



The HEInnovate Foundation Guide

A practical introduction for Higher Education Institutions



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What is HEInnovate?

HEInnovate is an initiative of the European Commission and the OECD that helps higher education institutions become more entrepreneurial, innovative and future-ready. It offers a **complete framework for transformation and change**, guiding you from reflection to action. With HEInnovate, your university can assess its current position, design action plans and access practical resources to turn ideas into impact.

At the core of HEInnovate is a self-assessment framework structured around **eight dimensions**, which captures key aspects of innovation and entrepreneurship in higher education institutions.

The HEInnovate journey unfolds through **five interconnected stages**, forming a cycle of continuous improvement (**Figure 1**Error! Reference source not found.). Each stage has distinct objectives, activities and outcomes, **all of which build upon one another to catalyse transformation** across institutions and alliances:

Step 0: Orientation – Familiarise yourself with HEInnovate's framework, resources, and methodology before beginning the formal assessment process.

Step 1: Reflect – Conduct a collaborative self-assessment in which diverse stakeholders complete the HEInnovate survey. This will generate a rich evidence base that captures multiple perspectives on your institution's innovation and entrepreneurship capacity.

Step 2: Engage – Convene stakeholders to discuss assessment results through structured dialogue. This stage prioritises conversation over scores—comparing perceptions, exploring differences, identifying patterns, and building shared understanding through facilitated workshops.

Step 3: Plan – Translate insights into action by designing concrete initiatives, setting measurable goals, and establishing strategic priorities based on identified strengths and improvement areas.

Step 4: Act – Implement planned actions, monitor progress against objectives, measure outcomes, and use learnings to inform the next reflection cycle.



FIGURE 1. THE HEINNOVATE JOURNEY

! This Foundation Guide supports higher education institutions engaging with HEInnovate. For use within a university alliance, please refer to [The HEInnovate Transformation Journey: A practical guide for European Universities alliances](#).

Why HEInnovate for Higher Education Institutions?

Higher education institutions operate in an increasingly complex and demanding environment. They are expected to respond to rapid technological change, evolving labour market needs, societal challenges and growing expectations from students, policymakers and external partners. At the same time, institutions differ widely in their missions, resources, organisational cultures and levels of experience with innovation and entrepreneurship.

Against this backdrop, higher education institutions often face common questions: How can we develop a shared understanding of innovation and entrepreneurship across the institution? How do we move from ambition to concrete action? How can we prioritise change when resources are limited? And how can we involve staff, students and external stakeholders in a meaningful and structured way?

HEInnovate provides a structured, evidence-based framework to support institutional reflection, dialogue and transformation. It helps higher education institutions assess their current practices, identify strengths and gaps, and define realistic pathways for strengthening their innovation and entrepreneurship capacity. Rather than prescribing one model, HEInnovate supports higher education institutions in developing approaches that are aligned with their mission, context and strategic priorities.

For individual higher education institutions, HEInnovate offers several key benefits:

Developing a shared understanding and strategic direction

- Create a common language around innovation and entrepreneurship across leadership, academic and professional staff.
- Build a shared understanding of what innovation means in the specific institutional context.
- Support strategic discussions by making implicit assumptions explicit.
- Align institutional ambitions with existing missions, values and priorities.

Supporting evidence-based self-assessment and prioritisation

- Provide a structured framework to assess current practices across key dimensions of innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Identify strengths to build on and areas where targeted improvement is needed.
- Support informed decision-making by moving beyond anecdotal evidence.
- Help prioritise actions in contexts with limited time, capacity or resources.

Strengthening institutional coherence and coordination

- Bridge gaps between strategy and day-to-day practice.
- Foster dialogue across faculties, departments and support units.
- Improve coordination between teaching, research, knowledge exchange and external engagement activities.

- Support alignment between leadership decisions and operational implementation.

Enabling organisational learning and continuous improvement

- Encourage systematic reflection rather than one-off initiatives.
- Support learning from internal experiences and past initiatives.
- Establish feedback loops that allow institutions to monitor progress over time.
- Promote adaptive approaches to strategy and organisational development.

Engaging and mobilising institutional stakeholders

- Involve staff, students and external partners in structured and participatory reflection processes.
- Build ownership and commitment to institutional change initiatives.
- Increase transparency around goals, challenges and priorities.
- Strengthen internal communication and understanding of innovation-related activities.

Supporting accountability and external communication

- Generate structured evidence that can support reporting to funders, authorities or governing bodies.
- Demonstrate progress and development over time in a transparent way.
- Provide a credible narrative of institutional change to external stakeholders.

The HEInnovate journey in an institutional context

HEInnovate's value and relevance for higher education institutions lie not only in identifying current strengths and areas for improvement, but in fostering a shared culture of reflection, learning and continuous development across the institution. When used effectively, HEInnovate supports higher education institutions in making sense of complex challenges, aligning stakeholders around common priorities and strengthening their capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship in a way that is consistent with their mission and context.

For this reason, HEInnovate is most effective when approached as a structured, inclusive and iterative process rather than as a one-off diagnostic exercise. It can support both small-scale reflection and more comprehensive institutional transformation, depending on the institution's ambitions, resources and readiness.

There are multiple ways to implement HEInnovate at institutional level. This guide presents a range of possible approaches, allowing users to select those that best suit their needs and starting point. The following section provides guidance for each stage of the HEInnovate user journey, supporting institutions in navigating the process step by step while adapting it to their specific organisational structures, priorities and capacities.

Two coloured boxes will appear within each step:

Quick Start

Blue boxes outline a light-touch approach to using HEInnovate, enabling institutions to begin with limited preparation. Additional guidance outside the boxes supports further development and scaling over time.

Key implementation points

Higher education institutions differ in size, structure, and organisational complexity. The highlighted boxes draw attention to practical points that may support implementation of the HEInnovate framework, including choices to be made, common challenges and aspects that may require particular attention in different institutional contexts.

Step 0. Orientation: Setting the stage

As a first step, institutions are encouraged to familiarise themselves with [HEInnovate](#) and prepare for the process ahead. This involves understanding what the tool offers and clarifying how it may be used in the institutional context. Preparation does not require a full commitment or immediate institution-wide implementation. Institutions can begin by exploring the framework, reflecting on their initial objectives and considering how HEInnovate could support existing priorities or initiatives.

Quick Start: Preparing the ground

If you want to begin with a light-touch approach, you can start by focusing on preparation rather than full implementation.

A quick start may include:

1. Exploring the HEInnovate platform to understand the [eight dimensions](#) and the type of questions asked.
2. Clarifying a preliminary purpose for using HEInnovate (e.g. exploration, strategy development, or learning).
3. Identifying a small group of colleagues who could act as initial participants or sounding board.
4. Agreeing whether the next step will be a pilot self-assessment or further internal preparation.

This approach allows institutions to familiarise themselves with HEInnovate, test interest and build confidence before committing to a broader process.

Key implementation points

Before starting the HEInnovate process, it may be useful to consider the following points:

- **Purpose and expectations:** Be clear about what you want to achieve at this stage (e.g. exploration, learning, strategy input). Avoid framing the exercise as an evaluation or performance review.

- **Scope:** Decide whether you are preparing for a small pilot or a broader institutional process. This will influence who you involve and how much coordination is needed.
- **Leadership awareness:** While formal endorsement is not required at this stage, informing relevant leadership or management levels can help manage expectations and support future steps.
- **Resources and timing:** Consider the time and capacity available to coordinate the process, particularly if you plan to involve multiple units or stakeholder groups.

These points are intended to support preparation and alignment. Institutions can revisit and refine them as the HEInnovate journey progresses.

Step 1. Reflect: Assess your own institution

The Reflect stage involves collecting perspectives on the institution's innovation and entrepreneurship capacity through the HEInnovate self-assessment. Participants complete the assessment individually, drawing on their own knowledge and experience. The platform aggregates responses and presents them in a visual format, highlighting patterns across the eight dimensions while preserving individual anonymity. These results provide an evidence base that supports collective reflection and discussion.

To get started with this step, you can follow the suggestions below:

Quick start: Running a first self-assessment

If this is your first time using HEInnovate, you can begin with a small and focused [self-assessment](#).

A quick start may include:

1. Creating one self-assessment group on the HEInnovate platform.
2. Inviting a limited number of participants who are familiar with the institution's innovation and entrepreneurship active ties.
3. Asking participants to complete the self-assessment individually, based on their own experience and knowledge.
4. Reviewing the aggregated results to identify initial patterns and discussion points.

This approach allows institutions to become familiar with the tool and its outputs before deciding whether to expand participation in later stages.

See [A Quick Start Guide: Self-Assessment for the Individual & Group Participants, and Organisers](#) for a detailed step by step description of completing self-assessment.

HEInnovate's value increases as a wider range of perspectives is brought into the process. Where capacity and interest allow, the self-assessment can be scaled up to include a broader set of internal and external stakeholders. If this is the case:

Define the scope of the larger self-assessment you will implement.

You can have a:

- **Focused participation** (a smaller, strategically selected group) is easier to manage and can still generate meaningful insights when participants are carefully chosen.
- **Broader participation** (a larger group representing diverse roles) offers more comprehensive coverage and fosters wider engagement but requires greater coordination.

To support this decision, you can refer to the stakeholder matrix in the [Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit](#), which outlines the motivations, contributions and benefits of different stakeholder groups. The matrix can serve as a starting point for identifying participants most relevant to your context.

Once responses have been collected, results can be analysed using the platform's dashboard. Data may also be exported to Excel for more in-depth analysis, if needed.

Key implementation points

When implementing the self-assessment, consider the following:

- **Individual reflection:** Participants should complete the self-assessment individually. There are no right or wrong answers; the value lies in capturing different perspectives.
- **Consistency of focus:** Clarify in advance what participants should reflect on (e.g. the institution as a whole or the part they know best) to support meaningful interpretation of results.
- **Anonymity and trust:** Results are aggregated and anonymous. Communicating this clearly can encourage honest responses.
- **Interpretation of results:** Self-assessment results indicate perceptions, not objective performance. They should be used as a starting point for dialogue rather than as a basis for judgement or comparison.

These points help ensure that the self-assessment produces insights that are useful for learning and discussion.

Step 2. Engage: Discuss with your community

This step focuses on creating opportunities for stakeholders to discuss and interpret the self-assessment results together. The aim is to build a shared understanding of the findings, explore differences in perspectives and identify themes that merit further attention. Through structured discussion, institutions can identify strengths to build on, gaps that may require action and priority areas to inform the planning stage.

Quick Start: Turning results into dialogue

To begin the engagement phase with limited preparation:

1. Invite the self-assessment participants to a structured discussion meeting (online or onsite).
2. Present the aggregated HEInnovate results using the platform's user dashboard.
3. Facilitate a discussion focused on explaining patterns, differences in perceptions and key observations.

4. Agree on a small number of priority themes to take forward.

This approach enables institutions to translate self-assessment results into shared understanding and initial priorities without extensive coordination.

If you decide to implement a broader self-assessment, you can organise a workshop that brings together internal participants and other relevant stakeholders for a structured discussion. To support this process, HEInnovate provides [workshop guides](#) and [training materials](#) on its website, which you can use as a reference along with the [SWOT analysis document](#) to facilitate the discussion.

Through this collective discussion, participants will be able to identify key strengths to build on, gaps that need to be addressed and priority areas for transformation. This supports the transition to the planning stage.

Key implementation points

When engaging stakeholders in discussion, consider the following:

- **Inclusive dialogue:** Encourage contributions from different roles and perspectives to enrich interpretation of the results.
- **Focus on learning:** Use the discussion to explore perceptions and experiences, not to validate or challenge scores.
- **Managing differences:** Variations in views are expected and valuable; they often highlight areas for deeper exploration.
- **Documentation:** Capture key insights and agreed priorities to ensure continuity into the planning stage.

These points support constructive dialogue and help ensure discussions lead to actionable outcomes.

Step 3. Plan: Design actions and set goals

Step 3 focuses on translating insights from reflection and dialogue into concrete actions. Institutions are encouraged to prioritise actions that are feasible, aligned with existing strategies and appropriate to their context. Action planning should be viewed as a flexible process that can be refined over time as learning deepens and circumstances evolve.

Quick Start: Defining initial actions

To move efficiently from discussion to planning:

1. Review the priority themes identified during Step 2.
2. Select a small number of actions that are feasible within existing resources. HEInnovate's [Action Cards](#) can help by offering practical ideas aligned with your priority areas. Use them to spark discussion and identify actions that fit your context.
3. Assign responsibility for each action and define indicative timelines.
4. Link actions, where relevant, to existing strategies, projects or initiatives.

This approach allows institutions to demonstrate momentum while keeping planning proportionate and realistic.

Key implementation points

When developing an action plan, consider the following:

- **Prioritisation:** Not all identified issues need to be addressed at once. Focus on areas with the greatest potential impact.
- **Integration:** Align HEInnovate-informed actions with existing institutional strategies and processes where possible.
- **Ownership:** Clearly assigning responsibility supports implementation and follow-up.
- **Flexibility:** Action plans can be revised as learning deepens or circumstances change.

Planning should be viewed as an adaptive process rather than a fixed commitment.

Step 4. Act: Implement, monitor and learn

The final step supports institutions in reviewing progress and reflecting on learning over time. Monitoring does not require extensive data collection or additional reporting structures. Institutions can choose review approaches and timelines that fit their existing processes, using insights gained to inform future planning and, where relevant, subsequent use of HEInnovate.

Quick Start: Tracking progress

To begin monitoring progress with minimal effort:

1. Review progress on agreed actions at regular intervals (e.g. annually or alongside existing review cycles).
2. Use qualitative feedback from those involved to assess what is working and what needs adjustment.
3. Decide whether and when to repeat the HEInnovate self-assessment to capture changes in perceptions.

This approach helps institutions embed reflection and learning without creating additional reporting burdens.

Key implementation points

When monitoring and reviewing progress, consider the following:

- **Proportionate monitoring:** Monitoring should match the scale and ambition of the actions taken.
- **Learning focus:** Use review moments to reflect on lessons learned, not only on completion of activities.
- **Use of evidence:** HEInnovate results can be complemented with other qualitative or quantitative information.
- **Continuous improvement:** Insights from monitoring can inform future planning cycles and subsequent HEInnovate use.

Monitoring and review support continuous development rather than one-off evaluation.

Conclusion

HEInnovate provides higher education institutions with a structured framework to translate reflection into concrete action. By systematically assessing strengths, identifying priorities, and planning initiatives, it enables institutions to align strategies, implement effective actions, and monitor progress toward their goals.

When applied consistently, HEInnovate supports institutional transformation and capacity building. Repeating the process periodically allows institutions to measure progress against previous assessments, refine strategies based on evidence, and embed a culture of continuous improvement in education, research, and innovation.