Beyond the institutional walls: Partnerships with external stakeholders

Webinar Background Note

Community for Educational Innovation - CEI

24/09/2025

European Commission | CEI

Beyond the institutional walls: Partnerships with external stakeholders

Join the webinar on 24 September!

The Community for Educational Innovation (CEI) webinars bring together educators, researchers, policymakers, industry leaders, and representatives from civil society to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and engage in discussions on innovation in education. CEI webinars promote the strategic development of skills and competences essential for student success across various sectors, aligning with the objectives of the recent European Commission's communication on the Union of Skills to enhance the EU's competitiveness through advancing its education and training systems.

This document describes the background, focus, and key questions that will guide the presentations and discussions during the webinar 'Beyond the institutional walls: Partnerships with external stakeholders' on 24 September 2025.

Collaborations between researchers and non-academic stakeholders—businesses, government agencies, and civil society—are often called 'university-business collaboration'. They are "a crucial channel for the production, valorisation, and diffusion of new knowledge."[1] These partnerships enable the transformation of knowledge creation processes since "more intense science-industry relations are built as knowledge is developed jointly through shared facilities and mixed teams."[2]

Enhancing collaboration with external stakeholders involves moving away from a linear innovation model, focused on discovering the behaviour of nature without an immediate practical purpose.[3] Instead, it embraces cross-fertilisation of knowledge through ongoing engagement with stakeholders and inter- and trans-disciplinary research projects.[4] Citizens also play a key role in this ecosystem by demanding solutions informed by science and innovation and contributing to

[1] Communication on A New European Innovation Agenda, COM(2022) 332 final, p. 16, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0332

[2] OECD, *University-Industry Collaboration: New Evidence and Policy Options*, OECD Publishing, 2019, p. 90, *https://doi.org/10.1787/e9c1e648-en*

[3] Finardi, U., *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, In: Sattler, K., 21st Century Nanoscience – A Handbook, CRC Press, https://doi.org/10.1201/9780429351631

[4] CIRSEAU, *Building a Water-smart Economy and Society, Stakeholder engagement in EU-funded inter- and trans-disciplinary research and innovation projects*, 2024, https://b-watersmart.eu/download/cirseau-recommendations-brief-on-stakeholder-engagement-in-eu-funded-inter-and-trans-disciplinary-research-and-innovation-projects/

"collecting data and evidence for new knowledge that can inform policy or lead to innovative solutions."[5]

European Union policies promoting societal engagement in research and innovation

Within the EU, "research and innovation (R&I) efforts have increasingly prioritised collaboration, co-creation, and stakeholder engagement to address complex systemic challenges in recent decades."[6] Recent policies on research and innovation that promote collaboration with non-academic stakeholders include:

- **A new ERA for research and innovation (2020):**[7] Promotes collaboration between academia and regional authorities, businesses, and citizens to enhance new knowledge production, valorisation, and diffusion.
- **Guiding principles for knowledge valorisation (2022):**[8] This framework promotes stronger collaboration among academia, industry, and society by transforming research into societal and economic value through co-creation and knowledge transfer. This is put into practice through several codes, including:
  - **Code of practice for industry-academia co-creation (2024):**[9] Provides practical guidance and tools to facilitate partnerships between industry and academia.
  - **Code of practice for citizen engagement (2024):**[10] Offers guidance and tools to create an environment where citizens can participate in knowledge valorisation.
- **European Research Area Policy Agenda 2025-2027 (2025):**[11] Seeks to strengthen links between research, innovation, and market deployment by

[5] Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Valorisation Channels and Tools: Boosting the Transformation of knowledge into new sustainable solutions*, 2020, p. 26, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/480584

[6] Gudek L., Rao M., and Broerse J., *Stakeholder engagement in European research and innovation: An investigation into how and why EU R&I projects develop engagement tools*, Open Res Europe, 5:107, 2025, p. 1, https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.19907.1

[7] COM(2022) 332 final, p. 16.

[8] Council Recommendation on the guiding principles for knowledge valorisation, 2022/2415, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H2415

[9] Commission Recommendation on a Code of Practice on industry-academia co-creation for knowledge valorisation, 2024/774, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32024H0774&qid=1709626992959

[10] Commission Recommendation on a Code of Practice on citizen engagement for knowledge valorisation, 2024/736, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32024H0736&qid=1709626992959

[11] Council recommendation on the European Research Area Policy Agenda 2025-2027, COM(2025) 62 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025DC0062

fostering synergies with education, industrial policy, and the European Skills Agenda, thereby enabling higher education institutions to engage more closely with businesses, government agencies, and civil society.

Benefits of collaboration with non-academic partners

Collaboration with non-academic partners in research and innovation generates several benefits for higher education institutions and society, including:

1. **Enhanced relevance and quality of research**: Collaboration with non-academic partners bridges academic research with practical applications, ensuring that research projects are aligned with societal challenges and facilitating the "flow of academic knowledge and results into industries."[12] It can also "enhance academic research output and generate university benefits via better research evaluations and higher levels of funding."[13]
2. **Improved learning outcomes**: Collaboration with non-academic partners offers students and researchers "the opportunity to gain skills not available within the university and to work on real-world problems".[14] They provide "practical experience through internships, co-op programmes [cooperative learning programmes], and collaborative research projects."[15]
3. **Support for entrepreneurship education**: Non-academic partners can engage in supporting services related to incubation, mentoring, coaching, professors of practice, professional networking, financing, business development, among others, "to support the transformation of ideas into innovations."[16]
4. **Talent attraction and retention at the regional level**: Collaboration with non-academic partners provides attractive alternative career paths, especially for early-career researchers interested in non-academic careers in the local innovation ecosystem. Industrial doctorates, for example, "may shape their future career paths, potentially better aligning them with industry needs."[17]

---

[12] Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2020, p. 12.

[13] Norn, M., and Alkærsig, L., *Fostering academic entrepreneurship: A practitioner-oriented review of the literature on academic entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on the digital sciences*, DIREC, 2024, p. 18, https://direc.dk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Fostering-academic-entrepreneurship-_-review-_-final-report-_-October-2024.pdf

[14] Kinnaird, Y., and Drogoul, L., *Models of engagement for PhDs with non-academic partners*, CESAER, 2024, p. 11, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13920218

[15] Ibid, p. 4.

[16] Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2020, p. 21.

[17] Kinnaird and Drogoul, 2024, p. 8.

5. **Enhanced impact in the local innovation ecosystem**: Collaboration with non-academic partners enhances innovation efforts and promotes knowledge transfer, contributing to innovation, economic growth, job creation, and global competitiveness. The "translation and commercialisation of research-derived knowledge and technology",[18] through activities like patenting, spin-off formation, and collaboration with industry, contributes to creating economic and societal value.

Collaboration mechanisms with non-academic stakeholders

Higher education institutions use several support mechanisms that create organisational conditions to foster sustained engagement with non-academic partners. These dedicated mechanisms include knowledge transfer offices (KTOs), technology transfer offices (TTOs), liaison units, incubators, accelerators, and science parks, among others. They "improve the conditions for knowledge transfer by serving as the first contact point for researchers and industry looking for new opportunities."[19] These mechanisms link researchers and innovators with mentors, co-founders, entrepreneurs, citizens, local businesses, and other support systems (regional incubators, accelerators, and networks).

In addition to formal structures, informal collaborations often stem from personal networks and shared research interests. Researchers frequently initiate contract research, consulting, and joint experiments. Informal networks, personal relationships, and disciplinary communities often drive this engagement. These informal collaborations usually serve as an entry point for more formal collaborations, helping to foster a culture of sustained engagement with external stakeholders within higher education institutions.

The following table provides an overview of diverse collaboration mechanisms in higher education to foster partnerships with non-academic stakeholders.

[18] Ibid, p. 4.

[19] Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2020, p. 20.

Table 1. Collaboration tools with non-academic stakeholders in research and innovation

Stakeholders	Collaboration tools
Industry (Businesses, SMEs [Small and Medium-sized Enterprises], and start-ups)	– Joint research and development projects. – Contract research and consultancy. – Mixed research teams and joint laboratories. – Researcher mobility and staff exchange programmes (Academia to industry/industry to academia), including professors of practice, visiting industrial fellow programmes, and industrial PhDs. – Entrepreneurship support (training, seed funding, mentoring). – Collaborative infrastructures (science parks, technology centres). – Licensing and commercialisation of intellectual property.
Public authorities (Municipalities, regional governmental bodies)	– Regional innovation ecosystems and clusters. – Participation of regional strategy boards, task forces, and expert groups dealing with Smart Specialisation Strategies and other policy priorities. – Policy advisory services and regional foresight studies. – University–municipality partnerships for social development projects.
Civil society (Associations, non-governmental organisations, citizens)	– Co-creation workshops, living labs, science shops. – Citizen science projects. – Open science/citizen science digital platforms. – Hackathons and innovation challenges. – Participatory and community-based research. – Public dialogues, science cafés, community forums. – Educational outreach and service learning.

Source: CEI team.

Barriers to effectively fostering partnerships with non-academic stakeholders

Navigating the complex landscape of university-non-academic stakeholder collaborations for innovation presents several obstacles. Below, we gathered some key barriers:

— **Skills and capacity gaps:** Researchers often lack the skills to engage with non-academic partners effectively, such as networking and managing

partnerships. "Training and career development of researchers insufficiently focus on entrepreneurship or opportunities outside academia."[20] This deficiency can make it challenging to promote the development of bottom-up initiatives.

- **Deficiencies in incentives and rewards:** The academic reward systems typically prioritise scientific publications and citations, often marginalising knowledge valorisation activities. An important driver for improving academy-industry interactions would be to "make achievements in knowledge valorisation part of a researcher's career evaluation."[21] This is enhanced by "insufficient work time allocated by the university for academics' UBC [university-business collaboration] activities."[22]

- **Difficulties in tracking informal collaboration**: While formal collaborations are measurable, informal collaboration between academics and industry is often hard to track. These "informal linkages between faculty members and industry, knowledge exchanges in conferences, and specialised media"[23] are crucial for transferring knowledge and innovation. However, measuring these activities is difficult, making it challenging to understand and support their full impact.

- **Navigating differing motivations and intellectual property**: Frictions can arise from "differing perceptions between academia and industry, administrative hurdles, and the balance between basic and commercial research."[24] The tension between open science and the commercial logic of intellectual property ownership can be challenging, especially when collaborative efforts lead to marketable products, potentially affecting open access. This issue also affects cross-border collaboration, posing challenges for the "management of intellectual assets in the context of international R&I [research and innovation] cooperation."[25]

- **Difficulties in engaging citizens**: Engaging citizens in fields such as science, technology, and innovation is challenging because these are "seen by outsiders as being the purview of experts, disconnected from people's everyday lives and concerns – in contrast, for example, to education or

[20] Communication on A new ERA for Research and Innovation, COM(2020) 628 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52020DC0628

[21] Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2020, p. 14.

[22] Galan Muros, V., *Basis of UBC and UBC Ecosystem*: *Spanning Boundaries Program*, 2021, https://uiin.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/D1S2_UBC-Ecosystem.pdf

[23] OECD, 2019, p. 33.

[24] Kinnaird and Drogoul, 2024, p. 11.

[25] Council Recommendation on the guiding principles for knowledge valorisation, 2022/2415, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reco/2022/2415/oj/eng

health issues."[26] This is challenging, especially in processes of prototyping, where a plurality of voices is needed.

— **Lack of institutional capacity and resources**: "Higher education, research and technology infrastructures (…) in less innovative regions in particular, currently lack the incentives, experience and resources necessary to engage more effectively with regional and international partners in industry."[27]

Focus and key questions for the webinar

The webinar, Beyond the Institutional Walls: Partnerships with External Stakeholders, will explore how higher education institutions can effectively engage non-academic stakeholders to bridge the gap between research and innovation. The session will provide insights into fostering collaborations for regional development and innovation. Key questions guiding the discussion will include:

— How can universities overcome structural barriers, such as a lack of institutional capacity, to engage in continuous co-creation with non-academic partners?

— What incentives are necessary to ensure effective and sustainable collaboration between higher education, businesses, and civil society?

— What support services are needed to enable researchers to develop partnerships with non-academic partners?

Share your good practices regarding 'Bridging the Innovation Gap in Higher Education' to enrich the final report for this thematic strand of the CEI community. The call focuses on:

- **Partnerships** between higher education institutions and non-academic stakeholders.
- **Support services** for research-based innovation.
- **Capacity-building** for researchers, innovators, and support staff.

Contribute your experience in the CEI community's call for good practices here!

[26] OECD, *Stakeholder engagement and collaboration in STI for the green transition*, Policy Brief, 2024, p. 4, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/12/stakeholder-engagement-and-collaboration-in-sti-for-the-green-transition_8f76852a/80de5e48-en.pdf

[27] Communication on A New European Innovation Agenda, COM(2022) 332 final, p.16, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0332

References

Commission Recommendation on a Code of Practice on citizen engagement for knowledge valorisation, 2024/736, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32024H0736&qid=1709626992959

Commission Recommendation on a Code of Practice on industry-academia co-creation for knowledge valorisation, 2024/774, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32024H0774&qid=1709626992959

Communication on A New European Innovation Agenda, COM(2022) 332 final, p. 16, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0332

Council recommendation on the European Research Area Policy Agenda 2025-2027, COM(2025) 62 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025DC0062

Council Recommendation on the guiding principles for knowledge valorisation, 2022/2415, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H2415

Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Valorisation Channels and Tools*: *Boosting the Transformation of knowledge into new sustainable solutions*, 2020, p. 26, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/480584

Finardi, U., *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, In: Sattler, K., 21st Century Nanoscience – A Handbook, CRC Press, https://doi.org/10.1201/9780429351631

Galan Muros, V., *Basis of UBC and UBC Ecosystem*: *Spanning Boundaries Program*, 2021, https://uiin.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/D1S2_UBC-Ecosystem.pdf

Gudek L., Rao M., and Broerse J., *Stakeholder engagement in European research and innovation*: *An investigation into how and why EU R&I projects develop engagement tools*, Open Res Europe, 5:107, 2025, p. 1, https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.19907.1

Kinnaird, Y., and Drogoul, L., *Models of engagement for PhDs with non-academic partners*, CESAER, 2024, p. 11, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13920218

Norn, M., and Alkærsig, L., *Fostering academic entrepreneurship*: *A practitioner-oriented review of the literature on academic entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on the digital sciences*, DIREC, 2024, p. 18, https://direc.dk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Fostering-academic-entrepreneurship-_-review-_-final-report-_-October-2024.pdf

OECD, *Stakeholder engagement and collaboration in STI for the green transition*, Policy Brief, 2024, p. 4, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/12/stake

holder-engagement-and-collaboration-in-sti-for-the-green-transition_8f76852a/80de5e48-en.pdf

OECD, *University-Industry Collaboration: New Evidence and Policy Options*, OECD Publishing, 2019, p. 90, https://doi.org/10.1787/e9c1e648-en