Development of a flexible, innovative and
practical framework for Work-based Learning
in higher education of Armenia and Russia

FlexWBL Stakeholder Interaction Plan

FlexWBL implementation support

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Abstract	

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2	05/10/2020	GSU comments included, additions made by DSTU	DSTU
3			
4			

DISCLAIMER

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Content

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List of Acronyms

HE = Higher Education

HEI = Higher Education Institution

WBL = Work-based Learning

WP = Work Package

SI = Stakeholder interaction

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Executive Summary

The biggest challenge for proposing a strategic stakeholder interaction plan is the wide scope of this task. The target audience in Russia and Armenia, i.e.: Ministries of Education and Science, Higher Education institutions (Higher Education providers), business institutions and enterprises, HE & business communities, HE learners and teachers etc., will be in need of evidence and guidelines in order to successfully interact with other stakeholders in their endeavors.

This SI Plan intends to discuss key elements and provide guidance on how best to plan stakeholder interaction. Within interaction process, the following key questions should be addressed: Why to interact? What to interact on and What do we hope to achieve? Who are the relevant stakeholders? When should each stakeholder be engaged? Where to interact with stakeholders? How will the interaction influence decision making? How should we interact?". Thus, discussing each of the questions can ensure efficient stakeholder interaction planning.

WHY

It should not be assumed that all stakeholders have a similar and comprehensive understanding of the concept and details of Work Based Learning (WBL), why it is needed, and where and how it should be implemented. Hence, stakeholder interaction should start from defining a clear and commonly shared vision for interaction. Setting a vision clarifies sustainability objectives to be achieved and helps address further aspects such as:

• The purpose of interaction, i.e. providing clarity and direction for all participants;

• The scope for interaction, i.e. setting parameters, outlining the negotiable and non-negotiable matters, deciding specific issues;

• The underlying gaps, challenges and needs relevant to interaction;

• The outcomes to be sought from the interaction.

Moreover, a shared vision can unite different stakeholders and be the basis to bring them together to collaborate and learn from each other.

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WHAT

At this point the objectives and expectations from the interaction should be established as well as a set of indicators for measuring them. A list of potential aspects/results of interaction answering the "what" question is as follows:

- Reaching consensus;

- Overcoming gaps and challenges;

- Knowledge exchange;

- Identification of potential issues, risks and limitations;

- Model selection and development;

- Scenario / process development;

- Data collection and integration;

- Opportunities for innovation;

- Development of policy alternatives;

- Clarifying service requirements and parameters;

- Defining service measures, e.g. key performance indicators;

- Interpretation of results;

- Building/piloting solutions.

Relevant stakeholders will be interacted in order to identify potential use of WBL, making use of available HEI – Enterprise network and finding ways on how to address challenges in implementing WBL in HE.

WHO

Many different aspects need to be considered before commencing stakeholder interaction. One should start with comprehensive stakeholder identification and analysis and then proceed planning each stakeholder's interaction.

- Who is WBL for?
- Who is affected by WBL?
- Who can influence WBL?
- Who is interested in WBL?
- Who would be capable of delivering WBL?
- Who is responsible for WBL?

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Stakeholder analysis

It is in general recommended to include as many stakeholders as possible in the interaction activities and promote acceptability of interaction results. However, it is not practical and usually not necessary to interact with all stakeholder groups with the same level of intensity all the time. Being strategic and clear about whom to interact with and why, can save both time. For example, there are aspects that may need to be limited among specific stakeholders (e.g. discussing teaching aspects among stakeholders with relevant expertise).

The main stakeholders in higher education domain are: Universities and Ministries of Education, HE students (Working/not working Students), Teachers and Administration of HEIs, HE Community at large in Russia and Armenia, youth and student organizations. In business community and start-up project teams in the target domains and stakeholder list

The main stakeholders in business community and industry domain are: Employers and Employer Associations and Sectoral (Industry) Ministries; Professional Associations, start-up project teams

The main stakeholders in policy makers' domain: are Regional Government Authorities, Ministries of Education, Sectoral (Industry) Ministries

Hence, once the full list of stakeholders is identified, perform further analysis will be performed in order to better understand each stakeholders' relevance and the perspectives they can offer. Using the following criteria:

• **Contribution**: Does the stakeholder have information, counsel, or expertise on the issue that could be helpful?

• **Willingness to** interact: How willing is the stakeholder to interact?

• **Influence**: How much influence does the stakeholder have? (it would be necessary to clarify "who" they influence)

• **Compatibility of goals:** Do the stakeholders' goals coincide with those of WBL academic program?

• **Necessity of involvement:** Is this someone who could derail or delegitimize the process if they were not included in the interaction? Do the legal regulations of the program require involvement of the given stakeholder as a must (the programme can not be realized without them)?

These criteria (or more) can be used to populate a chart of how stakeholders fulfill them. This chart can help decide which stakeholders to interact and how.

Stakeholder	Contribution	Willingness	Influence	Necessity
SH1				
SH2				
SH3				
SH4				

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Figure 1: Stakeholder analysis criteria chart

Another popular stakeholder analysis technique is the power (or influence) versus interest (or willingness) grid. These grids array stakeholders on a two-by-two matrix, where the dimensions are the stakeholder's interest in the issue under discussion (i.e. WBL), and the stakeholder's power to affect the issue's future. They also help highlight coalitions to be encouraged or discouraged, what behaviour should be fostered and whose 'buy in' should be sought or who should be 'co-opted'. An example of a power versus interest grid is depicted in Figure 2.
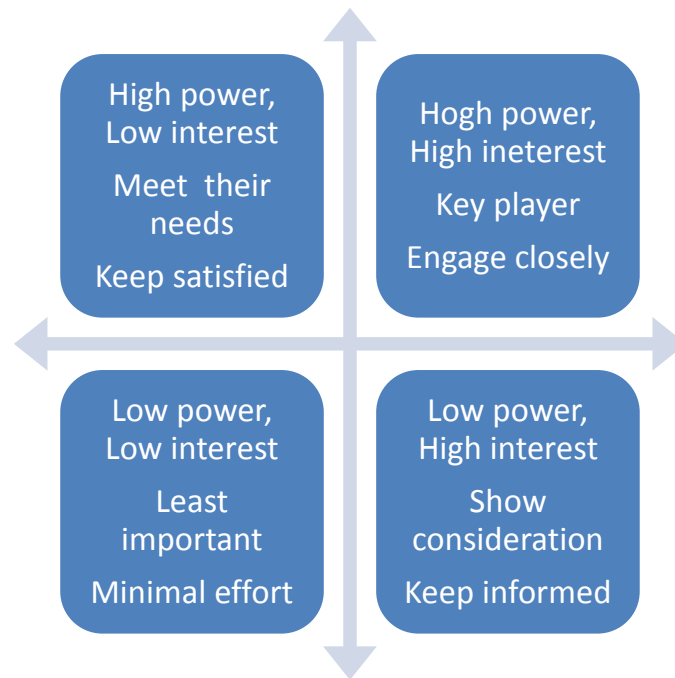

Figure 2. Interest of stakeholders

Stakeholders as leaders, participants or followers

Apart from the stakeholders who will participate as contributors to the interaction process, it should also be decided who will be leading the INTERACTION process. Additionally, planning should include passive stakeholders as well, i.e. providing opportunities to everyone to get informed. This paragraph discusses these different engagement types for stakeholders.

Who to lead

When considering stakeholder interaction regarding work based learning a leading stakeholder is Higher Education Institution, if it is local implementation, and National Ministry of Education and Science, if it is national level implementation. Leading the interaction process is a challenging task and the leader should have a number of key skills such as:

- Relationship management;
- Communication;

- Negotiation;
- Conflict resolution;
- Facilitation;
- Listening;
- Management of quality monitoring and control mechanisms.

And the (probably most) essential key characteristic of the leading stakeholder is that it is recognised as such by the rest stakeholders, gathering their respect and trust.

Who to participate

As previously mentioned, all types of stakeholders should be invited to participate in the interaction activities. The notion of engaging all stakeholders does not imply that everyone is suited to be interacted everywhere and in every way. Depending on different factors, such as scope, purpose, timing, etc. of the WBL implementation, different stakeholders may need to be engaged in different ways, through different activities or in different timing. This should be planned from the start of the interaction process.

Another aspect to mention here is the role that specific persons can play in stakeholder interaction. Experience has shown that interacting "believers" can make a difference at implementations. Such people are the human capital to drive things and push towards change. Believers need to be identified in every stakeholder organisation to be the first to be interacted in order to also convince the scepticists. Believers may also exist beyond the boundaries of organisations. There are people in the wider society who are in constant search for new ideas and for new ways to "change things" and their dynamism and excitement can enhance the interaction process.

Who to keep informed

Interaction results and decisions with regards to WBL must be communicated to all stakeholders. However, not only final results but also intermediate conclusions, recommendations, etc. drafted during the interaction process should also be available to the wider community of stakeholders. Interaction planning should establish specific and frequent time points of information provision to the wider public in order to, on the one hand, keep informed whoever is interested and ensure transparency, and, on the other hand, to gain visibility and attract more stakeholders to engage.

WHEN

It is widely believed that the sooner to engage, the better. Starting engagement right from the start of FlexWBL project will provide the opportunity to make WBL known to experts and non-experts, to give the floor to both supporters and opponents in order to collectively shape flexible, innovative and practical framework for Work-based Learning in higher education of Armenia and Russia and draw a mutually agreed line of action.

Considering the Work Packages of FlexWBL implementation, i.e. preparation, development,

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dissemination, quality and management it is obvious that different stakeholders may be more or less relevant to engage in each stage. For example, HE & business communities would be more relevant for the Dissemination, whereas business institutions and enterprises would be more relevant for Development WP and Ministries of Education and Science for Quality WP. Thus, it is essential to plan stakeholders' engagement according to each WP implementation stage.

WHERE

Usual domains for WBL implementations are those of higher education, lifelong learning, employability of HEIs graduates, practice-oriented learning, human capital and other matters related to education at workplace. Key stakeholders are involved in each domain and different challenges and gaps may apply. In the case that stakeholder engagement is performed for WBL implementations on specific domains, that domains' specific circumstances must be taken under consideration. Taking, for example, the higher education domain, it is important to involve as main stakeholders not only the Universities and Ministries of Education, but also the youth and student organizations; and it is important to address issues/challenges such as diploma certifications at national level, etc. The stakeholders of business community domain should also include start-up project teams. Moreover, the timing of engagement should be decided according to key stakeholders' availability, e.g. academics' and students' engagement will be minimal during exam periods.

HOW

This is probably the broadest question as it includes many different aspects that need to be considered before commencing stakeholder interaction. First of all, it refers to how to interact, namely to the wide range of methods and tools that may be used for engaging stakeholders. It also refers to how to engage in a successful way, namely to potential challenges that need to be considered. These aspects are discussed in the following subsections.

HOW to engage

There is a wide variety of methods and tools to engage stakeholders both actively, i.e. consulting/empowering them, and passively, i.e. informing them. Such methods include for example:

- Advisory groups, task forces;
- Workshops, meetings, hearings;
- Open space;
- Polls, surveys and focus groups;
- Brain storming and crowd storming;
- Living labs, crowdsourcing and hackathons.

It is not possible to discuss relevance or applicability of these methods for stakeholder interaction in WBL implementations in a generic fashion. Different methods may be more or less suitable depending on the targeted stakeholder group, the FlexWBL WP, the engagement level or the reason for interaction, i.e. the expected results for WBL.

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There are various classifications of engagement methods versus stakeholder groups, applicability, benefits, limitations, engagement level, etc. and guidelines on how to apply different interaction methods.

It is always helpful to start building a conceptual model with stakeholders. Stakeholders can then propose modifications and start questioning the draft model. Interaction should proceed on the basis of what are appropriate methods for each of the different stakeholder groups. For example, when consulting Ministry of Education and science officials formal presentations are the preferred consultation method, while communities prefer public meetings, and informal focus group discussions facilitated by posters, non-technical pamphlets and other visual presentation aids including models and videos."

Table 1 presents appropriate consultation methods per stakeholder group, and Table 2 presents a list of different engagement methods along with guidelines for applying them appropriately.

Table 1 Consultation methods per stakeholder group

Stakeholder group	Consultation methods
Employers and managers	- Phone/fax/email/text messaging; - Print media and radio announcement; - Workshops - Focus group meetings - Surveys - Social media
HEIs officials	- Phone/e-mail - One-one-one interviews - Formal meetings
Employees, potential WBL students	- Public meetings - Focus group meetings - Surveys - Information center - Print media, text messaging and radio announcement - Social media
Ministry of Education and Science	- Formal meetings - One-one-one interviews - Phone/e-mail/text messaging
HE & business communities and organisations	- Public meetings - Focus group meetings - Surveys - Information center - Print media, text messaging and radio announcement

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Table 2 Interaction technique and application

INTERACTION TECHNIQUE	MOST APPROPRIATE APPLICATION OF TECHNIQUE
Information Centre and information Boards	- Establish Information Boards in each Project area community.
Correspondence by phone/email/Text/Instant messaging	- Distribute project information to government officials, Organisations, agencies and companies - Invite stakeholders to meetings
Print media and radio announcements	- Disseminate project information to large audiences, and illiterate stakeholders - Inform stakeholders about consultation meetings
One-on-One interviews	- Solicit views and opinions - Enable stakeholders to speak freely and confidentially about controversial and sensitive issues - Build personal relations with stakeholders - Recording of interviews
Formal meetings	- Present project information to a group of stakeholders - Allow the group of stakeholders to provide their views and opinions - Build impersonal relations with high level stakeholders' - Distribute technical documents - Facilitate meetings using PowerPoint presentations - Record discussions, comments/questions raised and responses
Public meetings	- Present project information to a large audience of stakeholders , and in particular communities - Allow the group of stakeholders to provide their views and opinions - Build relationships with neighboring communities - Distribute non-technical project information - Facilitate meetings using PowerPoint presentations, posters, models, videos and pamphlets of project information documents - Record discussions, comments/questions raised and responses
Workshops	- Present project information to a group of stakeholders - Allow the group of stakeholders to provide their views and opinions - Use participatory exercises to facilitate group discussions, brainstorm issues, analyze information, and develop recommendations and strategies - Recording of responses
Focus group meetings	- Allow a smaller group of between 8 and 15 people to provide their views and opinions of targeted baseline information

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	- Build relationships with neighboring communities - Use a focus group interview guideline to facilitate discussions - Record responses
Surveys	- Gather opinions and views from individual stakeholders - Gather baseline data - Record data - Develop a baseline database for monitoring impacts
Social Media	- Maintain a relevant presence on social media - Search for stakeholder conversations - Target stakeholders by their interests - Share relevant content

Table 3: Engagement methods vs. engagement level, benefits and limitations

	Methods	Benefits	Limitations	Notes
Inform	**Fact sheets** Usually brief, paper based on online documents which summarise the 'facts'.	• Able to reach a large number of stakeholders in a simple, efficient way • Can be targeted to a particular stakeholder group and developed into languages other than English	• May not be accessible to people with visual impairment or low literacy levels • Does not facilitate two way communication	Should be tailored to the relevant needs of the recipients
	Information sharing Information e-mails, sessions, newsletters and websites.	• Able to reach a large number of stakeholders. • Can be targeted to specific stakeholder groups	• Written material may not be accessible to people with visual impairment or low literacy levels • Does not facilitate two way communication	Method and content should be tailored to the stakeholder group.
Consult	**Survey** A research reviews, questionnaires	• Straightforward • Focussed and specific • Can gauge a large number of opinions • Easily adapted	• Difficult to gather qualitative information • Answers may be irrelevant • Delivery methods can affect results	Always include open-ended questions and space for fuller comments.
	Opinion polls A research method used to extrapolate results and determine what people think about an issue.	• Quick and cheap • Provides a snapshot of opinions at a certain time • Straightforward and accurate	• May be too brief for people to provide their full opinions • Results may be influenced if questions are worded incorrectly	
	Workshops Facilitated events designed to enable stakeholders to work actively and collaboratively on a common problem or task.	• Discussing complex issues, analysing competing options and generating ideas • Encourages joint working and problem solving • Builds ownership of results	• Time required to organise • Cost, especially if external facilitation is required • Need to get stakeholders in the same place at the same time	Facilitation is crucial.
	Expert panel Used to gather concentrated opinions from a range of experts on a particular issue.	• Focus intently on a specific subject • Produce in-depth analysis • Experts can often be objective	• The process needs to be carefully focussed • Breadth may be limited • May be too 'exclusive'	If the group is large, facilitation will be necessary.
	Public meetings A meeting open to all interested, rather than those specifically invited.	• Opportunity for stakeholders to raise issues and ask questions • Opportunity to gather support for new ideas and build relationships	• Risk of vocal or pushy people taking over	Requires facilitation

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		• Communicate with large groups		
	Interviews Intensive face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations.	• Best way to obtain qualitative information from an individual • Can produce highly accurate results • Adds a personal dimension	• Necessitates sensitivity • Large numbers are required to ensure accurate results • Careful preparation necessary • Little dialogue between stakeholders	
	Web 2.0 Online chat surveys, internet forums and questionnaires enable stakeholders to contribute their views.	• Useful for diverse and extensive input • Enable access to views and ability to provide feedback • Measuring website statistics can also track stakeholder interest	• Participation limited to those with access to IT • Can be expensive to develop and maintain	
Involve	**Action Research** A set of research methods that enables the Department and stakeholders to explore issues and identify and test solutions.	• Provides good qualitative data • Is inclusive • Is flexible and responsible and has the ability to support problem solving and solution testing as the process evolves	• Difficult to gather qualitative information • Answers may be irrelevant • Delivery methods can affect results	
	Open space technology A large facilitation process which is based on the premise that stakeholders will take ownership of issues they feel strongly about, set the agenda, decide on length of engagement and the outcomes.	• Allows a bottom-up agenda to emerge • Inspires ownership and action • Enables new alliances to form • Ensures follow-up reflects the wishes of those who have high interest or might be impacted by outcomes	• May not be accessible to people with visual impairment or low literacy levels	Facilitation may be required
Collaborate and Empower	**Future search conference** A participative method often used to develop a shared future vision and plan around an issue.	• Can drive stakeholder and government action • Involves a broad range of relevant stakeholders • Develops stakeholder support and agreement	• The process needs to be carefully focussed • Breadth may be limited • May be too 'exclusive'	
	Participatory editing Stakeholders co-write reports and documents and endorse the final document.	• Builds ownership • Reflects their informed views and contributes to the quality of a document/proposal etc.	• Need to consider of the stakeholder's organisational structures and resources • May attract criticism if final result is not reflective of input	
	Stakeholder visioning An explorative method where stakeholders are asked to innovatively visualise what the future could look like and then inform follow-up plans etc.	• Large numbers and diverse stakeholders can be involved • Relationship building exercise • Utilises the expertise and knowledge of stakeholders • Generates forward planning	• Requires a number of facilitators • Generates a lot of information and data for collation & analysis • Requires careful documentation and clarity of purpose to ensure sound links to concrete outcomes	Stakeholder visioning can be expanded to accommodate a wide variety of people, i.e. younger people
	Co-design Utilise the skills and expertise of stakeholders to jointly create products and services.	• Diverse contribution • Builds relationships and increases commitment • Enables experimentation	• The process needs to be carefully focussed.	

HOW to successfully activate stakeholders

There are different factors that act as enablers (or barriers) to effective stakeholder interaction. This paragraph discusses such factors that need to be considered during interaction planning.

First of all, it is essential to show commitment to interaction with stakeholders, that facilitators are appropriately skilled, stakeholders understand their role and that the process is well planned and underpinned by a number of shared core values:

- Trust;
- Respect;
- Openness; and
- Transparency.

Interacting with a broad range of stakeholders will most certainly lead to divergent or conflicting inputs and criticism. Therefore, engagement leaders should be prepared to deal with these situations. Stakeholder interaction activities need to take and diffuse all interests into account, provide the opportunity to have all voices heard, try to strengthen stakeholder relations, and foster understanding and clarifications.

Sharing a clear understanding of the degree of government control vs. participant empowerment over the interaction process can help prevent conflicts or unrealistic expectations. Stakeholder engagement activities that are unclear about how the interaction can or will influence decisions could deliver little of value. The target should be at ensuring a two-way communication that is not simply designed to ensure that the audience has received the message accurately or as intended, but rather, that both parties are involved in a communication where information is exchanged and knowledge acquired.

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Updates of SI Plan

Appendix ___