



# Focus Groups Results, UAB

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The focus groups were carried out with the valuable collaboration of the following individuals:

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## INTRODUCTION

Universities play a critical role in addressing today's societal and environmental challenges, yet many partnerships remain narrowly focused and short-lived. **PARTNER4IMPACT responds to this gap by equipping higher education institutions with practical tools, frameworks, and guidance to develop partnerships that are intentional, inclusive, and education-driven.** The project brings together research, practice, and stakeholder insight to support universities in building collaborations that matter — for learners, institutions, and society at large.

PARTNER4IMPACT is an Erasmus+ project that aims to **rethink how universities collaborate — placing education, inclusion, and societal value at the center of partnerships.** By working closely with universities and external stakeholders, the project aims to support more intentional, responsible, and impactful collaboration practices across Europe.

With this objective, the project will **develop a framework to facilitate collaboration between universities and external actors, particularly social and impactful organisations.** The consortium comprises four participating universities — Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy), Lund University (Sweden), Technological University Dublin (Ireland), and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain) — and one coordinating organization, the University–Industry Innovation Network (The Netherlands).

During the first phase of the project, **a regional desk research and four case studies were conducted by each participating university. Together with the focus groups presented in this report, these inputs will inform the development of the collaboration framework.** The framework will subsequently **be piloted across the participating universities** to validate its effectiveness and assess its replicability.

Within this context, **three focus groups** were conducted with three distinct stakeholder groups — external stakeholders, HEI representatives, and students — to **obtain real experiences of educational collaborations between the university and public, private, and social organizations.** The focus groups aimed to identify the benefits, challenges, and impacts of these collaborations, as well as areas for improvement.

PARTNER4IMPACT contributes to the **UAB's mission by strengthening its connection with society and the local context through partnerships with external actors, particularly those addressing pressing social needs and demands.** Through the development of an institutional framework for impact-driven collaborations, the university will be able to further consolidate ongoing efforts to institutionalize collaborative methodologies such as Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) and Service Learning (SL) at both local and international levels.

# EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

## Collaboration experiences and models

External stakeholders reported **having long-standing collaborations with the university, most frequently through Service Learning (SL) projects linked to bachelor's and master's theses**. Additional partnership models included Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) projects, SL projects integrated into regular subjects, internships, hackathons, and postgraduate courses. Entities also engaged in on-campus activities, including informational talks, career fairs, guided visits, and volunteer programs.

A common theme for many collaborations involved communication and marketing students supporting entities with communication campaigns and redesigning visual identity elements.

From their experiences, **the first contact is usually initiated by the entity**, typically based on a specific need or challenge. **Some organizations approached the challenges office, intended as the main point of contact for external actors, while others relied on personal contacts** and were redirected to relevant staff. After the first collaboration, entities often continued the relationship with professors or employability offices, who initiated new collaboration proposals.

## Benefits and impact

One of the **main benefits highlighted by participants was the knowledge, support, and fresh ideas received from students**, although not all contributions were immediately applicable. Entities initially expected greater knowledge transfer from the university, which many considered a central motivation for collaboration.

Beyond knowledge, **students** – especially those from early academic years – **provided motivation, enthusiasm, and new perspectives**. Entities described collaborating with students as energizing and refreshing.

Entities also benefited from **students' increased awareness of social issues, amplifying the organization's impact, and serving as a potential source of future talent**. Some collaborations, mainly those involving internships or SL final projects, involved students working as independent professionals. This means that, if both parties were satisfied, **some experiences led to employment after graduation**.

Lastly, partnerships sometimes generated opportunities for **networking among participating organizations and public administrations, helping entities understand each other's work and build new connections**.

One participant noted an unexpected long-term impact: many former student collaborators who are now professionals continue to value their involvement many years later and still reference it in their professional profiles. They also continue receiving referrals from them due to the awareness generated by the project. An additional unexpected outcome emerged from partnering with students from academic fields that entities had not previously considered relevant or applicable.

## Challenges

**The most highlighted challenge for external stakeholders, also mentioned by HEI representatives, was the lack of structured communication channels.** They often struggled to identify whom to contact within a large and complex institution without a clear point of contact. Moreover, it was difficult to know which faculties, degrees, or services were most relevant.

This is a two-way challenge: **while entities struggled to identify the right contact, many also received proposals from several university departments.** Participants mentioned that **collaborations rely heavily on personal relationships**, which means that they often collapse when individuals change positions or organizations.

Moreover, **due to standard academic cycles, many collaborations are limited in duration**, making it very difficult to sustain student involvement beyond a few months. There is a need for more flexible internal structures to better adapt to entities' needs and timelines.

These structural limitations sometimes lead to collaborations that overly focus on fulfilling academic requirements rather than organizational needs, **causing mismatches in expectations.** Entities also highlighted the **lack of committed academic mentors capable of bridging academic and organizational goals.**

Lastly, participants stressed the need to strengthen the visibility and positioning of the social sector within the university and among students. Moreover, bureaucratic requirements create difficulties, especially under time constraints.

## Improvements and suggestions

One proposal was to **generate a database with students, professors, technical staff, and other HEI stakeholders** so entities can understand their roles and identify appropriate contacts. A similar database of social entities would help universities map territorial ecosystems and facilitate more accurate matching. **Some of this work already occurs during the highly valued SL events**, where entities and HEI representatives exchange information and connect with other organizations.

**The university should also organize collaboration options into clear co-creation itineraries** with defined conditions and replicable frameworks that reduce bureaucratic burden. These frameworks and agreements should enable students to continue engagement with the same entity beyond a single academic year and clearly state students' responsibilities within the collaboration to reduce misalignments in expectations.

Participants also suggested that collaboration agreements include a final presentation of student projects with entity participation, or other types of **recognition for their work**, which would provide more visibility for entities and address the current lack of feedback. **It is important that this is a structured process so that this does not depend on the will of each individual HEI collaborator.**

Lastly, participants highlighted **the need for a single point of contact to coordinate interactions between HEI stakeholders (students, professors, researchers, etc.) and entities**, reducing duplication and fragmentation in the connection process.

# HEI REPRESENTATIVES

## Collaboration experiences and models

The participants reported **a great array of experiences collaborating with external entities** through SL in subjects and in final theses, CBL projects, internships, microcredentials, and challenges in the framework of European projects (ECIU), as well as entrepreneurship trainings and competitions.

In these collaborations, **they have worked mainly with small social entities**, which are considered most conducive to meaningful student impact. However, they also collaborated with other partners, such as schools, health centers, and internal university units such as the sustainability office or library services.

The participants are also implicated in transversal commissions to promote SL and CBL across faculties, providing teacher training and producing materials and tools to be used across fields of study.

Participants mentioned that **partnerships often began through their personal contacts with entities, but they also mentioned sometimes receiving contacts through the SL office coordinator**. However, **collaborations with personally known entities were consistently more successful** than those emerging from institutional channels.

Once the first collaboration ends, **maintaining the partnership with those entities that generated a successful collaboration is considered essential**, as it reduces work overload. Nevertheless, only about half of subsequent collaborations involved previously partnered entities. The reasoning might be because students do not select those projects, because the projects cannot be further repeated, or other reasons beyond the control of HEI professionals.

## Benefits and impact

In the short term, participants noted that **collaborations with social entities provide useful external contacts for students and staff**, foster active methodologies, and connect learning with real-world contexts. Consequently, **students are more engaged and motivated to work on social challenges**, offering a safe space to **develop professional competencies** such as autonomy, communication, and responsibility. For professors, external relations **enhance the relevance of course content, generate innovation opportunities, and can lead to further collaborations** such as research projects or new agreements.

In the long term, at both personal and university levels, **sustained connections with the local context and community are considered essential** in order to be informed about the territorial ecosystem. In the same vein, students also demanded opportunities to socialize knowledge and co-create with local communities.

## Challenges

The most prominent challenge was that **collaborations are built between individuals rather than institutions**, similar to what was stated by external stakeholders. Then, if a partner changes positions – either within the university or within the entity – the collaboration often breaks down. **The absence of a structured contact channel and institutional database contributes to these disruptions**, leading to duplicated contacts or lost connections.

Similarly, collaborations involving SL and CBL methodologies lack structure. Participants stressed **the need for a clear match between university and entity expectations**, as some organizations anticipated unrealistic levels of student contribution, some could not have a strong commitment due to workload, some did not require university collaboration, and others lacked training to support students in these processes.

Another challenge was **the lack of recognition for the additional work these partnerships require for professors**. Although the benefits are acknowledged, professors undertake significant extra work – coordination, supervision, innovation... – that is not sufficiently recognized<sup>1</sup>. In the same vein, some partnership agreements are not reflected in university digital systems, which only register research projects and activities, **leaving no mechanism for logging the additional academic work generated by collaborations**.

## Improvements and suggestions

To address these issues, participants suggested **establishing a single point of contact to mediate between entities and HEI professionals**, helping avoid duplicated conversations and presenting a unified institutional identity. They also proposed **creating a database of current and past collaborations** to identify potential contacts and inspire future partnerships. This database could begin by collecting formal collaboration agreements and be expanded with informal collaborations. HEI professionals should be able to update it and consult it.

Nevertheless, some participants noted that this approach may have limited effectiveness, as collaborations tend to be shaped by preexisting personal connections.

As in the entities' focus group, participants recommended **maintaining and reinforcing SL events**, where entities and HEI professionals share their activities and experiences. A similar event could be organized for internal HEI professionals involved in SL and CBL projects.

Finally, participants proposed **creating a training course** (e.g. short instructional videos or a microcredential) **to systematize information for entities on how to accompany students and**

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For final degree projects, if they are based on a SL methodology, teachers have 3 additional hours for tutoring. However, this is insufficient recognition, and not all collaboration models are compensated. [https://www.uab.cat/doc/DOC\\_Reconeixement\\_altresactivitats\\_docents](https://www.uab.cat/doc/DOC_Reconeixement_altresactivitats_docents)

**engage in impactful partnerships with universities.** A first version of this microcredential has already been developed, and the proposal is now being put into practice<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Microcredential in How to support university students in Service-Learning (SL) and Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) projects. Training for partner organizations.

# STUDENTS

## Collaboration experiences and models

The participants of this focus group reported experience in **four collaboration formats with external entities**: bachelor's theses using SL methodology, subjects using CBL or SL, challenges and micromodules of european projects (ECIU), and internships.

Although the experiences had similar elements, **there were some differences between methodologies**. For example, for SL bachelor's theses, students selected their topic from a predefined list of proposed titles. Projects incorporating SL were marked accordingly, but since students often did not know the meaning of the SL acronym, **their choice was typically based on the topic title or the tutor, rather than the methodological approach**.

In contrast, in many subjects using CBL and in internships, students did not have a choice; the collaboration was presented as part of the academic structure. Therefore, **all students in that bachelor's program participate in the collaboration between the university and the entities**. In some cases, students were responsible for selecting and contacting the social entities with whom they would collaborate, while in other cases the partnerships were predetermined.

## Benefits and impact

One of the main benefits reported was **the opportunity to apply knowledge and competencies acquired in theoretical classes to practical, real-world contexts**. This provided a valuable first contact with the professional environment in a controlled, structured, and supported setting. Moreover, participants perceived that international experiences enhanced their competencies in multicultural collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and open-mindedness.

Another benefit was the possibility of **generating tangible social impact** through their collaborations and knowing that their contributions were helpful for direct beneficiaries, thereby **extending the value of their work beyond academic boundaries and deepening their understanding of real social challenges**.

A participant emphasized that the SL methodology allowed students to iterate on the same project and engage more deeply with the challenge. Moreover, because the SL collaboration formed part of an individual final thesis, the responsibility and impact depended directly on the student, which enhanced their sense of contribution.

On the other hand, **CBL subjects and ECIU challenges allowed students to work in an interdisciplinary context** and learn from each other, acquiring new perspectives for problem-solving.

Regarding timing, participants observed benefits to collaborating with external entities across all years of the degree. However, they remarked that during the early years of the degree, students would benefit from substantial support from HEI professionals or from adopting an observant rather than fully participatory role. For now, benefits are most evident in the final years, when students can apply the full set of competencies developed over their studies.

One participant noted unexpectedly rapid benefits for direct users. Beneficiaries were highly appreciative of the students' work, and professionals were receptive to incorporating the students' contributions into their practice.

## Challenges

One challenge identified by participants was **the difficulty in aligning the demands of external entities with the academic requirements of the university**. Students sometimes found themselves intermediating between the two actors, and direct communication between the entity and the university staff was sometimes limited.

Another challenge was **the mismatch in working rhythms between students, the university, and the entities**. External organizations were often overloaded with work and could not always prioritize student involvement, while students were bound by academic deadlines.

Finally, participants noted that **some projects lacked follow-up**. Students completed the project and sent the results to the entity but often received no information about the impact, how the results were used, or feedback on the quality of their contribution.

## Improvements and suggestions

One improvement suggested by participants was to **ensure that entities have a structured induction process for students**, including scheduled meetings and clear guidelines. They also requested **clearer guidance from academic tutors** regarding how the project will be developed, expectations, and methodological procedures.

Along these lines, participants proposed **organizing preparatory spaces before projects begin, where professors present collaborative methodologies and entities outline their needs and challenges**, enabling students to make better-informed decisions. Participants also mentioned the importance of **aligning expectations among all parties at the outset and the need for greater flexibility in academic requirements**, especially deadlines. Another proposal linked to the challenges described is to **ensure that students receive information on how their work is being used and what impact it generates**.

Moreover, participants proposed an increased portfolio of longer-term collaboration opportunities. Many international micromodules and challenges only last a few days, and students called for internships or longer forms of collaboration with a greater focus on professional development.

Lastly, participants expressed the desire for a wider range of social entities to choose from for their internships, as many of the current options available to them were in the private sector. They were particularly interested in collaborating with social entities engaged in direct work with beneficiaries, which offer a greater sense of impact and contribution.

## CONCLUSIONS

The contributions of the three focus groups — external organisations, university staff, and students — highlight that **educational collaborations between the UAB and its surrounding ecosystem generate significant value in both educational and social terms**. Despite the diversity of formats and experiences, a shared narrative emerges: partnerships between universities and external entities hold strong transformative potential, yet this potential is only fully realised when **clear collaboration structures, formal communication channels, and appropriate support mechanisms for both entities and students are in place**.

On the one hand, all stakeholder groups agree on the added value of **working on real-world challenges**, which enables students to develop professional competencies, gain a deeper understanding of their local context, and generate tangible social impact. For external organisations, collaboration with students brings fresh ideas, increased awareness of the organisation's mission, and, in some cases, longer-term relationships that continue through employment opportunities. For academic staff, these initiatives give meaning to active learning methodologies, foster teaching innovation, and open up opportunities for research and knowledge transfer.

On the other hand, the focus groups also reveal shared challenges that limit the scope and sustainability of these collaborations. The most pervasive issue is **the strong reliance on personal relationships**, which makes partnerships vulnerable when individuals change roles or leave an organisation. This lack of institutional structure is further reflected in difficulties identifying clear points of contact, the existence of uncoordinated communications from different university units, and the absence of systems to track, recognise, and ensure continuity of collaborations over time. In addition, **the lack of systematic feedback for all parties involved**, together with misalignment between academic timelines and the operational rhythms of external organisations, often leads to mismatched expectations and may reduce the overall quality of the collaborative experience.

Finally, the focus groups offer clear guidance on how to move towards a more structured and sustainable collaboration model. Key proposed improvements include **the establishment of a single point of contact and an institutional database** capturing both formal and informal collaborations, **the strengthening of exchange and networking events** between the university and external entities, and **greater institutional recognition of the coordination and support work** associated with SL and CBL methodologies.

Overall, the focus group findings confirm that UAB has a solid foundation of experience and motivation to consolidate a transformative collaboration model. However, this foundation requires a structural boost to **move from partnerships sustained by individual commitment towards an institutionalized and long-term sustainable model**. In this sense, the collected evidence serves as the starting point for the next phases of the project, including **the development of an impact-oriented collaboration framework and the implementation of pilot actions across the participating universities**. The framework that PARTNER4IMPACT will develop and validate therefore represents a strategic opportunity to strengthen this collaborative ecosystem, enhance the quality and impact of partnerships, and advance towards a university that is more connected and committed to its territory and to society as a whole.





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