D4.1. Report on co-design approach on user engagement

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1. Executive Summary

The INITIATE project, funded under the Horizon Europe WIDERA programme, is a strategic initiative designed to support institutional transformation in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Widening countries. The project addresses systemic barriers to research and innovation (R&I) by promoting inclusive, stakeholder-driven reform processes that are aligned with European Research Area (ERA) objectives and the clean energy transition.

This deliverable, *D4.1 – Report on Co-Design Approach on User Engagement*, defines a comprehensive methodology for engaging diverse HEI stakeholders in participatory processes aimed at building institutional capacity for R&I. The report also presents an evaluation framework for monitoring and assessing the quality, inclusiveness, and effectiveness of these engagement activities.

At the core of INITIATE's methodology is the belief that transformation in HEIs cannot be successfully achieved without the active participation of those who shape, implement, and are affected by institutional policies and practices. The co-design approach outlined in this deliverable enables meaningful collaboration between internal stakeholders (such as academic and administrative staff, researchers, students, and leadership) and external actors (including regional innovation ecosystems, industry representatives, SMEs, and policy bodies).

This deliverable is produced under Task 4.1 – Co-design of user engagement for capacity building, which serves as the conceptual backbone of Work Package 4. T4.1 will focus on enhancing engagement among different target groups and refining the value-based propositions for R&I development originally outlined in T1.2. This will be achieved using a Design Thinking approach, applied through multiple inclusive and iterative co-design cycles aligned with the “Leave No One Behind” principle. It establishes:

- The principles and structure of stakeholder, citizen and consumer engagement,
- A flexible set of participatory tools and methods (e.g., workshops, design sprints, R&I Labs, and digital co-creation via the INITIATE Knowledge Hub),
- Guidelines for adapting these approaches across diverse HEI contexts.
- Developing an evaluation plan (detailed in D5.1) that will guide assessments within the R&I and Policy Labs (T4.2).

It also sets the stage for the implementation and further development of the following WP4 tasks:

- Task 4.2 – INITIATE R&I Lab will serve as the primary operational vehicle for co-design activities. Using the methodology from D4.1, the Labs will engage stakeholders at three pilot HEIs (in Croatia, Portugal, and North Macedonia) to identify institutional needs, test new models, and generate user-informed solutions.
- Task 4.3 – Steering policy and market recommendations will analyze findings from the Labs to formulate actionable recommendations that align institutional innovation strategies with national and EU-level R&I and market frameworks. This task will also ensure that outputs are policy-relevant and scalable.
- Task 4.4 – Roadmap for R&I uptake and Alliance for green energy transition forming will build on the outcomes of stakeholder engagement to construct a forward-looking roadmap that outlines strategic pathways for institutional R&I development. It will also guide the formation of a long-term alliance of HEIs and stakeholders committed to green transition objectives.

Complementing the co-design methodology, this deliverable presents a rigorous evaluation plan with a set of

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Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) covering four key dimensions:

- Relevance: How well the engagement aligns with institutional and regional priorities,
- Inclusiveness: The breadth and diversity of stakeholder participation,
- Satisfaction: Stakeholder perceptions of the process and its usefulness,
- Impact: Changes observed in institutional attitudes, capacities, and strategies related to R&I.

The evaluation plan is designed to support both real-time adaptation during pilot activities and longitudinal assessment of the INITIATE approach's effectiveness and replicability.

Ultimately, this deliverable provides a strategic foundation for advancing user-centric, system-level transformation in HEIs. By embedding co-creation into institutional development, INITIATE ensures that reform efforts are not only innovative and effective, but also legitimate, inclusive, and sustainable in the long term.

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2. Introduction

2.1 About the INITIATE Project

The INITIATE project, formally titled *Supporting European R&I Through Stakeholder Collaboration and Institutional Reform* (Grant Agreement No. 101136775), is a Horizon Europe Coordination and Support Action (CSA) that commenced on 1 February 2024 and will run until 31 July 2027, for a total duration of 42 months.

The overarching objective of INITIATE is to empower Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)—particularly those in Widening countries—to enhance their Research and Innovation (R&I) capabilities through comprehensive institutional transformation. The project seeks to foster scientific excellence and promote knowledge valorisation by supporting collaborative R&I practices and increasing the circulation of knowledge across Europe.

At the core of INITIATE's strategy lies a stakeholder-inclusive, co-design approach. This approach is used to develop a transformative framework for HEIs that reflects the specific needs, capacities, and contextual realities of individual institutions. It also accounts for external factors such as structural policy barriers and lessons learned from other successful European initiatives. A key component of this strategy is the identification of collaborative opportunities with a variety of actors, including local innovation ecosystems, industry, and public authorities.

The framework will be implemented through an iterative process, guided by activities such as Research & Innovation (R&I) Labs and supported by digital tools including the INITIATE Knowledge Hub. These tools and spaces are intended to generate actionable policy recommendations aimed at enhancing institutional R&I capacity and scientific performance in Widening countries. Additionally, INITIATE aims to produce tangible research outputs and support joint applications to future funding instruments, including Horizon Europe.

The methodology developed by INITIATE will be tested and validated through pilot implementations in Croatia, Portugal, and North Macedonia. These national pilots will provide the basis for designing a roadmap for long-term R&I uptake across Widening countries and identifying opportunities for scaling and replication.

Beyond its official duration, the project aims to establish a sustainable Alliance for the Green Energy Transition, thereby ensuring the continued relevance and impact of INITIATE's outcomes. Through this work, INITIATE supports HEIs in becoming agents of change, embedding a culture of scientific excellence and value creation, especially in institutional contexts where research intensity has historically been lower.

2.2. Objectives of this Deliverable

This Deliverable 4.1 (D4.1), titled *"Report on Co-Design Approach on User Engagement,"* serves as a foundational document for Task 4.1: Co-design of user engagement for capacity building.

The primary objectives of this deliverable are to:

- Define and elaborate on the co-design methodology for user engagement within the context of the INITIATE project, specifically focusing on capacity building in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).
- Establish a comprehensive framework for participatory engagement that guides the interaction between the project consortium and various stakeholders, ensuring effective collaboration and

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knowledge exchange.

- Articulate the guiding principles that underpin all user engagement activities, emphasizing relevance, transparency, inclusivity, and shared ownership to foster a collaborative and impactful environment.
- Detail the stakeholder mapping and engagement strategy, identifying key internal and external stakeholders within HEIs and their broader ecosystems, and outlining appropriate engagement channels and tools.
- Describe the participatory methods and processes that will be employed, including workshops, design sprints, R&I Labs, and digital co-creation mechanisms like the Knowledge Hub, along with strategies for feedback loops and iteration.
- Present a robust evaluation plan for participatory processes, specifying the purpose, scope, key evaluation dimensions, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), evaluation methods, and instruments to assess the effectiveness and impact of engagement activities.
- Discuss the implementation strategy, including how the methodology will be adapted across different pilot sites, reflections from initial deployments, lessons learned, and the interlinkages with policy development and broader capacity building efforts.

By achieving these objectives, D4.1 will provide a clear and actionable blueprint for fostering meaningful user engagement, which is critical for the successful implementation and long-term sustainability of the INITIATE project's outcomes.

2.3. Relation to other Tasks and Work Packages

Task 4.1, and consequently this deliverable, is intricately linked with several other tasks and Work Packages (WPs) within the INITIATE project, forming a cohesive and interdependent framework for achieving the project's overarching objectives. The co-design approach to user engagement is not an isolated activity; rather, it is a cross-cutting theme that both informs and is informed by multiple components of the project.

As a core component of Work Package 4 (WP4), Task 4.1 provides the conceptual and methodological backbone for stakeholder engagement across the project. The co-design frameworks and participatory methodologies developed in Deliverable 4.1 will directly guide the implementation of activities in subsequent WP4 tasks. For example, the stakeholder mapping and engagement strategy described herein will be essential for identifying and involving relevant participants in the INITIATE R&I Labs and other co-creation sessions conducted under Task 4.2.

There is a strong interdependency with Work Package 2 (WP2), which focuses on analyzing the current state of R&I ecosystems and institutional capacities in Widening countries. The SWOT analyses and contextual insights generated through WP2 will directly shape the co-design approach by ensuring that user engagement activities are tailored to actual institutional needs, gaps, and opportunities. This alignment is critical for relevance and long-term impact.

Work Package 3 (WP3) is closely connected through its role in developing the Knowledge Hub and other digital co-creation tools. The participatory methods and virtual engagement mechanisms described in D4.1 will be supported technically by WP3. The functionality, accessibility, and user experience of these tools are vital for the success of INITIATE's digital engagement strategy. Close coordination ensures that technological infrastructure effectively facilitates inclusive and meaningful stakeholder collaboration.

The evaluation plan established in this deliverable is directly tied to Work Package 5 (WP5), which leads the project's overall monitoring and impact assessment. The Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and evaluation

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instruments presented in D4.1 will be employed by WP5 to measure the quality, reach, and effectiveness of user engagement and co-design activities. This feedback loop supports adaptive management, continuous learning, and contributes evidence to inform institutional change strategies and broader policy discussions.

Lastly, the outcomes of Task 4.1 will make a substantial contribution to Work Package 6 (WP6), which focuses on communication, dissemination, and exploitation of project results. The tools, strategies, and best practices emerging from this co-design work will generate compelling case studies and replicable models that can be shared with HEIs and R&I actors beyond the consortium. Furthermore, effective stakeholder engagement is expected to strengthen the institutional visibility and funding readiness of participating HEIs for future European R&I programmes.

Deliverable 4.1 is a pivotal document that not only sets the foundation for user engagement within INITIATE but also integrates tightly with other work packages to ensure a systemic, coherent, and impactful approach to institutional transformation in Widening countries.

2.4. Structure of the document

This document is structured to provide a comprehensive overview of the co-design approach for user engagement within the INITIATE project. Following this introductory section, the report is organized into several core chapters, each building on the preceding content to offer a complete methodological and evaluative framework:

Chapter 3: INITIATE Co-DesignMethodology
This chapter presents the core methodology developed for stakeholder engagement. It outlines the goals of the co-design approach, introduces the framework for participatory engagement, and articulates the guiding principles that ensure ethical, inclusive, and effective collaboration. The chapter also includes a stakeholder mapping and engagement strategy, identifying relevant internal and external actors, and the appropriate channels for involving them. Finally, it details the participatory methods and processes to be used, such as workshops, R&I Labs, and digital co-creation tools including the INITIATE Knowledge Hub.

Chapter 4: Evaluation Plan for Participatory Processes
This section presents a detailed plan for evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the co-design approach. It outlines the purpose and scope of evaluation activities, defines key evaluation dimensions and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and describes the methods and instruments to be applied. It also addresses the integration of evaluation efforts with pilot monitoring and other relevant Work Packages, and defines roles, responsibilities, and reporting schedules to ensure rigorous oversight.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implementation Strategy
This chapter offers a reflective analysis of the co-design methodology and its practical implementation. It examines how the approach will be adapted to different pilot contexts, presents insights from initial deployments, and outlines lessons learned. In addition, it explores the connections between co-design activities and broader policy development and capacity-building efforts, supporting the long-term objectives of the project.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Next Steps
The final content chapter summarizes the key components of the co-design methodology and the associated evaluation plan. It reinforces their alignment with INITIATE's long-term vision, and provides direction for future applications and replication in other HEIs and Widening contexts.

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Chapter 7: References
A comprehensive list of all sources cited throughout the document.

Chapter 8: Glossary
Definitions of all key terms, acronyms, and project-specific concepts used in the report.

Chapter 9: List of Figures
A numbered list of all figures referenced in the report.

Chapter 10: List of Tables
A numbered list of all tables presented in the document.

This structured format ensures that all critical aspects of the co-design methodology and its evaluation are clearly addressed, offering a cohesive, actionable, and transferable framework for the INITIATE project team and its stakeholders.

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3. INITIATE Co-design methodology

3.1 Overview and Methodology Goals

The INITIATE project adopts a robust and context-sensitive co-design methodology to ensure that user engagement for capacity building is both effective and grounded in the lived realities of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Widening countries. This approach transcends traditional, top-down models of implementation by fostering genuine collaboration, shared ownership, and mutual learning among all stakeholders. The underlying philosophy of the INITIATE approach is that sustainable institutional transformation and impactful innovation are best achieved when the people affected by change are actively involved in shaping it. By embedding participatory principles at every stage, INITIATE builds trust, relevance, and long-term commitment.

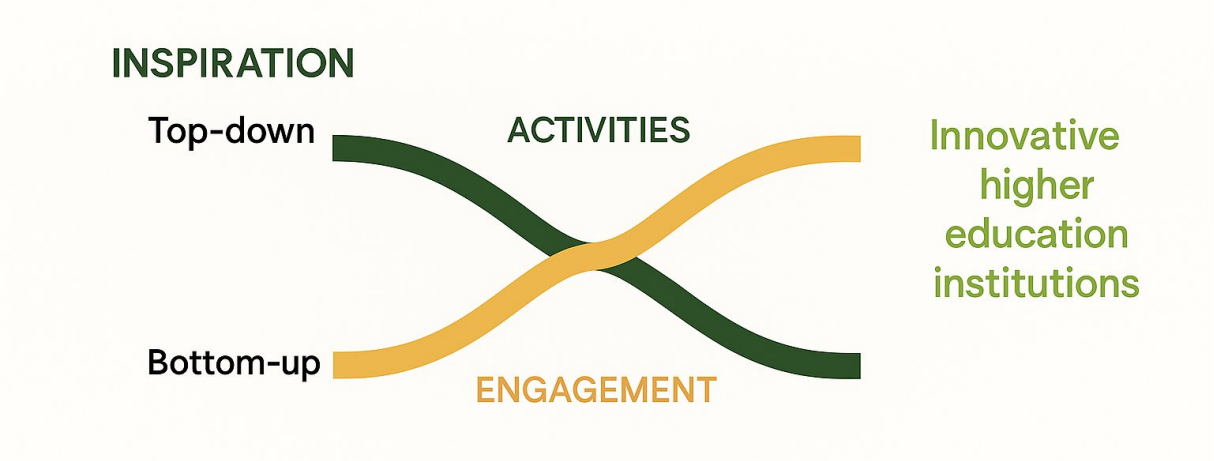


Figure 1 – Top-down and bottom-up approaches to IHEI

The conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 3 serves as the foundation for the INITIATE methodology on stakeholder engagement and value-based proposition design within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It provides structured guidance for engaging stakeholders throughout the entire institutional transformation process—spanning the design, implementation, exploitation, and scaling of HEI services. The visualization reflects the iterative and non-linear nature of institutional and community development, highlighting the dynamic and context-specific pathways that HEIs may follow.

A key feature of the framework is its recognition of the diverse starting points from which HEIs may embark on their transformation journey. Whether engagement begins through bottom-up initiatives led by local actors, or through top-down strategies initiated by institutional leadership, the framework accommodates both trajectories. It further emphasizes the interconnections between stakeholder engagement strategies and the development of institutional services, encouraging alignment between participation processes and value creation.

This section provides a detailed explanation of the framework's components, as well as the conceptual foundations that informed its design.

Primary Goals of the Co-Design Methodology

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To foster active participation and collaboration
The methodology creates inclusive spaces where all relevant stakeholder groups—university leadership, academic staff, administrative personnel, students, industry partners, policymakers, and community actors—can share their perspectives, expertise, and needs. This inclusive participation ensures that resulting strategies and tools are relevant and multi-dimensional.

To ensure relevance and applicability
By involving end-users in the design process, INITIATE ensures that capacity-building measures and R&I transformation strategies directly respond to the practical challenges and institutional realities faced by HEIs. This approach minimizes misalignment and increases the utility of outcomes.

To enhance ownership and commitment
Stakeholders who are part of the co-creation process develop a sense of ownership over the solutions and reforms generated. This leads to stronger commitment to implementation, thereby enhancing the sustainability and institutional uptake of project outcomes.

To facilitate knowledge exchange and mutual learning
The co-design process functions as a learning ecosystem, encouraging cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional dialogue. Participants share best practices, learn from others' experiences, and collectively develop new knowledge and capabilities—especially bridging gaps between more and less research-intensive HEIs.

To generate innovative and tailored solutions
By bringing together diverse institutional actors, the process encourages creative problem-solving and results in context-specific innovations. These solutions are better equipped to address the complexity of R&I challenges within heterogeneous institutional environments.

To build sustainable networks and communities of practice
Through collaborative engagement, INITIATE helps establish interconnected networks across HEIs, industry, and public stakeholders. These networks are expected to evolve into communities of practice that persist beyond the project's duration and continue to foster R&I development.

To inform policy recommendations
The process yields valuable evidence on effective engagement practices and institutional challenges. These insights will directly inform the policy recommendations produced later in the project, ensuring that they are grounded in real-world experience and reflect the nuanced needs of HEIs.

The INITIATE co-design methodology is intentionally iterative and adaptive. It incorporates a variety of participatory tools and techniques, allowing for continuous refinement based on stakeholder feedback, pilot experiences, and evolving institutional needs. This flexible and inclusive foundation is essential for driving meaningful, resilient change in the research and innovation landscape of Widening countries.

3.2 Framework for Participatory Engagement

The INITIATE project embraces a structured, inclusive, and flexible framework for participatory engagement, designed to enable meaningful collaboration between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Recognizing that effective institutional transformation depends on active involvement from those directly and indirectly affected by R&I policies and practices, this framework lays the foundation for sustained, high-quality engagement throughout the project lifecycle.

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Figure 2 – INITIATE project lifecycle and phases

Steps in the design process require differing levels of participation, whether it is to give shape to the proposition underlying the service or to foster support for the implementation and adoption. Each phase of the project lifecycle involves a set of steps and activities that are critical to the success of the process as a whole.

INITIATE's engagement model seeks to move stakeholders upward along the spectrum of participation, from passive information recipients to active co-creators and long-term partners in institutional change. The framework is designed to function across multiple levels of engagement, from individual interviews and feedback loops to multi-stakeholder co-design workshops and R&I Labs. This multi-layered design ensures that all voices can be heard, regardless of background, institutional role, or geographic location, and that each contribution is both valued and impactful.

Stakeholder Identification and Segmentation

Effective engagement begins with a thorough mapping of stakeholders. INITIATE adopts a systematic approach to identifying internal and external actors with a vested interest in R&I capacity building. These include university leadership, academic staff, students, administrative personnel, policymakers, regional innovation actors, civil society organizations, and private-sector partners.

Once identified, stakeholders are segmented based on influence, level of interest, expertise, and potential roles in the engagement process. This segmentation allows the consortium to develop tailored engagement strategies, ensuring that each group is approached with relevant tools, messaging, and levels of involvement appropriate to their context.

Clear Objectives for Every Engagement Activity

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Each engagement action within INITIATE is goal-driven and explicitly aligned with both the overall aims of the project and the specific objectives of the related task or work package. For example:

- Some engagements may focus on exploratory research, such as understanding institutional barriers;
- Others may aim at co-developing policy recommendations;
- Still others may facilitate joint decision-making on the implementation of capacity-building initiatives.

This clarity of purpose helps ensure that stakeholder participation is not only efficient but also meaningful and outcome-oriented.

Diverse and Adaptive Engagement Channels

Recognizing the limitations of a one-size-fits-all model, INITIATE's framework integrates a variety of channels and tools for engagement. These include:

- In-person methods: such as workshops, design sprints, R&I Labs, roundtables, and campus dialogues;
- Digital tools: such as the INITIATE Knowledge Hub, online surveys, collaborative whiteboards, and video conferencing platforms;
- Asynchronous mechanisms: such as structured feedback forms, online discussion threads, and shared documentation portals.

The choice of engagement tools is based on the target audience, the type of interaction required, and logistical considerations such as time, accessibility, and digital literacy.

Iterative Engagement and Feedback Loops

Participation in INITIATE is not static. The engagement process is designed to be iterative and responsive, incorporating continuous feedback loops. Each round of stakeholder interaction informs the next phase of project design or implementation.

Inputs are systematically captured, analyzed, and integrated into project activities and deliverables. This cycle of engagement, reflection, and refinement ensures that stakeholder contributions are not only heard but also acted upon—building trust, relevance, and ownership along the way.

Capacity Building for Meaningful Participation

To ensure that all stakeholders can participate effectively, the framework includes targeted capacity-building measures. These may involve:

- Training sessions on co-design principles and participatory methods;
- Briefing materials that explain the project's goals and technical language;
- Facilitation support during workshops or Labs to ensure equal voice and access.

By investing in stakeholder empowerment, INITIATE supports more confident and capable participation, especially from groups that may be unfamiliar with formal R&I processes or underrepresented in institutional decision-making.

Documentation and Knowledge Management

Transparency and learning are supported by comprehensive documentation of all engagement activities. This

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includes records of discussions, decision rationales, visual outputs (e.g., canvases, mind maps), and evaluation data.

The Knowledge Hub functions as a centralized digital repository, ensuring that all engagement-related content is accessible, searchable, and reusable by project partners and stakeholders. It also serves as a key tool for dissemination, reflection, and replication in other institutional contexts.

Integration with Project Management and Evaluation

Participatory engagement is not a standalone process—it is embedded within the overall project governance and evaluation architecture. Engagement activities are aligned with project timelines, work package milestones, and key deliverables. Moreover, the evaluation framework outlined in Chapter 4 includes specific indicators to assess the effectiveness, inclusivity, and relevance of stakeholder engagement efforts. This enables continuous quality improvement and ensures that engagement remains a dynamic contributor to INITIATE's overall impact.

Through the implementation of this comprehensive and adaptable framework, the INITIATE project ensures that its co-design activities are not only methodologically sound, but also inclusive, responsive, and strategically aligned with institutional transformation goals. In doing so, the project lays a strong foundation for sustainable R&I capacity building and meaningful stakeholder empowerment across Widening countries.

3.3 Guiding Principles

The effectiveness of INITIATE's co-design methodology rests on four foundational Guiding Principles—Relevance, Transparency, Inclusivity, and Shared Ownership—that provide both ethical direction and operational coherence. These principles ensure that stakeholder engagement is not only well-intentioned but also meaningful, participatory, and impactful. They inform the design, delivery, and evaluation of all engagement activities, shaping them to be contextually grounded, transparent, equitable, and collaboratively driven.

Relevance

Relevance ensures that co-design activities address real-world problems and opportunities relevant to participating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their local ecosystems. This principle requires a needs-driven approach, underpinned by institutional assessments and stakeholder dialogue, ensuring that project interventions align with genuine challenges and strategic priorities (Bogomolova et al., 2021; PRECISE, 2023). By emphasizing contextual adaptation, the INITIATE framework allows flexibility to suit diverse institutional, cultural, and socio-economic settings. Evidence-based design further reinforces relevance, grounding activities in validated research and best practices (Burkett, 2012). Ultimately, relevance ensures solutions are not abstract but yield tangible outputs—such as new strategies, tools, policies, or collaborative models—that enhance R&I capacity.

Table 1 — Relevance: Sub-criteria & Indicators

Sub-criteria	Indicator
Needs alignment	Activities reflect documented institutional challenges and stakeholder priorities
Contextual adaptation	Methods and outputs tailored to local conditions and institutional culture

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Evidence-informed design	Activities reference relevant literature and international best practices
Tangible outcomes	Co-design outputs result in actionable policies, tools, or service models

Transparency

Transparency upholds clarity, openness, and accountability throughout the co-design process. By ensuring open communication, INITIATE makes meeting agendas, decision criteria, and project documentation readily accessible, enabling stakeholders to understand and follow decision-making (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; PRECISE, 2023). Clear definitions of roles and responsibilities prevent confusion and build trust, while mechanisms like the Knowledge Hub reinforce visibility and continuity. Structured feedback loops ensure that stakeholder input is acknowledged and adapted in real time, helping maintain legitimacy and confidence in the co-design process.

Table 2 — Transparency: Sub-criteria & Indicators

Sub-criteria	Indicator
Open information access	Meeting agendas, minutes, and decisions are publicly accessible
Governance clarity	Roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes are clearly defined
Traceable contributions	Stakeholder input is recorded and reflected in outcomes
Feedback mechanisms	Channels exist for stakeholders to provide feedback and receive responses

Inclusivity

Inclusivity ensures that co-design activities are truly participatory by engaging a broad and diverse array of stakeholders—including students, junior researchers, administrative staff, policymakers, industry actors, and local communities. Drawing on the principles of participatory and community-based research (Israel et al., 2005), INITIATE adopts strategies to reduce barriers (e.g., multilingual facilitation, hybrid sessions) and proactively support under-represented voices (Burkett, 2012). Facilitators actively mitigate power asymmetries to ensure equitable participation. This inclusive approach enhances legitimacy, improves relevance, and fosters shared understanding across stakeholder groups.

Table 3 — Inclusivity: Sub-criteria & Indicators

Sub-criteria	Indicator
Diverse representation	Participants include varied roles and demographics from across the quadruple helix
Accessible formats	Hybrid, multilingual, and supported sessions accommodate diverse participant needs
Power-aware facilitation	Facilitation ensures equitable speaking time and prevents dominance
Cultural respect	Materials and engagement practices reflect sensitivity to diverse backgrounds

Shared Ownership

Shared Ownership ensures that responsibility for both the process and outcomes is collectively shared with

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stakeholders. Rooted in co-creation frameworks (Burkett, 2012; Israel et al., 2005), this principle emphasizes joint decision-making, co-creation, and distributed responsibility, often via participatory governance structures or community committees. By empowering participants to define problems, shape solutions, and take implementation roles, INITIATE builds local leadership capacity and fosters long-term institutional commitment. The result is a more sustainable legacy of innovation and engagement, as stakeholders feel ownership over the change process.

Table 4 — Shared Ownership: Sub-criteria & Indicators

Sub-criteria	Indicator
Joint problem definition	Stakeholders collectively establish goals and challenges
Collaborative design	Workshops and labs lead to jointly developed proposals and prototypes
Shared responsibility	Tasks and roles are distributed across stakeholder groups
Capacity building	Stakeholders demonstrate the ability to continue and scale initiatives post-project

By embedding the principles of **Relevance, Transparency, Inclusivity**, and **Shared Ownership** throughout the co-design methodology, INITIATE ensures that its participatory practices are not only procedurally sound but socially meaningful, responsive, and sustainable. These principles bridge the gap between ideal and implementation, ensuring that the project achieves genuine R&I capacity building across diverse contexts.

3.4 Stakeholder Mapping and Engagement Strategy

Effective stakeholder engagement is central to the INITIATE project's co-design methodology. The development of R&I capacity within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) requires the active and coordinated involvement of a diverse range of actors across institutional, sectoral, and geographical boundaries. This section outlines the stakeholder mapping process, the strategic categorization of stakeholder groups, and the targeted engagement strategies that will guide participatory activities throughout the project.

3.4.1 Stakeholder Mapping: Process and Purpose

Stakeholder mapping in INITIATE serves a dual purpose: to identify all relevant actors in the R&I ecosystems of the participating HEIs, and to inform tailored engagement approaches that reflect the roles, interests, and influence of each group. The mapping process draws from best practices in stakeholder analysis (Bryson, 2004; Schmeer, 2000), and involves:

- Institutional self-assessment and scoping interviews with key staff;
- Ecosystem mapping of policy, research, and innovation stakeholders;
- Cross-case comparison of actors across pilot countries;
- Continuous updating as new stakeholders emerge through engagement activities.

This dynamic and iterative process ensures that no critical actors are overlooked and that engagement strategies remain flexible and context-sensitive.

3.4.2 Stakeholder Categories

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Stakeholders are grouped according to the Quadruple Helix model (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009), which reflects the complexity of R&I systems by incorporating four core domains:

- Academia: University leadership, researchers, research support staff, students;
- Industry: SMEs, start-ups, business incubators, industry associations;
- Public Sector: Ministries, research councils, regional authorities, funding agencies;
- Civil Society: NGOs, citizen groups, community leaders, and the general public.

Each category plays a unique role in shaping, supporting, or benefiting from HEI transformation. Sub-categorization within each helix allows for more granular targeting—for example, separating early-career researchers from senior faculty or distinguishing between national and local policymakers.

3.4.3 Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

The engagement strategy defines how each stakeholder group will be involved in the co-design and implementation of capacity-building activities. It is based on three key principles:

1. Fit-for-purpose engagement: Engagement intensity and format are adapted to the relevance and influence of each stakeholder group. For instance, industry partners may be targeted via innovation co-labs, while students may engage through participatory design sprints.
2. Progressive involvement: Stakeholders are not all engaged at once but are progressively involved across phases—needs assessment, co-design, implementation, evaluation.
3. Multimodal communication: A combination of in-person workshops, digital platforms (e.g., Knowledge Hub), and bilateral dialogues are used to maximize participation and accessibility.

The stakeholder engagement plan is also aligned with Task 4.2 (R&I Labs) and Task 4.4 (Alliance Formation), ensuring continuity between strategic planning and practical collaboration.

Table 5 – Stakeholder Categories and Engagement Approaches

Stakeholder Group	Role in INITIATE	Engagement Methods
University leadership	Strategic direction and institutional embedding	Advisory panels, high-level workshops
Researchers (all levels)	Methodology co-creation, piloting, feedback	Labs, surveys, co-design workshops
Students	Beneficiaries and innovation co-creators	Hackathons, idea labs, peer-learning forums
Industry partners	Application, valorisation, innovation feedback	Co-creation sessions, bilateral meetings
Policymakers	Alignment, regulation, funding and support	Policy roundtables, white paper co-writing sessions
Community actors	Contextualisation, local impact, social dialogue	Town hall meetings, interviews, user testing

3.4.4 Engagement Monitoring

To ensure the inclusiveness and effectiveness of stakeholder engagement, KPIs will be applied to measure participation diversity, feedback integration, and the iterative refinement of engagement approaches. The

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evaluation framework detailed in Chapter 4 supports this process by integrating stakeholder engagement as a critical dimension of performance.

3.5 Participatory Methods and Processes

The INITIATE project employs a structured and iterative participatory approach to co-design, grounded in methods that ensure inclusivity, responsiveness, and real-world applicability. The participatory processes are designed to foster active stakeholder involvement across various levels of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), enabling the collaborative development of context-sensitive solutions that address systemic challenges in research and innovation (R&I) capacity.

The participatory methods used throughout INITIATE include interactive co-design workshops, targeted design sprints, institutionally embedded R&I Labs, and digital collaboration tools. These mechanisms are complemented by continuous feedback loops that support iterative refinement, learning-by-doing, and long-term stakeholder engagement. Together, they form a cohesive strategy for meaningful and impactful co-creation.

3.5.1 Workshops and Design Sprints

Workshops and design sprints form the foundation of INITIATE's participatory engagement during key project phases. These formats offer focused, time-bound spaces for structured dialogue, collaborative ideation, and rapid prototyping.

Workshops will be organized around specific thematic challenges identified through stakeholder mapping and contextual assessments. They follow a facilitation structure that includes joint problem definition, ideation, concept refinement, and stakeholder validation. In addition, workshops serve as important venues for capacity building, offering hands-on training in co-design practices and exposure to R&I system transformation strategies.

Design sprints, inspired by the Google Ventures methodology (Knapp, Zeratsky, & Kowitz, 2016), enable rapid development and testing of prototypes over 3–5 days. These sprints involve structured phases such as user journey mapping, sketching, prototyping, and real-user testing, generating tangible outputs within compressed timeframes. They are particularly effective for tackling complex institutional or digital innovation challenges.

Both formats will be facilitated by experienced moderators and are designed to foster an inclusive and psychologically safe environment that empowers contributions from diverse actors.

3.5.2 R&I Labs

The R&I Labs represent the operational heart of INITIATE's co-design framework. They provide sustained, institution-specific environments—both physical and virtual—for iterative development and testing of capacity-building solutions.

Each R&I Lab is coordinated by a core team within the host HEI and draws participation from internal and external stakeholders, including researchers, students, administrators, policymakers, and industry representatives. The Labs operate through a cyclical process of deep-dive diagnostics, co-creation sessions, pilot implementation, and feedback-based revision.

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Activities within the R&I Labs include:

- Diagnostic deep dives into systemic R&I challenges in Higher Education Institutions;
- Identification of policy and implementation barriers, and the co-development of methods, and collaborative models to support improvement
- Pilot implementation within institutional contexts;
- Monitoring and evaluation based on defined KPIs;
- Knowledge exchange and cross-case learning among pilot countries.
- Sharing funding opportunities to sustain the initiative and co-develop future project ideas.

The outputs of R&I Labs contribute directly to INITIATE's policy recommendations and roadmap development, while also embedding co-design capacities within the participating institutions.

3.5.3 Digital Co-Creation and the Knowledge Hub

To ensure sustained collaboration across geographical and institutional boundaries, INITIATE integrates digital co-creation through a dedicated Knowledge Hub. This online platform complements in-person engagements by enabling asynchronous interaction and continuous knowledge sharing.

Key features of the Knowledge Hub include:

- Centralized access to documents, toolkits, and datasets;
- Moderated discussion forums and interactive Q&A sessions;
- Collaborative document editing and stakeholder feedback modules;
- Virtual workshops and webinars, supported by tools such as Zoom, Miro, and Microsoft Teams;
- Visual progress tracking dashboards for pilot implementation.

The Knowledge Hub acts as both a repository and a live co-creation space, ensuring that stakeholder engagement continues beyond scheduled events and remains inclusive for dispersed or time-constrained actors.

3.5.4 Feedback Loops and Iterative Design

A defining feature of the INITIATE co-design methodology is its commitment to iterative development through embedded feedback loops. These ensure that stakeholder input is continuously gathered, synthesized, and used to refine both process and outputs.

Feedback mechanisms include:

- Post-workshop and post-sprint evaluation surveys;
- Ongoing feedback channels within the Knowledge Hub;
- Qualitative interviews and structured focus groups;
- Regular progress reviews within R&I Labs.

The project follows a Plan–Do–Check–Act (PDCA) cycle, where each phase of engagement or implementation is followed by reflection and adaptation. Transparency in how feedback is integrated ensures trust and reinforces the participatory ethos of the project.

This iterative model enhances the relevance, feasibility, and sustainability of the co-designed solutions and

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supports adaptive project management in dynamic institutional environments.

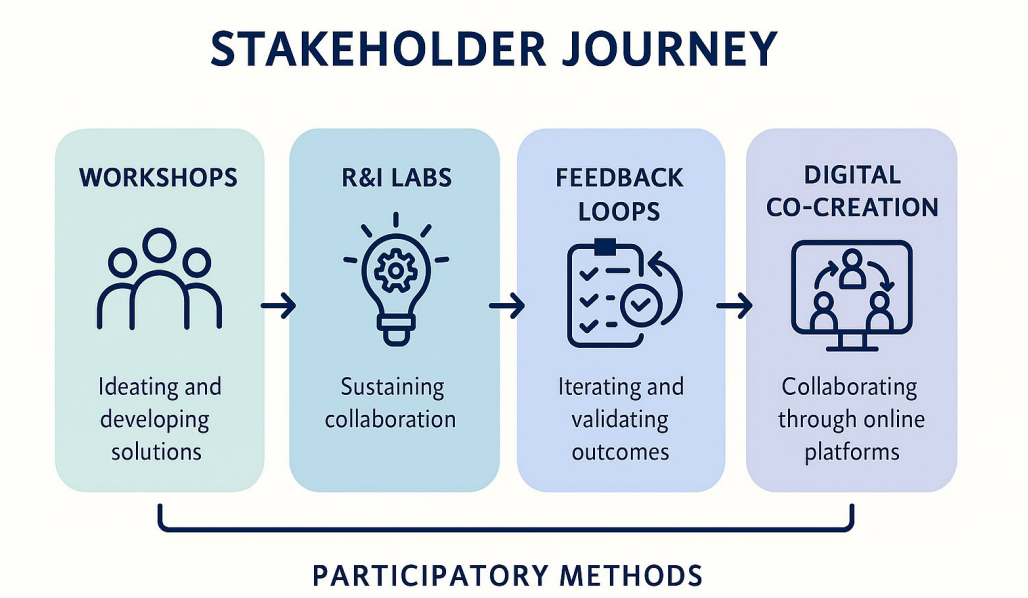


Figure 3 – Stakeholder journey including all steps and participatory methods

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4. Evaluation Plan for Participatory Processes

4.1 Purpose and Scope

The INITIATE Evaluation plan table can be found in Chapter 9: Annex.

The primary purpose of evaluating the participatory processes within INITIATE is to:

Assess Effectiveness**:** Determine how well the co-design methodology and its implemented activities achieve their intended goals of engaging stakeholders, fostering collaboration, and generating relevant solutions.

Measure Impact: Quantify and qualify the influence of participatory engagement on R&I capacity building, institutional change, and the development of a culture of excellence within HEIs.

Identify Best Practices and Lessons Learned: Extract valuable insights from successful engagement strategies and identify areas where improvements can be made, contributing to continuous learning and refinement of the methodology.

Ensure Accountability and Transparency: Provide evidence of the project's progress and impact to the European Commission, consortium partners, and other stakeholders, demonstrating responsible use of resources and adherence to project objectives.

Inform Future Strategies: Generate data and insights that can inform the adaptation of the co-design methodology for future applications, both within and beyond the INITIATE project.

The scope of this evaluation plan covers all co-design and user engagement activities undertaken as part of Task 4.1 and related Work Packages. This includes, but is not limited to, workshops, design sprints, R&I Labs, digital co-creation activities via the Knowledge Hub, and various stakeholder communication and feedback mechanisms. The evaluation will consider both the process of engagement (e.g., quality of participation, inclusivity) and the outcomes (e.g., relevance of solutions, stakeholder satisfaction, impact on R&I culture).

4.2 Key Evaluation Dimensions and KPIs

The evaluation of the R&I Labs is guided by the following key dimensions and corresponding KPIs:

This dimension assesses the extent to which the co-designed solutions and engagement activities address the actual needs and strategic priorities of the participating HEIs and align with their institutional development plans.

KPI 4.2.1: Alignment of Co-designed Solutions with HEI Needs:

Metric: Percentage of co-designed solutions directly addressing identified R&I capacity gaps or strategic priorities of pilot HEIs.

Measurement: Review of co-design outputs (e.g., workshop reports, R&I Lab outcomes) against initial needs assessments and HEI strategic documents.

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KPI 4.2.2: Integration of Co-designed Solutions into HEI Strategies:

Metric: Number of co-designed strategies, policies, or tools formally adopted or integrated into HEI operational plans or curricula.

Measurement: Documentation review, interviews with HEI leadership and relevant departments.

KPI 4.2.3: Stakeholder Perception of Relevance:

Metric: Average rating of relevance of engagement activities and co-designed outcomes by participants (e.g., on a Likert scale).

Measurement: Post-activity surveys and qualitative feedback from interviews/focus groups.

Inclusiveness and Reach

This dimension evaluates the breadth and diversity of stakeholder participation, ensuring that the co-design process is open, accessible, and representative of all relevant groups.

KPI 4.2.4: Diversity of Participants:

Metric: Representation of different stakeholder categories (e.g., leadership, researchers, administrative staff, students, industry, policymakers, civil society) in co-design activities, compared to target demographics.

Measurement: Participant registration data, demographic surveys.

KPI 4.2.5: Reach of Engagement Activities:

Metric: Number of unique individuals engaged across all co-design activities (workshops, R&I Labs, Knowledge Hub participation).

Measurement: Attendance records, Knowledge Hub user statistics.

KPI 4.2.6: Satisfaction with Inclusivity:

Metric: Percentage of participants reporting that their voice was heard and valued during co-design activities.

Measurement: Post-activity surveys, qualitative feedback.

Stakeholder Satisfaction

This dimension measures the overall satisfaction of participants with the co-design process, including the quality of facilitation, the collaborative environment, and the perceived value of their contributions.

KPI 4.2.7: Overall Satisfaction with Co-design Process:

Metric: Average satisfaction rating of participants with the overall co-design experience.

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Measurement: Post-activity surveys, general feedback forms.

KPI 4.2.8: Perceived Value of Contribution:

Metric: Percentage of participants who feel their contributions were meaningful and impactful.

Measurement: Post-activity surveys, qualitative interviews.

KPI 4.2.9: Quality of Facilitation:

Metric: Average rating of the effectiveness of facilitators in guiding discussions and ensuring productive outcomes.

Measurement: Post-activity surveys.

Impact on R&I Culture and Practices

This dimension assesses the long-term effects of the co-design methodology on the R&I culture, practices, and capacity within the participating HEIs.

KPI 4.2.10: Increase in Collaborative R&I Initiatives:

Metric: Number of new inter-departmental, inter-institutional, or university-industry R&I collaborations initiated as a direct result of co-design activities.

Measurement: Project reports, interviews with HEI R&I offices.

KPI 4.2.11: Enhanced R&I Skills and Knowledge:

Metric: Self-reported increase in R&I-related skills (e.g., proposal writing, project management, valorisation) among participants.

Measurement: Pre/post-activity surveys, qualitative feedback.

KPI 4.2.12: Change in Institutional R&I Policies/Practices:

Metric: Number of new or revised institutional policies, guidelines, or procedures related to R&I management, valorisation, or engagement.

Measurement: Documentation review, interviews with HEI administration.

KPI 4.2.13: Awareness and Adoption of Knowledge Hub:

Metric: Number of active users and frequency of engagement with the INITIATE Knowledge Hub.

Measurement: Platform analytics.

Dimension	Indicators
Participation & Inclusion	Number of participants, stakeholder diversity, gender balance
Relevance & Alignment	Fit between Lab themes and institutional/national priorities

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Engagement & Collaboration	Quality of interaction, feedback richness, co-creation intensity
Knowledge & Capacity Gain	Skills strengthened, new insights generated, follow-up interest
Outcome & Follow-up	Concrete outputs (proposals, strategies), new partnerships, follow-up actions

This table reflects the visual model previously developed and provides the benchmark for data comparison across Labs.

4.3 Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative tools to ensure robust insights:

Surveys: Online surveys will be administered after each major co-design activity (e.g., workshops, design sprints, R&I Lab phases) to collect quantitative data on participant satisfaction, perceived relevance, inclusivity, and initial impact. Surveys will utilize Likert scales for ratings and open-ended questions for qualitative comments.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a selected sample of key stakeholders (e.g., HEI leadership, R&I Lab coordinators, active participants, industry partners) at regular intervals. These interviews will delve deeper into their experiences, perceptions of impact, challenges faced, and suggestions for improvement. They will provide rich qualitative data to complement survey findings.

Focus Groups: Focus group discussions will be organized with specific stakeholder groups to explore particular themes, gather diverse perspectives on complex issues, and facilitate group interaction and consensus-building on evaluation findings. These will be particularly useful for understanding group dynamics and shared experiences.

Observational Protocols

Direct observation of co-design activities will provide valuable insights into group dynamics, interaction patterns, and the effectiveness of facilitation.

Structured Observation: Trained observers will use predefined protocols to systematically record observations during workshops, R&I Lab sessions, and other participatory events. This will include noting levels of participation, types of contributions, instances of conflict or consensus, and the overall collaborative atmosphere.

Process Tracing: For specific co-design initiatives, process tracing will be used to document the evolution of ideas, decisions made, and the influence of different stakeholders throughout the development cycle. This involves reviewing meeting minutes, collaborative documents, and communication logs.

Self-Assessment Tools

Self-assessment tools will empower participants and HEIs to reflect on their own progress and contributions to the co-design process.

Participatory Self-Assessment Workshops: These workshops will bring together HEI teams to collectively assess their progress in implementing co-designed solutions, identify internal strengths and weaknesses, and

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plan for future actions. Facilitated discussions will guide them through a structured reflection process.

Checklists and Rubrics: Simple checklists and rubrics will be developed to help HEIs and individual participants self evaluate their adherence to co-design principles (e.g., transparency, inclusivity) and the quality of their engagement.

4.4 Review of R&I Labs (Rounds 1 & 2)

Round 1

Lisbon R&I Lab (ISCTE), 25 October 2024

Objectives: To explore institutional R&I barriers and gather initial insights from key academic and policy actors.

Participants: 25 participants from academia, administration, and government agencies.

Methods Used: Workshops, SWOT analysis, facilitated dialogues.

Key Outcomes:

- Identification of gaps in internal collaboration structures.
- Mapping of funding bottlenecks and bureaucratic obstacles.
- Initial proposals for institutional R&I support structures.

Feedback Highlights: High satisfaction with inclusiveness and facilitation; call for more structured follow-up mechanisms.

Lessons Learned: The need to better connect institutional priorities with policy dialogues.

UKIM R&I Lab (Skopje), 27 February 2025

Objectives: To define funding pathways and institutional readiness for international R&I participation.

Participants: 28 attendees from faculties, administration, and national R&I offices.

Methods Used: Funding landscape workshop, guided brainstorming, mapping session.

Key Outcomes:

- Identification of high-interest calls (e.g., LIFE, Horizon WIDERA).
- Proposal to establish an internal grant support unit.
- Joint roadmap draft for R&I institutional growth.

Feedback Highlights: Strong appreciation of practical orientation and funding focus.

Lessons Learned: Stakeholders need more preparatory material to maximize workshop outcomes.

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UNIZAG FSB R&I Lab (Zagreb), 25 April 2025

Objectives: To examine institutional gaps and external partnerships for innovation valorisation.

Participants: 30 participants, including academic leadership, researchers, and industry actors.

Methods Used: Stakeholder journey mapping, co-design sprints, group ideation.

Key Outcomes:

- Insights into lack of incentive structures for interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Development of action points to promote academic-industry co-creation.
- Agreement to develop a university innovation incubator proposal.

Feedback Highlights: Design sprint format well-received; stakeholders noted time constraints.

Lessons Learned: Stakeholder facilitation needs more introductory framing and shared vocabulary.

Round 2

Lisbon R&I Lab (ISCTE), 8 May 2025

Objectives: To deepen institutional dialogue on reform implementation and transnational collaborations.

Participants: 22 stakeholders from universities, municipalities, and civil society.

Methods Used: Roundtables, stakeholder scenario building, comparative policy review.

Key Outcomes:

- Cross-comparison of national R&I reforms and their local effects.
- Drafting of principles for institutional policy harmonization.
- Suggestion for a permanent multi-stakeholder policy forum.

Feedback Highlights: Strong appreciation for dialogue format; suggestion to include more junior staff.

Lessons Learned: Labs must balance theoretical discussion with tangible institutional change agendas.

UKIM R&I Lab (Skopje), 5 June 2025

Objectives: To bridge national energy and innovation policy with pilot institutional needs.

Participants: 30+ attendees, including Ministry representatives, faculty, researchers.

Methods Used: Presentations, moderated roundtable, Horizon call review, MSCA design workshop.

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Key Outcomes:

- Alignment analysis between Smart Specialization Strategy and university R&I roadmap.
- Actionable outcomes from the MSCA Staff Exchange planning workshop.
- Enhanced awareness of cross-cutting funding opportunities (LIFE, Horizon).

Feedback Highlights: Very strong satisfaction with Horizon & MSCA session; desire for longer hands-on sections.

Lessons Learned: Future Labs should segment participants for parallel focus streams.

4.5 Other Strategic Engagements

While the INITIATE R&I Labs serve as formal arenas for structured co-creation and participatory innovation, other strategic meetings held outside the formal Lab format have also played a critical role in advancing institutional collaboration, stakeholder alignment, and thematic deep dives. These engagements, although less structured than Labs, provided essential groundwork for shaping R&I priorities and forging alliances with key industry and academic actors. INITIATE consortium members participate in a great number of cross-sectoral meetings, meetings with industry stakeholders, decision-makers (faculty boards, deans and vice-deans, peer researchers, etc.) but two such notable meetings were conducted in the first year of implementation: a bilateral cooperation meeting between UNIZAG FSB and HELB, and a strategic alignment session between UKIM and Kontron.

4.5.1 Meeting: UNIZAG FSB – HELB Cooperation Discussion

Date: 19 March 2024
Location: HELB Headquarters, Božjakovina, Zagreb
Participants:

- Marko Mimica, Goran Krajačić (UNIZAG FSB)
- Tomislav Geceg, Zdravko Ivčić, Hrvoje Lovrić (HELB)

Objective:
To explore synergies and opportunities for collaboration between UNIZAG FSB and HELB, particularly in domains relevant to the energy transition, smart systems, and industrial electrification.

Key Discussion Points:

- HELB presented its facility and ongoing industrial efforts in smart grids and electrification of transport, including maritime sectors.
- UNIZAG FSB emphasized research activities under INITIATE and other EU-funded initiatives, especially the importance of partner involvement and stakeholder co-evaluation.
- Strategic alignment emerged around shared interests in renewable integration, decarbonisation technologies (biomass, hydrogen), and smart network solutions including integrated heating and gas systems.
- A noteworthy point was HELB's openness to exploring foreign market collaborations (e.g., Morocco, Kazakhstan, China) in addition to national engagements.

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Outcomes:

- Agreement on prioritizing pilot areas such as battery integration, hydrogen infrastructure, and electric ship charging.
- Identification of collaboration formats: internships, joint pilot testing, and R&I Labs.
- Recognition of the need for further structured engagement and partner evaluation at early stages of implementation.

4.5.2 Meeting: UKIM – Kontron Strategic Alignment on Smart Energy Systems

Date: 10 July 2024
Location: Kontron Headquarters, Skopje
Participants:

- Dimitar Tashkovski, Zhivko Kokolanski (FEEIT/UKIM)
- Slobodan Jovanovski, Darko Vidinikj (Kontron)

Objective:
To assess potential collaboration between UKIM's INITIATE team and Kontron, a regional leader in digital infrastructure, with a focus on smart energy systems.

Key Discussion Points:

- The meeting established the groundwork for a joint "Smart Energy Systems" working group.
- Discussions centered on strategic alignment between INITIATE goals and Kontron's capabilities in IoT, AI/ML, and system integration across sectors such as energy, public safety, and transport.
- Specific technological themes were defined, including Digital Twins, Energy Communities, and Smart Grids.

Outcomes:

- Agreement to establish thematic subgroups and assign point persons for continued development.
- Plan for follow-up sessions and a co-developed roadmap outlining project milestones, pilot actions, and resource allocation.
- Mutual acknowledgment of value in building long-term institutional-industry partnerships to support R&I transformation.

Strategic Value of These Engagements:
These early bilateral meetings illustrate how INITIATE's engagement ecosystem is not limited to formal R&I Labs but includes a broader strategy of alliance-building with key industrial and technological partners. They have enabled:

- Early identification of pilot areas and institutional needs.
- Strengthening of HEI-industry ties for mutual knowledge transfer.
- Expansion of the INITIATE network into non-academic domains critical for applied innovation.

These strategic conversations are planned to be formalized into future co-design formats—such as Labs, Working Groups, or Living Labs—ensuring continuity of collaboration, mutual benefit, and alignment with

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INITIATE's capacity-building goals.

4.5.3 FSB JOBS: Career Opportunities at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture

Another example of strategic engagement example is the FSB Jobs event organized by UNIZAG FSB. FSB Jobs is an informative and career-oriented event designed for master's students, alumni, and engineers to gain insight into the professional environment of the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture.

The event aims to highlight the Faculty as a dynamic setting for professional development, offering access to diverse employment, research, and collaboration opportunities. Participants (mostly master students) are introduced, through presentations by faculty members and researchers, to openings for assistant or researcher roles on projects, opportunities to work on master's theses focused on contemporary topics, and the possibility of occasional student engagements in the industry. The event includes parallel presentations of departments, laboratories, and projects, followed by short one-on-one conversations with registered candidates.

FSB JOBS enables direct contact with academic staff and unveils the Faculty's extensive infrastructure — over fifty laboratories, numerous national and international projects, and intensive research work largely funded by European grants. This event was organized with the support of the INITIATE project for two consecutive years — 2024 and 2025 — in collaboration with the project team and the Faculty's Career Support and Development Center.

4.5.4 FSB Practical Connection: Bridging Students with Industry Through Meaningful Conversations

The FSB Practical Connection ("FSB Praktičan spoj") is a career event that actively links students with employers through brief yet focused discussions about internship and employment opportunities. Its primary goal is to foster collaboration between academia and industry while providing young professionals with concrete pathways for career development. Hosted in the newly renovated buildings of the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture, the event offers an inspiring and modern environment for exchanging ideas, experiences, and future prospects. Students have the chance to meet representatives from leading companies, learn about their current projects and job openings, and build professional connections that can significantly shape their career paths.

The FSB Practical Connection is organized within the framework of the INITIATE project and led by the UNIZAG FSB in spring (April). This event marked its third edition in 2025 and included more than 60 different stakeholders and industry partners.

4.6. Integration with Pilot monitoring and WP5

The evaluation plan for participatory processes is not a standalone activity but is deeply integrated with the broader monitoring and evaluation framework of the INITIATE project, particularly with the pilot monitoring activities and Work Package 5 (WP5).

Pilot Monitoring: The co-design activities are primarily implemented within the pilot HEIs in Croatia, Portugal, and North Macedonia. The evaluation of these participatory processes will be closely coordinated with the overall monitoring of the pilot implementations. Data collected on stakeholder engagement, solution adoption, and perceived impact will feed directly into the pilot progress reports. This ensures that the

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effectiveness of the co-design approach is assessed in the context of its real-world application and its contribution to the pilot objectives.

Work Package 5 (WP5) – Monitoring and Evaluation: WP5 is responsible for the overarching monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment of the entire INITIATE project. The evaluation plan for participatory processes (D4.1) will provide specific methodologies, KPIs, and data collection instruments that will be utilized and integrated by WP5. This ensures consistency in data collection and analysis across different aspects of the project. WP5 will aggregate the findings from the co-design evaluation with other project data to provide a holistic assessment of INITIATE's overall success and impact. The insights from D4.1 will specifically contribute to WP5's assessment of project relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability, particularly concerning stakeholder engagement and capacity building.

Data Flow and Reporting: A clear data flow mechanism will be established to ensure that data from co-design activities and their evaluation are systematically collected, processed, and shared with WP5. This includes regular reporting on KPI progress, qualitative findings from surveys and interviews, and lessons learned. The findings from this evaluation will be incorporated into the periodic and final reports of the INITIATE project, as required by the Grant Agreement.

4.7 Roles, Responsibilities and Reporting Schedule

Clear roles and responsibilities are essential for the successful implementation of the evaluation plan. The following outlines the key actors involved and their respective duties, along with a general reporting schedule.

Task 4.1 Lead (B1 Media):
Responsibilities: Overall coordination and oversight of the co-design methodology and its evaluation. Development and refinement of evaluation tools and instruments. Synthesis of evaluation findings for D4.1 and contributions to other project reports. Ensuring adherence to guiding principles (relevance, transparency, inclusivity, shared ownership).

Pilot HEIs (UNIZAG FSB, ISCTE, UKIM):
Responsibilities: Active participation in co-design activities. Collection of primary data (e.g., administering surveys, facilitating self-assessment workshops) within their respective contexts. Providing qualitative feedback on the co design process. Implementing co-designed solutions and reporting on their integration and impact.

Work Package 5 Lead:
Responsibilities: Integration of D4.1 evaluation data into the overall project monitoring and evaluation framework. Aggregation and analysis of project-wide KPIs. Providing guidance on evaluation methodologies and ensuring consistency across WPs. Contributing to the overall project reports.

All Consortium Partners:
Responsibilities: Active participation in co-design activities. Providing feedback on the methodology and its implementation. Contributing to data collection where relevant (e.g., through participation in surveys or interviews).

Reporting Schedule:

Continuous Feedback: Ongoing collection of qualitative and quantitative feedback through surveys, online

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platforms (Knowledge Hub), and informal channels throughout the project duration.

Mid-term Evaluation Report (M18 - aligned with D4.1 submission): This deliverable (D4.1) will present the initial evaluation framework, preliminary findings from early engagement activities, and refined KPIs. It will serve as a baseline for future assessments.

Annual Progress Reports: Contributions to the annual progress reports submitted to the European Commission, summarizing key achievements, challenges, and lessons learned from the co-design and engagement activities.

Final Evaluation Report (M42 - integrated into final project report): A comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness and impact of the co-design methodology, drawing on all collected data and insights throughout the project lifespan. This will include a detailed analysis of all KPIs and a synthesis of best practices and policy recommendations.
This structured approach to roles, responsibilities, and reporting ensures that the evaluation of participatory processes is systematic, collaborative, and contributes effectively to the overall success and learning of the INITIATE project.

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5. Discussion and Implementation Strategy

The success of the INITIATE project in strengthening Research and Innovation (R&I) capacity within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Widening countries is not solely dependent on the quality of its co-design methodology. Equally important is the strategy for its implementation—one that is pragmatic, flexible, and informed by real-world conditions. This chapter outlines the strategic approach adopted for deploying the methodology, explores how it will be tailored to diverse institutional contexts, and reflects on early implementation insights, continuous learning, and links to wider capacity-building and policy objectives.

5.1 Adapting the Methodology Across Pilots

The INITIATE project is being piloted across three distinct national contexts—Croatia, Portugal, and North Macedonia—each representing different levels of institutional maturity in R&I, varied governance structures, and diverse cultural and socio-economic environments. These differences necessitate a highly adaptable implementation strategy. Rather than enforcing a one-size-fits-all model, INITIATE embraces a flexible framework that allows each HEI to apply the co-design methodology in a way that is most meaningful and impactful within their local context. A critical first step in each pilot site is the contextual analysis. This entails a thorough review of the institution's internal R&I capabilities, organizational culture, governance mechanisms, and its position within the national innovation ecosystem. The analysis also considers the strategic priorities of the HEI, its stakeholder networks, and the policy environment it operates within. These insights inform the adaptation of both the engagement tools and the thematic focus of the co-design activities. This localized adaptation also extends to stakeholder prioritization. While the overall engagement framework identifies a comprehensive range of actors—including university leadership, academic staff, students, industry partners, public bodies, and civil society—each HEI will tailor its approach to focus on those stakeholders who are most strategic and most likely to catalyze institutional transformation. For instance, one institution might prioritize industry engagement, while another may focus on internal cross-departmental collaboration. Additionally, cultural sensitivity is embedded in the facilitation of co-design activities. Communication formats, facilitation techniques, and even workshop scheduling are attuned to local norms and participant preferences, ensuring inclusivity and comfort. Language accessibility is also addressed through translations and bilingual facilitation when necessary, removing barriers to participation and fostering ownership among local stakeholders. Equally important is an awareness of resource availability—both human and financial. Each pilot HEI adapts the co-design process to fit its operational constraints, leveraging existing capacities and infrastructure wherever possible, while building new capabilities as needed. As a living methodology, INITIATE promotes iterative refinement, incorporating feedback from each round of implementation to recalibrate and improve subsequent iterations.

This adaptive approach not only enhances the relevance and sustainability of co-designed solutions at each site, but also provides a proof-of-concept for broader replication in diverse European R&I settings.

5.2 Reflections from Initial Deployment

Initial implementations of the co-design methodology have already begun to provide valuable insights into how participatory processes unfold in practice within HEIs. While detailed evaluation of these early experiences is ongoing, a number of preliminary reflections can already be observed.

First, early deployments have underscored both the opportunities and challenges of stakeholder engagement. In some cases, there was strong enthusiasm and active participation from diverse stakeholder groups. In

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others, engagement was hampered by time constraints, competing institutional priorities, or skepticism toward participatory approaches. These experiences emphasize the importance of clear communication, transparent processes, and the demonstration of early results to build trust and credibility. Second, the efficacy of specific participatory tools—such as design sprints, R&I Labs, and digital platforms like the Knowledge Hub—varies by context. For example, in Portugal, online tools proved useful for asynchronous collaboration, while in North Macedonia, in-person workshops were more effective for deep engagement. Understanding the strengths and limitations of each method in different settings is essential for informed tool selection moving forward. Moreover, the initial deployments have surfaced unforeseen needs and opportunities. In Skopje, for instance, unexpected synergies emerged between academia and the private sector, revealing opportunities for partnership that had not been explicitly targeted. These spontaneous outcomes speak to the value of a flexible and open-ended co-design process. Another important insight relates to capacity-building needs. Not all stakeholders enter the process with the same level of familiarity with co-design or R&I concepts. Early workshops highlighted the need for preparatory training and ongoing support to ensure meaningful participation from all actors. Addressing these disparities will be key to democratizing the co-design process. Finally, the project's feedback mechanisms have proven essential in fostering a culture of continuous learning. Initial experiences show that stakeholders are more invested when they can clearly see how their feedback is acknowledged and integrated into project decisions and outputs. This loop of dialogue, adjustment, and response is a cornerstone of INITIATE's methodology and has already proven its value in practice.

5.3 Lessons Learned and Improvements

The INITIATE project embraces a philosophy of continuous learning. As the project moves through successive stages of implementation, insights gathered from pilot sites will be systematically analyzed and used to refine both the co-design methodology and its operationalization. One key area for improvement is the refinement of engagement protocols. Early experiences have already led to adjustments in the length and structure of workshops, the pacing of communication with stakeholders, and the level of facilitation support required for different groups. Such adaptations are expected to become increasingly tailored and nuanced over time. Similarly, digital tools—particularly the Knowledge Hub—will be incrementally improved based on usability feedback. For example, enhancements may include better navigation, translation tools, collaborative editing functions, or improved visualization of project progress. The aim is to reduce technical friction and encourage widespread, equitable participation. Another area of ongoing development is facilitation capacity. Facilitators play a critical role in shaping the quality of co-design sessions. The project will invest in upskilling internal facilitators through training sessions and peer learning exchanges, ensuring that engagement activities are consistently inclusive, dynamic, and productive. Furthermore, resource allocation will be optimized over time. By tracking which methods and activities deliver the highest engagement and learning outcomes, the project can concentrate resources on what works best, maximizing impact within available budgets and timeframes. An important deliverable from these lessons learned will be a set of best practice guides, drawn from the lived experience of implementing the methodology across multiple contexts. These guides will include detailed case studies, practical toolkits, and step-by-step recommendations, serving both the INITIATE consortium and external institutions looking to adopt similar approaches. Finally, the project's evaluation metrics and KPIs will evolve. Indicators that prove difficult to monitor or that do not adequately capture the impact of engagement activities will be revised or replaced. New metrics may also be added to reflect emerging priorities and contextual insights. This responsive evaluation strategy ensures that learning remains grounded in evidence and supports continuous adaptation.

5.4 Interlinkages with Policy and Capacity Building

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The co-design of user engagement for capacity building within INITIATE is not an isolated technical exercise; it is deeply intertwined with broader policy development and the overarching goal of sustainable capacity building. The insights generated through this methodology will directly inform and influence policy recommendations, while the participatory process itself serves as a powerful mechanism for building enduring capacities within HEIs and their ecosystems.

Informing Policy Recommendations:

Evidence-Based Insights: The co-design process generates rich, empirical data on the challenges and opportunities for R&I capacity building in Widening countries. This includes insights into institutional barriers, stakeholder needs, and the effectiveness of different intervention strategies. These evidence-based insights are invaluable for formulating actionable and relevant policy recommendations.

Stakeholder Consensus: By involving a diverse range of stakeholders (including policymakers) in the co-design process, the project fosters a shared understanding of the issues and potential solutions. This consensus-building approach increases the likelihood that policy recommendations will be well-received and implemented by relevant authorities.

Identifying Policy Gaps: Through collaborative discussions and problem-solving, the co-design activities will help identify specific policy gaps or regulatory hurdles that impede R&I development. This direct feedback from the ground is crucial for advocating for necessary policy reforms.

Showcasing Best Practices: Successful co-designed solutions and engagement models emerging from the pilot HEIs will serve as concrete examples for policymakers, demonstrating the tangible benefits of participatory approaches in R&I policy formulation.

Direct Capacity Building through Participation:

Skill Development: Active participation in co-design workshops, R&I Labs, and digital platforms directly enhances the skills of HEI staff and other stakeholders in areas such as collaborative problem-solving, strategic planning, project management, and communication. This is a direct form of capacity building.

Network Building: The co-design process facilitates the creation and strengthening of professional networks among researchers, administrators, industry representatives, and policymakers. These networks are vital for future collaborations, knowledge exchange, and sustained R&I development.

Institutional Learning: HEIs involved in the co-design process undergo a process of institutional learning, adapting their internal structures and processes to better accommodate participatory approaches and foster a more collaborative R&I culture. This contributes to long-term institutional resilience and adaptability.

Empowerment and Ownership: By giving stakeholders a voice and a role in shaping R&I strategies, the co-design methodology empowers them and instills a sense of ownership over the outcomes. This intrinsic motivation is a powerful driver for sustained engagement and implementation of capacity-building initiatives.

Sustainability of Results: The capacities built through the co-design process—both individual skills and institutional capabilities—are designed to be sustainable beyond the project's lifespan. This ensures that the impact of INITIATE continues to grow and evolve, contributing to the long-term R&I development of Widening

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countries.

In essence, the co-design methodology serves as both a generator of policy-relevant insights and a direct mechanism for capacity building. This dual function underscores its central role in achieving the transformative goals of the INITIATE project.

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6. Conclusions and Next Steps

This Deliverable 4.1 has laid out a comprehensive co-design approach for user engagement aimed at capacity building within the INITIATE project. The methodology, framework, guiding principles, stakeholder engagement strategies, participatory methods, and evaluation plan are all designed to foster active collaboration, ensure relevance, and drive sustainable R&I transformation in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Widening countries. By embracing principles of relevance, transparency, inclusivity, and shared ownership, INITIATE seeks to empower stakeholders and co-create solutions that are both impactful and enduring.

6.1. Summary of Methodology and Evaluation

The INITIATE Co-Design Methodology is built on an iterative and adaptive foundation, emphasizing active participation from a diverse range of internal and external stakeholders. It leverages a multi-layered framework for engagement, utilizing various channels and tools such as workshops, design sprints, R&I Labs, and a central Knowledge Hub for digital co-creation. The core goals are to foster collaboration, ensure relevance, enhance ownership, facilitate knowledge exchange, generate innovative solutions, build sustainable networks, and inform policy recommendations. The Evaluation Plan for Participatory Processes is integral to this methodology, providing a systematic approach to assess its effectiveness and impact. It focuses on key dimensions including relevance and institutional alignment, inclusiveness and reach, stakeholder satisfaction, and impact on R&I culture and practices. A mixed-methods approach, combining surveys, interviews, focus groups, observational protocols, and self-assessment tools, will be employed to gather comprehensive data. This evaluation is closely integrated with the project's overall monitoring and evaluation (WP5) and pilot activities, ensuring that insights are directly fed back into the project for continuous improvement and accountability.

6.2. Alignment with INITIATE's Long-Term Vision

The co-design approach and its robust evaluation are fundamentally aligned with INITIATE's overarching long-term vision: to empower HEIs in Widening countries to become stronger actors in the European Research Area. By fostering a culture of co creation and shared responsibility, the project aims to:

Catalyze Institutional Transformation: The participatory methods encourage HEIs to critically examine their internal processes and structures, leading to more adaptive and innovation-friendly environments.
Enhance R&I Excellence: By involving diverse perspectives, the co-designed solutions are more likely to be cutting-edge and tailored to specific R&I challenges, thereby elevating the quality and impact of research.
Strengthen Regional Innovation Ecosystems: The engagement of external stakeholders, particularly industry and policymakers, facilitates stronger linkages between academia and the broader innovation ecosystem, contributing to regional development.
Promote Knowledge Valorisation: The emphasis on co-creation ensures that research outcomes are not only scientifically excellent but also relevant and applicable to societal and economic needs, facilitating their valorisation.
Ensure Sustainability and Replicability: By building capacity and fostering ownership among stakeholders, the project ensures that the positive changes initiated will continue beyond its lifespan. The documented methodology and lessons learned will also serve as a blueprint for other HEIs and regions.

6.3. Future Applications and Replication

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The comprehensive co-design methodology developed within INITIATE has significant potential for future applications and replication beyond the project's immediate scope. The structured approach to stakeholder engagement, participatory methods and rigorous evaluation can serve as a model for other initiatives focused on institutional change, capacity building, and collaborative innovation, particularly in the context of European research and innovation programs. Potential future applications include:

Scaling Up within Widening Countries: The methodology can be adapted and applied to other HEIs and research organizations within Widening countries that were not part of the initial pilot phase, further expanding the impact of INITIATE's approach.
Cross-Sectoral Application: The principles and methods of co-design are transferable to other sectors beyond higher education, such as public administration, healthcare, or urban development, where multi-stakeholder collaboration is crucial for addressing complex challenges.
Policy Development and Implementation: The insights gained from the co-design process, particularly regarding effective engagement and the identification of policy barriers, can directly inform the development and implementation of future R&I policies at national and European levels.
Training and Education: The methodology can be integrated into training programs for university managers, researchers, and policymakers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to lead and participate in co-design processes.
International Collaboration Projects: The framework provides a robust model for structuring engagement in other international collaborative research and innovation projects, ensuring effective cross-cultural and cross-organizational cooperation.
As the INITIATE project progresses, the continuous refinement of this co-design methodology, coupled with the systematic collection of lessons learned, will solidify its position as a valuable resource for fostering impactful and sustainable R&I capacity building across Europe and beyond. The ultimate goal is to leave a lasting legacy of enhanced R&I ecosystems, driven by collaborative and inclusive approaches.

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8. Glossary

CSA: Coordination and Support Action
D4.1: Deliverable 4.1
HEI: Higher Education Institution
KPI: Key Performance Indicator
R&I: Research & Innovation
REA: European Research Executive Agency
WP: Work Package

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9. Annex

9.1. INITIATE Evaluation plan

2	Project structure						Task Planning		Task Actual Execution			
3	WP	Task code	Task Title	Sub-task title	Deliverable	Deliverable Responsible Partner	Sub-task event (Month)	Sub-task event (Exact date)	Sub-task event (Month)	Sub-task event (Exact date)	Host	Venue
4	4	4.1/4.2	4.1. Co-design of user engagement for capacity building, 4.2 INITIATE R&I Policy Lab	Co-design Workshop 1	D4.1 Report on co-design approach on user engagement, D4.2 Recommendations for new policies for R&I development of energy transition sector	B1 (D4.1) ESEIA (D4.2)	12		12		UNIZAG	Zagreb, Croatia
5												

Figure 4 – Project structure, Task Planning and Task Execution

Stakeholders			Evaluation						
N. of expected participants	Stakeholder Categories of Participants	INITIATE Partners involved (namely)	Evaluation Objective	Object of the Evaluation	Evaluation Indicators	Evaluation Method	Evaluation Method results	Stakeholder Categories of Respondents	Evaluation Output
150	A. INITIATE Partners B. Expert Stakeholders	UNIZAG, ESEIA, B1	Co-design activities and consultations workshops effectiveness		Knowledge and Skills Gained Level of Engagement Quality of the Training and Trainers Satisfaction with Training Materials and Resources	Satisfaction survey, questionnaire		A. INITIATE Partners B. Expert Stakeholders	INITIATE D4.1. and D4.2.
			Stakeholder and industry engagement		Expertise Understandability Learnability Governance Support Analyzability Evolvability	Satisfaction survey, questionnaire		A. INITIATE Partners B. Expert Stakeholders	

Figure 5 – Stakeholders and Evaluation methods

9.2. R&I Labs Dates and Topics

Project: INITIATE

WP 4, Task 4.2: INITIATE R&I and Policy lab (M8-M42)
Task Leader: ESEIA
Partners involved: All (UNIZAG, CYI, JSI, NURE, BrainIT, B1, VINCA, UKIM, EPBIH, ISCTE, LPNU, UTBV)

Co-design Workshop 2024-2026 (tbc):

Series	Proposed date	Location	Mode	Organizer	Person in Charge
1st	24 Nov. 24	Lisbon /PT	Onsite	ISCTE	Paula Vicente

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	(together with GA meeting)				
2nd	27 Feb 2025	Skopje/MK	Onsite (Hybrid)	UKIM	Vladimir Gjorgievski
3rd	25 April 2025	Zagreb/CRO	Onsite (Hybrid)	UNIZAG	Ana Daria Bokan
4th	5 June (together with GA meeting)	Skopje/MK	Onsite (Hybrid)	UKIM	Vladimir Gjorgievski
5th	8 May 2025	Lisbon /PT	Onsite (Hybrid)	ISCTE	Paula Vicente
6th	25 September 2025	Zagreb/CRO	Onsite (Hybrid)	UNIZAG	Ana Daria Bokan
7th	October 2025	Skopje/MK	Onsite (Hybrid)	UKIM	Vladimir Gjorgievski
8th	December 2025 (together with GA meeting)	Zagreb/CRO	Onsite (Hybrid)	UNIZAG	Ana Daria Bokan
9th	27 Nov 2025	Lisbon /PT	Onsite (Hybrid)	ISCTE	Paula Vicente

Topic

Series	Proposed date	Location	Topic
1st	24 Nov. 24 (together with GA meeting)	Lisbon /PT	*Collaboration Strategies and Policy Frameworks for Research & Innovation in Higher Education Institutions*
2nd	27 Feb 2025	Skopje/MK	*The prospects of digital twins for living lab integration &Horizon Europe Funding Opportunities*
3rd	25 April 2025	Zagreb/CRO	*Croatia's Energy Transition: Innovations and Opportunities through EU Projects*
4th	5 June (together with GA meeting)	Skopje/MK	*R&I Lab Bridging Policy and Innovation: Research and Funding Strategies*
5th	8 May 2025	Lisbon /PT	*From Research to Reality: How Companies Benefit from Academic Expertise in Business Analytics*
6th	25 Sep 2025	Zagreb/CRO	tbc
7th	Oct 2025	Skopje/MK	tbc
8th	Dec 2025 (together with GA meeting)	Zagreb/CRO	tbc
9th	27 Nov 2025	Lisbon /PT	*"Shaping the Future of Data, Knowledge, and Innovation with AI for Global Sustainable Change."*

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9.3. INITIATE Lab report template

Topic	Value
Organizing entity	
Organizers (names)	
Contact person	
Facilitators	
Date, time of workshop:	
Location:	
Workshop number .. of .. (total amount planned)	*1/3*
Number of invited participants:	
Number of actual participants:	
Number of return visitors/ participants*	
Categories of participants*	
* if applicable	

1. **R&I and Policy Lab Event Summary**

Provide a concise overview of the event, including the title, date, location and key stakeholders or partners involved. Summarize the main goals and the central theme or topic addressed. Mention the format of the event and the audience it targeted. Include any notable speakers or contributors, and highlight the general flow of the event.

2. **Questionnaire**

Attach or summarize the questionnaire that was shared with participants.

3. **Results of the Questionnaire**

Present an overview of the responses received from the questionnaire. Highlight key insights, trends, or patterns that emerged. Include both quantitative data (e.g., satisfaction ratings, participation numbers) and qualitative feedback (e.g., open-ended responses, suggestions). If possible, incorporate visuals such as charts or graphs to illustrate the findings clearly.

4. **Photos**

Include a curated selection of photos taken during the event that capture key moments, participants, activities, or outcomes.

9.4. R&I Lab Evaluation guideline

Project: INITIATE

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WP 4, Task 4.2: INITIATE R&I and Policy lab (M8-M42)
Task Leader: ESEIA

Task 4.1: Co-design of user engagement for capacity building
Task Leader: B1

1.Objective of the R&I Labs

Realize the social, user-oriented evaluations of INITIATE outcomes, following guidelines from the methodology and evaluation plans defined in T4.1 (B1).
Expert engagement through workshops and discussions to gather constructive feedback on the pilots and leading to development of policy recommendations.

2.Expected Outcomes for R&I Labs

- **Policy Recommendations:** Recommendations for stimulating R&I development and fostering scientific excellence. (T4.3)
- **Roadmap Creation:** A structured roadmap outlining steps for advancing R&I development and promoting the clean energy transition and digitalization. (T4.4)
- **Alliance for Green Energy Transition:** Formation of a collaborative alliance to sustain and build upon the pilots' work, including policy recommendations, research collaborations, project concepts, and stakeholder cooperation
- **Joint Applications for Funding:** Development of relevant project ideas for Horizon Europe.
- **Enhanced Research & Business Connections:** strengthening the link between research and business.
- **Supporting Institutional Transformation**: feedback mechanism through R&I labs.

3.Format of the R&I Labs

R&I labs: 3 x per Pilot (Lisbon, Zagreb, Skopje)

Round 1: Foundation building through vision, challenges and expert insights (First R&I Lab in each pilot)
- To establish clear understanding of each pilot´s vision, identify current challenges and recognize achievements, while integrating expert insights and exploring collaboration opportunities.

Round 2: Policy recommendations (Second R&I Lab in each pilot)
- To identify and discuss policy recommendations tailored to each pilot`s context, focusing on enhancing legal and regulatory framework to support research and innovation.

Round 3: Sustainability of the Labs, Long-term impact and implementation (Third R&I Lab in each pilot)
- To develop actionable plans for implementing and scaling pilot innovations, while defining future lab activities to ensure long-term impact and sustainability.

4.Guideline for Evaluation Surveys

Purpose of the evaluation: The evaluation surveys aim to assess the effectiveness and impact of the R&I Labs conducted within the INITIATE project. They will collect constructive feedback from participants of each R&I Labs to improve future sessions and ensure alignment with project objectives.
Each round of the R&I Labs has a distinct focus to explore, so each questionnaire should include specific questions to gather valuable insights.

Structure of the Evaluation Surveys: Each round of R&I Labs will have two tailored evaluation surveys,

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1. **Satisfaction survey:** Focused on participants overall experience.
2. **Questionnaire**: Designed to generate insights for pilots by exploring key challenges, framework conditions, and stakeholder needs. (for each round)

    1.1. **Satisfaction Survey:** Will have sample questions to evaluate areas such, content relevance quality, facilitator effectiveness, and event organizations.

The survey will feature concise and targeted questions to ensure it is easy to complete while providing comprehensive insights. It will be conducted using **Mentimeter** (suggested), an online tool for live feedback collection and real-time result visualization. Responses will be gathered on-site during a dedicated session, ensuring that participants can provide immediate and relevant feedback while the workshop experience is still fresh in their minds.

Sample Questions

- How satisfied were you with the overall event organization?
- How would you rate the clarity and engagement of the expert presentations?
- Did you feel encouraged to participate in discussions?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving the logistics of future R&I Labs?

    1.2. **Questionnaire:** will provide structured feedback for pilots and help answer critical questions regarding needs, barriers, and framework conditions. It will focus on:

Barriers & Challenges: Stakeholders will share perspectives on obstacles associated with the intervention area(s). This discussion will generate valuable insights for shaping and refining policy recommendations.
Framework Conditions: Participants will analyze internal factors (e.g., knowledge, resources, infrastructure, technology) and external factors (e.g., policy, economic, social, and technological aspects) that influence institutional transformation in research and innovation.
Stakeholder Needs & Expectations: Participants will provide feedback on key concerns, values, and expectations, ensuring that relevant factors are addressed in future planning.

Sample Questions must be relevant for each round of the R&I labs.

- How relevant were the topics discussed to your work/research?
- How clearly were the funding opportunities explained?
- What are the most pressing needs of stakeholders in this field?
- How well do current research and innovation policies address these needs?
- How do institutional factors (e.g., internal knowledge, resources, infrastructure) influence research and innovation in your organization?
- What policy changes or support mechanisms would enhance the research and innovation ecosystem?

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