks, it depends mostly on individual initiative.”

c) Event-Based and Ad Hoc Engagement

Universities frequently invite external stakeholders to:

- Career days
- Public lectures
- Roundtables
- Awareness campaigns
- Sustainability workshops

While these initiatives increase visibility and networking opportunities, they are often episodic and lack long-term follow-up mechanisms.

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

Participants identified multiple layers of benefit emerging from collaboration.

a) Student Development

The most frequently mentioned benefit concerns student employability and skill development.

Through collaboration, students:

- Gain practical experience
- Improve communication and teamwork skills
- Develop environmental awareness
- Access employment opportunities

One participant highlighted:

“Students who complete internships or volunteer in NGOs are more confident and better prepared for the labor market.”

Additionally, sustainability-focused activities enhance students’ civic responsibility and environmental consciousness.

b) Institutional Visibility and Reputation

Collaboration strengthens the university’s public image and societal role.

Benefits mentioned include:

- Increased visibility in the local community
- Improved ranking indicators (e.g., sustainability rankings)
- Contribution to accreditation processes
- Stronger alignment with ESG and Green Deal principles

Participants acknowledged that measurable community engagement indicators positively influence institutional evaluation processes.

c) Regional Development and Knowledge Transfer

University representatives emphasized the potential of knowledge transfer to support local development.

Examples discussed:

- Environmental impact studies
- Policy advisory roles
- Green transition strategies
- Support for SMEs in sustainability compliance

A dean stated:

“The university should act as a regional knowledge hub, especially in the green transition process.”

d) Institutional Learning

Collaboration also benefits the university by:

- Enhancing interdisciplinary cooperation
- Stimulating applied research
- Strengthening links between theory and practice
- Encouraging curriculum innovation

3. Barriers identified

Despite the recognized benefits, participants identified several structural barriers.

a) Bureaucratic and Administrative Procedures

Administrative processes were described as time-consuming and rigid.

Challenges include:

- Contract approval procedures
- Legal reviews
- Financial reporting requirements
- Complex documentation for partnerships

b) Limited Financial Resources

Funding limitations affect:

- Transportation for field activities
- Small-scale sustainability projects
- Student-led initiatives
- Awareness campaigns

Participants mentioned that many sustainability initiatives rely on project-based funding rather than institutional budgets.

c) Lack of Central Coordination

Collaboration is often:

- Faculty-specific
- Project-dependent

This leads to fragmentation and duplication of efforts.

d) Workload and Responsibility

Academic staff expressed concern about:

- Increased administrative burden
- Responsibility for student safety in off-campus activities
- Limited recognition of community engagement in evaluation criteria

e) Misalignment of Expectations

Differences between academic timelines and business needs were mentioned.

External partners often expect:

- Rapid implementation
- Immediate results

Whereas academic processes require:

- Internal approvals
- Ethical reviews
- Budget planning

4. Desired future directions on capacity building

Participants proposed several strategic improvements.

a) Clear NGO and Partner Selection Criteria

Participants suggested developing formal criteria based on:

- Transparency and accountability
- Alignment with university strategy
- Track record and previous projects
- Public benefit orientation

A pilot collaboration model was proposed to assess compatibility before long-term partnerships.

b) Needs-Based Collaboration Model

Representatives proposed:

- Regular stakeholder consultations
- Joint needs assessments
- Co-designed sustainability projects

This approach would increase relevance and mutual benefit.

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)