



The HEInnovate Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit



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This toolkit supports higher education institutions and European Universities Alliances in planning and implementing stakeholder engagement within **Step 1 (Reflect)** and **Step 2 (Engage)** of the HEInnovate Transformation Journey. It highlights stakeholder engagement as an integral component of institutional reflection, dialogue, and long-term development.

The toolkit outlines the role of stakeholders in HEInnovate processes and presents key principles of good stakeholder involvement. It introduces a Stakeholder Engagement Matrix to support the identification of relevant actors, their motivations, and contributions across the HEInnovate steps (Reflect, Engage, Plan, Act).

Finally, the toolkit presents a Stakeholder Mapping Action Sheet as a practical tool for workshops and facilitated discussions, supporting the analysis of stakeholder interest and influence and the prioritisation of engagement strategies.

Together, these elements provide a structured and adaptable approach to stakeholder engagement for institutions and alliances using HEInnovate.

Introduction: Stakeholders in the HEInnovate Journey

Reflecting on stakeholders is not simply a supportive activity in an HEInnovate project—it is a fundamental prerequisite for meaningful institutional development and transformation. Higher education institutions are deeply embedded in complex systems of relationships, responsibilities, expectations, and external pressures. Innovation and entrepreneurial transformation, therefore, depend not only on internal motivation, but also on the ability to understand, involve, and manage the **stakeholders who influence—or are influenced by—the HEInnovate journey**.

An HEInnovate process typically addresses questions of strategic change: how an institution strengthens innovation, builds partnerships, improves governance structures, or fosters entrepreneurial teaching and learning. Such change processes inevitably affect established routines, decision-making structures, and institutional priorities. This is why stakeholder reflection becomes critical. According to Freeman (1984)¹, stakeholders are defined as “*any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives*”.

First, **stakeholders shape the conditions under which institutional change is possible**. Internal groups such as academic staff, students, leadership teams, or administrative units all have specific roles, interests, and levels of influence. If these groups are not understood and meaningfully engaged, innovation initiatives may remain fragmented, face resistance, or fail to gain institutional traction.

Second, **external stakeholders are often essential partners in entrepreneurial and innovation-driven development**. HEInnovate strongly emphasises engagement with the wider ecosystem—business, industry, regional development actors, public authorities, and

¹ Freeman, R. E. (1984): Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach. Boston: Pitman.

civil society. These external actors can provide resources, legitimacy, expertise, and opportunities for collaboration. At the same time, they may have expectations that need to be aligned with institutional goals.

Third, **reflecting on stakeholders helps institutions anticipate challenges and manage tensions early**. Innovation processes often create uncertainty, raise concerns about workload, raise questions of strategic direction, or lead to competing interpretations of what “entrepreneurial” development should mean. Stakeholder analysis allows institutions to identify potential conflicts, address concerns proactively, and create spaces for dialogue before problems escalate.

Finally, **stakeholder engagement strengthens ownership and sustainability**. HEInnovate is not designed as a one-time assessment exercise, but as a pathway toward long-term institutional development. Sustainable change requires shared commitment, collective learning, and ongoing support across the institution and beyond. When stakeholders are actively involved, they become co-creators of the process rather than passive recipients of change.

In this sense, stakeholder reflection is not an additional layer of project management. It is a strategic approach to ensuring that institutional innovation is credible, inclusive, and implementable. It helps institutions move from isolated activities to coordinated transformation—anchored in relationships, supported by partners, and driven by collective purpose.

Principles of good stakeholder engagement

1. Stakeholder Identification: Knowing Who Matters

The first principle of stakeholder management is the systematic identification of relevant actors. Institutions need to understand which individuals, groups, or organisations have an interest in the HEInnovate process or may influence its success.

Stakeholders typically include internal groups (leadership, academic staff, students, administration) as well as external actors (industry partners, regional authorities, civil society organisations, innovation ecosystems). Freeman’s approach emphasises that strategic success depends on recognising this broader network of relationships (Freeman, 1984). An overview of potential stakeholders for higher education transformation processes is provided in the next chapter (“stakeholder engagement matrix”).

2. Stakeholder Engagement: Moving Beyond Consultation

A core principle in contemporary stakeholder management is that meaningful engagement is more than one-way communication. Stakeholder management requires creating opportunities for dialogue, participation, and co-creation.

In HEInnovate processes, stakeholders should not be seen as passive recipients of institutional change, but as potential contributors, partners, and co-owners of innovation.

Continuous involvement strengthens trust and increases the likelihood that change becomes embedded in institutional structures.

3. Relationship Building: Innovation as a Social Process

Stakeholder theory highlights that organisations succeed through relationships, not only through internal capacities. Innovation processes depend heavily on collaboration, mutual understanding, and long-term commitment.

Building relationships with stakeholders is, therefore, a strategic investment. For higher education institutions, entrepreneurial transformation often requires strengthening ties with external ecosystems and fostering internal alignment across diverse institutional communities.

4. Communication and Transparency: Building Legitimacy

Trust and legitimacy are key outcomes of effective stakeholder management. Transparent communication about goals, processes, decisions, and outcomes is essential to maintain stakeholder support.

In HEInnovate projects, communication should not only report results but also explain why change is needed, how stakeholders are involved, and what value the process creates for different groups.

5. Continuous Stakeholder Management Across the Process

Stakeholder management is not a one-time exercise at the beginning of a project. Literature emphasises the need for continuous monitoring and engagement throughout the entire project lifecycle.

HEInnovate processes require institutions to revisit stakeholder roles regularly, as influence, expectations, or partnerships may evolve over time. Sustainable innovation depends on maintaining stakeholder ownership beyond the initial assessment phase.

A Stakeholder Engagement Matrix

The Stakeholder Engagement Matrix outlines the motivations, roles, and contributions of key actors involved in implementing the HEInnovate framework. It serves three key purposes:

1. **As a mapping tool** to help you identify which stakeholders are relevant to your specific HEInnovate goals and which might be involved at different stages of the journey
2. **As a communication resource** to articulate the value proposition for each stakeholder group, helping you make compelling cases for their involvement and showing them what they stand to gain
3. **As a strategic planning tool** to ensure balanced representation across governance levels, disciplines, institutional functions, and external ecosystems.

TABLE 1 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT MATRIX FOR ALLIANCES

| Stakeholder Group | Motivation to contribute | Contribution across steps (Reflect – Engage – Plan – Act) | Benefits |
|---|---|---|--|
| University Leadership (Rectors, Vice-Rectors, Deans, governance and management boards.) | To shape strategic direction, strengthen institutional reputation, align with policy priorities, and ensure long-term competitiveness. | <p>Reflect: Define strategic vision and institutional ambitions through HEInnovate insights.</p> <p>Engage: Frame discussions within policy, funding, and societal contexts.</p> <p>Plan: Integrate innovation and entrepreneurship priorities into institutional strategies.</p> <p>Act: Institutionalise changes through governance mechanisms, resources, and leadership practices.</p> <p>ALLIANCES: Coordinate multi-institutional self-assessment; facilitate cross-institutional dialogue; develop alliance-wide strategies; monitor implementation across partners and report to funding bodies.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger strategic alignment with EU and national policies. • Enhanced institutional reputation and visibility. • Evidence-based decision-making for strategy and innovation investment. • Greater staff engagement and shared ownership of transformation. |
| Alliance Governance Bodies (Alliance Rectors' Council, Steering Committee, Executive Board) | To ensure strategic coherence across partner institutions, demonstrate alliance impact, fulfil European Commission requirements, and create a unified entrepreneurial vision. | <p>Reflect: Coordinate multi-institutional self-assessment across all partner universities to identify alliance-wide strengths and gaps.</p> <p>Engage: Facilitate cross-institutional dialogue and alignment on shared priorities and values.</p> <p>Plan: Develop alliance-wide innovation strategies, shared governance frameworks, and joint entrepreneurship initiatives.</p> <p>Act: Monitor implementation across partners, ensure accountability, report outcomes to EC, and scale successful practices alliance-wide.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced alliance cohesion and strategic alignment. • Stronger positioning for European funding opportunities. • Evidence-based governance and decision-making across the alliance • Increased visibility as a leading innovative alliance. • Fulfilment of European Universities Initiative objectives. |
| Alliance Coordination Teams (Project Managers, Work Package Leaders, Administrative Coordinators) | To operationalise alliance activities, ensure smooth collaboration, meet project deliverables, and facilitate knowledge exchange between partners. | <p>Reflect: Aggregate and synthesise self-assessment results across all partner institutions to identify patterns and divergences.</p> <p>Engage: Organise and moderate cross-institutional workshops; facilitate communication between partners; document insights.</p> <p>Plan: Translate strategic priorities into concrete work packages, timelines, and resource allocation plans.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development in international project management • Enhanced cross-cultural collaboration skills • Recognition for enabling alliance success • Expanded professional networks across Europe • Career advancement opportunities within European education sector |

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| | | Act: Coordinate implementation, manage resources, track KPIs, facilitate peer learning, and ensure timely reporting. | |
| Academic Staff (Professors, Researchers, Doctoral Students, Course Directors) | To innovate in teaching and research, expand collaboration opportunities, and strengthen academic and societal relevance. | <p>Reflect: Identify opportunities and challenges in teaching, research, and engagement.</p> <p>Engage: Share disciplinary perspectives and discuss related needs and barriers.</p> <p>Plan: Design new curricula, co-create innovative solutions, interdisciplinary initiatives, and external partnerships.</p> <p>Act: Implement and assess new practices in learning, research, and knowledge exchange. Monitor the impact of interventions.</p> <p>ALLIANCES: Engage in joint programme development; share best practices across borders; coordinate transnational teaching and research; mentor students across partner institutions.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribution to the university's strategy and plans. • Recognition for innovative teaching and research practices. • Access to interdisciplinary and external collaboration opportunities. • Professional development in entrepreneurship and digital pedagogy. • Contribution to societal impact and policy relevance. |
| Students (Undergraduate, Postgraduate, Alumni, Student Societies) | To co-create their learning experience, develop entrepreneurial mindsets, and gain recognition through innovation initiatives. | <p>Reflect: Provide insights into learning experiences, barriers, and aspirations.</p> <p>Engage: Contribute fresh perspectives and identify opportunities for improvement.</p> <p>Plan: Co-develop initiatives such as innovation labs, hackathons, and mentoring programmes.</p> <p>Act: Lead student-driven projects, serve as ambassadors for innovation and change, and provide feedback for measuring impact.</p> <p>ALLIANCES: Provide comparative insights across partner institutions; participate in transnational innovation challenges; represent diverse cultural perspectives; serve as alliance ambassadors.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced learning experience and employability skills. • Empowerment through participation in innovation initiatives. • Networking with industry, mentors, and peers. • Visibility and recognition for student-led projects and leadership. |
| Internal Innovation and Entrepreneurship Staff (Technology Transfer Offices, Incubators, Accelerators) | To strengthen the institution's innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystem, demonstrate value creation, and ensure sustainability of innovation infrastructure. | <p>Reflect: Provide operational evidence of innovation support mechanisms and their impact.</p> <p>Engage: Offer practical insights on university–ecosystem collaboration.</p> <p>Plan: Identify gaps and propose new or improved innovation support structures.</p> <p>Act: Implement new services, monitor outcomes, and scale successful models.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger institutional support for innovation services. • Increased sustainability and impact of innovation infrastructure. • Recognition as key enablers of institutional transformation. • Expanded partnerships with regional and international actors. |

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| | | ALLIANCES: Share best practices across partner institutions; develop joint support services; create cross-border innovation programmes; harmonise support mechanisms. | |
| External Stakeholders (Public Authorities, Businesses, Incubators, Accelerators, Science and Technology Parks, NGOs, Civil Society) | To access talent and research, co-create solutions, and strengthen regional and national innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystems. | <p>Reflect: Contribute external, market-oriented, and societal perspectives.</p> <p>Engage: Validate institutional findings against real-world needs and priorities.</p> <p>Plan: Co-design joint projects, align with policies, and leverage funding opportunities.</p> <p>Act: Participate in partnerships, internships, and co-creation of policies or initiatives.</p> <p>ALLIANCES: Access transnational talent pools; engage with multiple partner institutions simultaneously; participate in cross-border innovation projects; offer European-scale internships and partnerships.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to talent, ideas, and research outcomes. • Opportunity to co-design solutions addressing societal and economic challenges. • Strengthened regional and national innovation ecosystems. • Long-term, trust-based partnerships with universities. |
| Cross-Border Regional Ecosystems (Interregional authorities, European clusters, cross-border partnerships) | To strengthen territorial innovation capacity, access transnational knowledge networks, and address shared regional challenges through alliance collaboration. | <p>Reflect: Contribute regional perspectives on innovation needs; identify opportunities for university-region collaboration across borders.</p> <p>Engage: Participate in cross-border stakeholder dialogues; validate regional innovation priorities against alliance capabilities.</p> <p>Plan: Co-design transnational projects addressing regional challenges; align alliance strategies with innovative specialisation strategies across regions.</p> <p>Act: Engage in joint innovation projects, provide internship and employment opportunities for alliance students, and participate in knowledge transfer activities.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to transnational talent pools and research expertise • Solutions to shared cross-border challenges (sustainability, digital transition) • Enhanced competitiveness of European regions in global economy • Strengthened innovation infrastructure through university partnerships • Contribution to European cohesion and territorial development |

A Stakeholder Mapping Action Sheet

For use in the HEInnovate Train the Trainers programme and for workshops, we developed a Stakeholder Mapping Action Sheet, which may help to reflect on particular stakeholders to be considered in an innovation project and process.

The sheet is used by mapping stakeholders onto the matrix based on their level of interest and their level of power or influence.

The horizontal axis marks the level of power and influence of different stakeholders, whereas the vertical axis marks the level of interest and engagement. According to the structures, stakeholders with both high interest/engagement and influence/power are the **key actors** that should be prioritised for active involvement.

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|--------------------------------|------|--|--|
| Level of interest / engagement | high | Supporters >> inform, engage >> involve where relevant | Key Players >> actively involve >> co-create, collaborate |
| | low | Minimal Effort >> monitor occasionally >> keep informed at milestones | Keep Satisfied >> consult, inform selectively >> monitor |
| | | low | high |
| | | Level of Influence / power | |