



# How higher education is supporting regions, cities and companies to recover and thrive -

Webinar organised by the European Commission;  
Associação Porto Business School (PBS) – University of  
Porto; Circle of Sustainable Europe (CoSE)

European Week of the Regions and Cities 2021

Thematic cluster: Green transition: for a sustainable and green recovery

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## 0. Summary

On 13th October, the European Commission (DG EAC Unit C1) in collaboration with Associação Porto Business School (PBS) at the University of Porto, with the Circle of Sustainable Europe (CoSE), held a webinar as part of the 19<sup>th</sup> edition of the **European Week of the Regions and Cities 2021** (11-14 October).

The webinar was organised within the thematic cluster **Green Transition: for a Sustainable and Green Recovery**. The session focused on the challenge: “**How higher education is supporting regions, cities and companies to recover and thrive**” and brought together 87 registered participants from different backgrounds across higher education, policy, and business.

Some of the main points highlighted during the session were:

- Countries will benefit from having innovative higher education systems that coordinate strongly with labour market actors. Such coordination is essential in recovering from the long-term challenges accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic such as skills mismatch between HE and labour market.
- Good examples exist of the quintuple helix at work, combining higher education research, business, regional governance, and civil society, along with the natural environment.
- HEIs have a role as **educators**; **connectors**; and **building intelligence as knowledge producers** which can be harvested to support regions, cities, and companies.

For more information, please read the meeting report [here](#).

### Take away message:

*Higher education institutions have a strong role in recognising and responding to the many challenges (labour market, business, social, environmental ...) accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have a key role to play as educators, making sure learners are empowered to take action and to contribute to solving European and global challenges. They are essential connectors (knowledge sharing between business and education), building and sharing intelligence as knowledge producers that can inform policy, and to develop their local and regional ecosystems.*

## 1.1. Welcome

The webinar was moderated by **Joerg Niehoff, DG EAC, European Commission**. He reminded participants that the webinar was focused on how higher education (HE) is supporting regions, cities and companies to recover and thrive in the post-pandemic context.

He welcomed participants and summarised the theme of the session. He noted some of the initiatives in this area where DG EAC collaborates with DG REGIO to empower HE collaboration and regional recovery from COVID-19. He then welcomed the co-organisers and outlined the agenda.

First, three experts would set the scene through presentations highlighting examples of HE initiatives followed by Q&As with the audience. There would then be a panel discussion on the different tools higher education institutions (HEIs) use that are linked to sustainability, smart cities and regional development that can help cities and regions to recover and thrive.

## 1.2. Setting the scene

**Andrea Rosalinda Hofer**, OECD and **Urban Bren**, (University of Mariburn, Slovenia) presented the LMRO (Labour Market Relevance and Outcomes of HE) partnership initiative, focusing on what HEIs can do to cultivate green skills. The LMRO initiative in partnership with the OECD aims to understand how HE can be more proactive and well-focused for the labour market and better equipped to inform policy.

Given the challenges accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic, developing innovative HE systems can benefit regions to have a broader scope of co-ordination with labour market actors. In turn, a suite of public policies and institutional practices can assist HEIs in recognising and responding particularly to changing labour market needs.

**Rosalinda Hofer** outlined ways in which labour markets are transforming and the focus on regions and cities through three mechanisms:

- (1) **Monitoring emerging skills needs:** HE can introduce new mechanisms to detect labour market needs early on, and go beyond traditional methods such as surveys, administrative data, interviews and focus groups. However, there are still challenges and a need to standardise data that are already available.
- (2) **Updating education curricula:** new formats can be introduced to involve more stakeholders. This would be illustrated by a project-based example.
- (3) **Innovation in teaching and learning:** there is a need for more challenge-based education and new education formats, for example, in entrepreneurship.

The LMRO aims to improve co-ordination between labour market dynamics and HEIs through country-specific examinations and peer learning activities. The project features country-specific analyses, a self-reflection questionnaire by HEIs, and peer learning activities within and among countries. Four countries (Slovenia, Austria, Hungary, and Portugal) have participated in the LMRO Project. The LMRO project will also complement and support related initiatives, including the European Commission's DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture's Department's work on the EIT and Innovation, in particular the HEInnovate tool.

**Urban Bren** presented a university project in Slovenia which is addressing labour market trends. The project set up an innovation fund for students allowing them to compete on a call for ideas for innovative start-up projects. Students use the knowledge learned during the course and connect with experienced academics who know how to put ideas and products on the market. The approach

is boosted by seed funding from the university student fund. The project has received more than 40 applications showing a high volume of interesting ideas that could be ‘harvested’ for wider benefit.

He then outlined the approach to teaching and learning in the Slovenian scheme, which is based on ongoing review of teaching and learning techniques, and a focus on more student-oriented teaching and micro credentials (for lifelong learning). He noted that this approach was particularly useful and much appreciated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

He emphasised how collaboration between academia and industries need to build understanding and mutual trust, starting with small common projects (such as a Master thesis), then scaled up by applying to common projects funded by regions, and then leading to collaboration on industrial projects. An example of such a project would be further explored during the panel discussion.

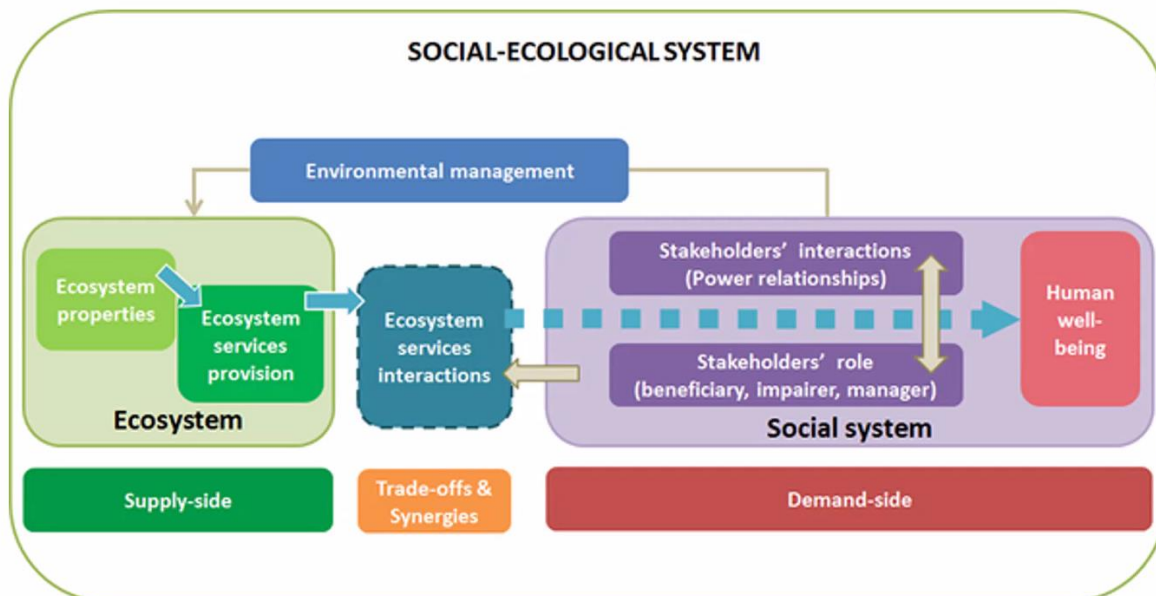
During the **Q&A**, participants discussed the LMRO projects. Ms Rosalinda clarified that a pilot is expected by the end of the year in the four countries with a roll out to further countries.

The next speaker was **Frank Croes, Program Director Circular Economy**, at the Centre of Multiple Value creation at HAN University of Applied Sciences. He presented the role of the Centre in contributing to co-creation with partners in the triple helix of a smart, sustainable, and green metropolitan area.

A short video testimonial of **Jan Markink, Provincial executive Gelderland** was firstly shown to present the experience of Gelderland.

Frank Croes then explained that the Centre is built on the idea of a holistic approach (Figure 1), where the local area around the Centre is seen as an ecosystem that can be adapted by society to become more balanced and to offer ecosystem systems.

Figure 1: The Social-Ecological system



Source: Speaker presentation – Frank Croes, 2021.

During the **Q&A** he emphasized the importance of multidisciplinary co-creation using case studies as an important way to teach students.

**Catarina Reis, Project Officer, Centre for Business Innovation at Porto Business School** then presented tools that HE can use to support regions, cities and companies. Porto Business School is a non-profit association that emerged from a collaboration between the university and companies, having a close collaboration with businesses, particularly through adult education.

She presented the different roles of HE: **educator** (about sustainability, digitalisation); **connector** (creating formal and informal partnerships such as hackathons, or competitions helping regional

achievement of SDGs); and **intelligence producer** (HE can provide research and methodologies relevant for business projects).

She highlighted some examples such as RE-ACT (Erasmus+), an initiative developed by the HEInnovate initiative of the OECD and European Commission that has allowed the Porto Business School to develop a self-reflection tool to monitor SDGs at regional level.

### 1.3. Panel discussion

The panel discussion was opened by **Cátia Santana, Project Officer, Centre for Business Innovation at Porto Business School** who described the experience of the School during the pandemic. The pandemic accelerated the incorporation of sustainability into the Porto Business School curricula and activities.

An impact study of SMEs in was undertaken. Results showed that only 50% companies have concerns about the circular economy. There are still myths around sustainability and there is a need to better define the term. Also, while almost all companies recognised the need for incorporating sustainability in business, they often believed there is no funding to boost participation in these types of initiatives. As a possible solution, she said that it was important to promote projects, for example through a transversal committee within the business.

**Urban Bren, Vice-Rector for Knowledge Transfer, University of Maribor** described a project showing how research in HE has supported business. In the example project, wood cuttings were discovered to contain high value chemicals with antimicrobial properties that can be re-used. A company has therefore been involved to extract the compounds from the cuttings. These compounds can then be used to replace antibiotics added to animal feed. He explained this was important as EU legislation no longer permitted the use of particular antibiotics in agriculture. He also explained that the chemicals found in wood cuttings have other applications in wine and cognacs, giving them a bitter taste. They project is now also investigating making a food additive for human use because wood cuttings have favourable antioxidant properties and anticancerogenic properties.

The project can be said to be energetically circular. Once the chemicals have been extracted from the wood cuttings, the leftover wood can be used to heat the vat which is used for the extraction process. Overall, the project helps develop the region and could be used as an example scalable to other regions. The project has been co-funded with EU Regional Funding, and it highlights the cooperation between industry and academia to problem-solve environmental and health issues, with regional funding assistance.

**Mr Croes** pointed out that ownership of sustainability starts with strategic goals and objectives. That is why his Centre helps companies to develop strategies that take the SDGs into account. He also highlighted teachers have a role in demystifying entrepreneurs' sometimes false perception that sustainability is unprofitable. Teaching should show entrepreneurs that sustainability and economic prosperity go together through research and analysis, and it should provide practical applications of how it can be brought together in a multi-capital business approach. Together, this motivates students and business to partner to co-create.

Joining the discussion, participants discussed the role of multidisciplinary approaches (e.g. collaboration with the Law faculty to understand legal requirements); how different stakeholders can contribute to the 17 SDGs, each focusing on their unique strengths; or the need to continue working on bringing together research and business to collaborate.

### 1.4. Conclusions and closing remarks

The moderator brought the discussion to an end thanking the speakers, the event organisers and all those who participated in and contributed to the discussion.

To join the University-Business Cooperation (UBC) network, join the Microsoft Teams Group, stay updated and get involved in future activities of the UBC network, please contact the European Commission:

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