



Beyond the Institutional Walls: Partnerships with external stakeholders

Webinar Summary

Community for Educational Innovation – CEI

24/09/2025

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European
Commission



Thematic Strand 2 – From Research to Impact: Bridging the innovation gap in higher education

The 'Beyond the Institutional Walls: Partnerships with external stakeholders' webinar, organised by the Community for Educational Innovation (CEI), explored the collaborative efforts between higher education institutions (HEIs) and non-academic stakeholders, including government, industry, and civil society. It aimed to show how these collaborations can translate academic research and expertise into tangible societal and economic impacts.

This document summarises the key insights shared during the webinar, the main points from each presentation, the discussion that followed, and the upcoming activities relevant to the CEI community.

Presentation 1: Local Responses to Multiple Global Crises: Universities on the Frontline

By John Goddard, Emeritus Professor of Regional Development Studies, Newcastle University, United Kingdom.

Professor Goddard's presentation examined the critical role of HEIs in responding to global crises, such as climate change, public health emergencies, and socio-economic inequalities. His core argument involved the concept of the *Civic University*, which implies that HEIs are not isolated, inward-facing institutions but place-based institutions committed to attaching a high priority to the economic, social, environmental, and cultural life of their local communities. By evidence-based analysis of local needs, *Civic Universities* develop partnerships with local stakeholders to overcome diverse challenges.

Professor Goddard started by illustrating the gap between two spheres of activity: the education and research world, which focuses on international academic excellence and knowledge creation, and the regional development sector, which seeks to address societal issues. While these domains have historically operated in isolation, Professor Goddard called for breaking down the 'hard boundaries' between these spheres to create collaborations that better serve local and global needs. He proposed that HEIs, as anchor institutions, have the potential to serve as catalysts for local economic and social development through knowledge exchange and active civic engagement.

The presentation also touched on the challenge of aligning HEIs' strategic goals with regional priorities. Professor Goddard noted that HEIs must not only engage with external stakeholders but also redesign their management structures to support these external collaborations. This includes integrating civic engagement into HEIs' leadership, setting long-term, demand-driven goals, and allocating resources specifically for partnerships with local stakeholders.

Professor Goddard highlighted key examples of HEIs involved in *place-making* initiatives, where they take an active role in shaping the social and economic development of their regions. These collaborations often involve joint research projects, co-designing public services, and co-funding local initiatives that address specific challenges, such as environmental sustainability or social inclusion. Professor Goddard emphasised that such collaborations should be a vital component of HEIs' third mission alongside research and teaching.

Presentation 2: Smarter Together: How Smart Docklands Leverages the Quadruple Helix for Urban Innovation

Dr. Karolina Anielska, Programme Manager, Smart Docklands, Ireland.

Dr. Anielska's presentation provided an insightful look into the Smart Docklands initiative in Dublin, a notable example of how urban innovation can be driven through a quadruple helix model. The quadruple helix involves the collaboration of academia, industry, government, and civil society in co-creating solutions to complex urban challenges. Anielska described how Smart Docklands has used this model to transform the Docklands district into a smart city testbed, where innovations in urban mobility, environmental monitoring, and digital infrastructure are being piloted.

Anielska elaborated on how the *Smart Dublin* initiative, a collaboration between the four local Dublin authorities (Dublin City Council, DLR County Council, South Dublin City Council, and Fingal County Council), integrates diverse stakeholders to tackle city challenges using smart technology. The focus is creating practical, real-world applications for new technologies through partnerships between researchers, technology providers, local authorities, and citizens. The collaboration helps solve issues related to traffic congestion, air pollution, waste management, and energy efficiency.

Several projects under Smart Docklands exemplified the quadruple helix collaborative approach, including:

- **Design Your Future City:** Engaging young people in data collection and analysis, allowing them to contribute to city planning while gaining insights into urban development and environmental issues.
- **The Sensor Inspector:** Engaging students in citizen science activities by setting up sensors to monitor air pollution and traffic patterns in real time.
- **River Liffey Water Sensors:** Deploying cutting-edge water sensors along the River Liffey to monitor temperature, velocity and level of water in real time.
- **expl[AI]n:** Upskilling local authority staff about traditional and generative AI, so they can use technologies and understand the research behind it.
- **Count Docklands:** Working with a research team looking at traffic patterns after the local authority's traffic plan changes, incorporating community engagement.

Anielska stressed that collaboration with civil society, particularly through initiatives like citizen science workshops and educational programmes, ensures that innovation is aligned with the needs of local communities. This helps create a sense of ownership among residents, making them active participants in the innovation process rather than passive recipients of technology.

Moreover, Anielska emphasised the importance of building trust among stakeholders—especially local stakeholders. She explained that these partnerships must be built on transparency, open communication, and mutual respect for the various roles played by academia, government, industry, and civil society in shaping the city's future.

Presentation 3: Seeding Trust, Growing Impact – Rethinking Industry-Academia Partnerships

Amanda Paananen, Innovation Manager, EIT Higher Education Initiative.

Amanda Paananen's presentation explored the dynamics of industry-academia collaborations through the lens of the *EIT Higher Education Initiative*. The Initiative aims to boost innovation and entrepreneurship capacity in higher education and recognises HEIs as pivotal actors in regional and European innovation ecosystems. This initiative funds projects implementing capacity-building activities to translate research into market-ready solutions, establish strategic partnerships, support new ventures, and attract investment.

Paananen's key argument was that traditional collaboration models, often centred around short-term, project-based funding, are insufficient for creating long-term, purpose-driven, and ecosystem-wide partnerships. She highlighted barriers to successful collaboration, such as the *cultural misalignment* between academia, which prioritises academic rigour and research goals, and industry, which often

values speed and practical, market-ready solutions. Furthermore, intellectual property and data governance issues can also challenge university-business cooperation. She explained that these differences in priorities often prevent effective collaboration, as they hinder the formation of shared goals and understanding.

Paananen stressed the importance of trust in building collaborations with non-academic stakeholders. She explained that trust does not emerge automatically from a funded project but is developed over time through sustained interaction between researchers and industry professionals. Successful partnerships are based on personal relationships in which researchers understand industry challenges and professionals learn to speak the 'language' of academia.

The speaker explained that HEIs must design partnerships that survive beyond grants and leadership changes. These partnerships must be resilient, adaptive, values-driven, and part of HEIs' strategy. This requires thinking beyond short-term funding for projects and investing in mechanisms, processes, and educational content that allow researchers and industry to meet, understand each other, and collaborate meaningfully. The following table presents key actions that need to be funded to enable long-term partnerships:

Category	Examples / Actions
Capacity Building	-Training for researchers, TTOs, and innovation staff on industry engagement, communication, and co-creation. -Educational programmes on entrepreneurship.
Embedded Roles	-Finance innovation managers, innovation agents, liaison officers, business developers. -Support partnership facilitation and negotiations.
Shared Infrastructure	-Co-fund labs, co-working spaces, and digital platforms. -Regional innovation hubs for collaboration and informal exchange.
Processes & Protocols	-IP negotiation templates, co-creation protocols, and onboarding guides for industry partners.
Trust-Building	-Fund workshops, site visits, pilot collaborations. -Industry immersion programs, joint fellowships, informal networking events.

Paananen recommended several strategies to build effective industry-academia partnerships:

1. **Early Trust Building:** Start trust-building activities before projects begin. This could include PhD exchange programmes, joint seminars, and site visits to foster mutual understanding between academia and industry.
2. **Focus on People, Not Projects:** Paananen stressed that people, not projects, build partnerships. Successful collaborations arise when individuals—such as PhD students, innovation managers, and research staff—spend time within industry settings, developing personal relationships and learning how to address real-world challenges.
3. **Long-term Engagement:** Instead of focusing only on project deliverables, universities should invest in mechanisms that enable long-term engagement. This includes funding for innovation managers and business developers who can facilitate ongoing partnerships and provide guidance throughout the collaboration.

Paananen concluded by emphasising the need to shift from transactional, project-based collaboration models to transformational, long-term partnerships. These partnerships should be purpose-driven and aimed at creating broad societal impact rather than solely focusing on academic outputs or short-term project goals.

Discussion and Key Takeaways

The debate following the presentations highlighted the following topics:

1. **Cultural misalignment between academia and industry:** A recurring theme from the debate was the challenge of reconciling academia and industry cultures. Participants agreed that fostering a shared understanding of each sector's goals and priorities is essential for successful collaborations. This requires continuous dialogue, mutual learning and long-term partnerships.
2. **Trust as the cornerstone of collaboration:** Speakers highlighted trust as a key factor in the success of these partnerships. The debate emphasised that HEIs need to invest in building relationships with industry and civil society partners. This means moving beyond formal contracts and fostering connections that drive long-term collaboration goals.
3. **Building a collaborative ecosystem:** Speakers pointed out that HEIs must create ecosystems that support collaboration rather than only focusing on short-term projects. This includes providing the infrastructure, processes,

and mechanisms facilitating communication, co-creation, and shared learning between all stakeholders.

4. **Community engagement and co-creation:** An important point raised during the discussion was the need for HEIs to actively engage with local communities and embed this in their strategies, which is aligned with Professor Goddard's *Civic University* concept. They stressed that involving industry, government, and citizens in co-creating innovations ensures that these solutions are relevant and meaningful to the people they aim to serve.

Upcoming Activities

Looking ahead, CEI is committed to continuing its support for innovation in higher education through the following activities:

- **Fully funded CEI Study Visit 2025-II:** Applications are now open for the second CEI Study Visit, which will take place on November 25th and 26th in Austria and focus on 'Knowledge Valorisation and Bridging the Innovation Gap in Higher Education.'
- **Webinar on Institutional Support for Research-based Innovation:** This session will explore the role of institutional support in facilitating research-based innovation within universities. It will be held on October 22, 2025, at 15.30 CET.
- **Good Practices Call:** CEI invites community members to share initiatives (individual or institutional), projects, programmes, or policies that bridge the innovation gap in higher education. These practices will enrich the upcoming Bridging the Innovation Gap in Higher Education report.