

State of Student Engagement with Society

Academic Survey Report

Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality Assurance Practices

A Project Developed by:



UNIVERSITY
OF TWENTE.



MCAST



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



Project: Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality Assurance Practices (Qual-AI-ty Engagement)

Consortium Partners

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Reference

Buitrago, H., and Ejubovic, A. (2022). State of Student Engagement with Society: Academic Survey Report. Accreditation Council for Entrepreneurial and Engaged Universities (ACEEU). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5918540>



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Document Version: December, 2021

Project Number: 2020-1-LV01-KA203-077578

Disclaimer: This project has been funded with support from the European Union. This document and all its content reflect the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academics' survey on Student Engagement with Society

The Academic Survey on Student Engagement with Society was carried out by the Qual-AI-ty Engagement Project and builds on the existing gap of knowledge on student engagement with society as a dimension of higher education. The term Student engagement with society refers to any activity that benefits society and is carried out with the involvement of students. This survey was designed to consider seven dimensions for student engagement with society that constitute a base for building a framework. These dimensions are activities, motivations, inputs, sporting mechanisms, impacts, barriers, and challenges.

The survey got 129 valid answers from the twenty-seven countries of the European Union. The sample is mainly represented by active professors (98.7%) working in universities (Comprehensive, technical, and applied sciences) (96.6%), mainly from Italy, Portugal, Netherlands, Greece, and Germany (46.9%). In addition, the respondents declared to have knowledge of activities related to student engagement with society in their institutions (93.3%).

According to the respondents, the main motivation for embedding student engagement in higher education are the institutions' aim to offer experience in real-life projects to improve students' employability skills (94.1%), the search for an increase in the university network of contacts with external organizations (88.8%), and the objective of enriching students' learning experience through the said activities (87.5%). These motivations are materialized mainly through internships (89.7%), programmes or courses designed to respond to societal needs of the external community (84.1%), and research projects focused on social needs (74%). Hence, student engagement with society is mainly used to improve students' skills and their learning experience.

The respondents considered the main inputs the universities use to foster student engagement with society are the active involvement of university staff in activities relating to student engagement with society (77%), the knowledge, guidance and mentoring offered by university staff (75%), and the physical facilities (such as material, equipment, etc.) to carry out activities relating to student engagement with society (70.4%). The crucial support structures the respondent identify is the university's strategic commitment to student engagement with society (75%), the promotion through communication channels (social media, website, etc.) (74.6%), and the availability of facilities for students to engage in activities with society (73.8%). In conclusion, institutional commitment, the profile of the staff, and the availability of facilities play a crucial role in fostering student engagement with society.

Finally, the respondents identified as the main barriers to foster student engagement with society the limited information and time for activities relating to student engagement with society (77.2%), the lack of public funding (77.1%), and the lack of awareness of the possibilities offered by fostering student engagement with society (74%). Additionally, the main challenges to consolidating student engagement with society are the economic (funding) and the political (policies) challenges.

INTRODUCTION

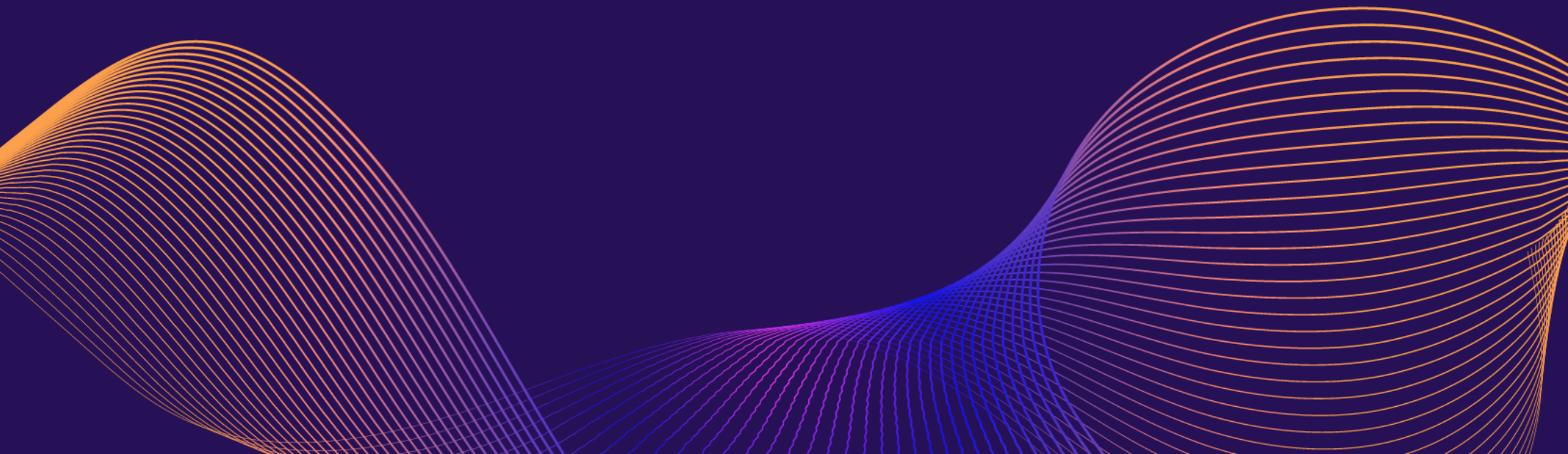
Fostering Student Engagement through AI-driven Qualitative Quality Assurance Practices (Qual-AI-ty Engagement) is Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships project initiated in 2021. The project aims at empowering QA staff to take a more proactive role in fostering student engagement with society through AI resources to acquire and process qualitative data. The project is underpinned by the growing urgency for fostering student engagement with society as a proxy for higher education quality due to its positive effects on active citizenship and human and economic development. The project also tackles the perception of universities as not taking a proactive role in engaging with society-related issues (Hadad & Cantaragiu, 2018). As a whole, the project envisions that a way to help institutionalize student engagement with society is integrating it as a framework to the existing quality assurance models to create a culture of quality in student engagement with society.

Community engagement “has become increasingly prominent in the policies and programmes of transnational institutions (the EU, UN and OECD), as well as at national and university level” (Farnell, 2020, p. 8). This is due to the increasing economic inequalities, decreasing social cohesion, declining trust toward political institutions, rise in populist attitudes, rise of ‘science denial’, growing environmental challenges, among others. Social engagement should contribute “to foster mutually beneficial relationships with wider civil society, activity that contributes to a richer cultural environment and activity that promotes greater environmental awareness and contributes to achieving broader social goals on sustainability” (OECD, 2019, p. 403). In this context, student engagement with society is crucial since students are the main stakeholders in higher education. However, despite the growing concern on social engagement in higher education, student engagement with society is in its early stage, and it lacks frameworks and policy approaches.

The Academic Survey on Student Engagement with Society carried out by the Qual-AI-ty Engagement Project builds on the existing knowledge gap on student engagement with society. It identifies the critical issues on student engagement with society according to academics. The consortium developing the project designed a multidimensional perspective on the topic as a baseline for the survey. In the end, the survey identifies the key activities, motivations, inputs, supporting mechanisms, impacts, barriers, and challenges.

This report is part of the environmental scanning of the Qual-AI-ty Engagement Project. It complements the U-Society Insight Report that offers a panorama on the status quo of student engagement with society, its development, background, and existing tools. This broad picture serves as a foundation for developing the information basis of the Qual-AI-ty Engagement Project.

1. Methodology and Demographics



Methodology

General characteristics

The partner institutions of the project carried out desk research to identify existing practices on student engagement with society and, with this survey, they aimed to include the perspectives of European academics. They identified the status-quo of student engagement with society, the most important practices and the existing priorities in the field. For this purpose, the consortium identified seven dimensions that allowed to understand the activities, motivations, inputs, supporting mechanisms, impacts, barriers, and challenges. For each dimension, the consortium identified the most important elements. The respondents were expected to measure the level of involvement of their institutions with the practices on student engagement with society. The characteristics of the survey are:

- ❖ Direct email invitation
- ❖ 10 minutes to complete
- ❖ Paperform Survey Platform
- ❖ Anonymous questionnaire
- ❖ Likert scale questions from 0 to 10
- ❖ Seven key dimensions
- ❖ 14 questions. 56 sub-questions

All the respondents were contacted through the networks of each of the partners of the consortium. They received an invitation email for them to voluntarily participate in the anonymous survey. The first 6 questions collect demographic information (country, age range, gender, type of institution, faculty, and position). Then, the seventh question asks about their knowledge on activities related to student engagement with society. Once the participants answered affirmatively (93.3%), they went through the seven dimensions, measuring their perception on the level of institutional engagement with each element. The general characteristics of the valid answers obtained are:

- ❖ 179 Valid answers from academics across Europe
- ❖ All 27 countries of the European Union are represented
- ❖ 98.7% Active professors
- ❖ 96.6% from Universities (Comprehensive, technical, and applied sciences)

Survey Design

Seven dimensions

Student engagement with society refers to any activity that benefits society and is carried out with the involvement of students. With this definition in mind, our survey was designed with seven dimensions containing diverse elements in each one. The respondents ranked each element on a Likert scale from one to ten, offering a panorama of each dimension's most and least essential elements. The seven dimensions are:



Activities

Student Engagement with Society can be reflected through courses, internships, research, community development, initiatives through student organisations, projects with businesses or authorities, and similar.



Motivations

Intuitions implement student engagement with society motivated by helping society, enriching learning experiences, offering real-life experiences, increasing networks with external organizations, increasing external funding, etc.



Inputs

The inputs could be staff involved with society, intuitional involvement with public authorities, specific guidance for social engagement, involvement of business representatives with students, physical facilities, funds, etc.



Supporting Mechanisms

The supporting mechanisms could be national policies, intuitional commitment, institutional promotion, institutional tracking of activities, facilities, informal networking sessions, defined indicators, dedicated academic staff, etc.



Impact

The impacts are reflected on improvement in teaching and learning, student satisfaction, engaged research, university rankings, external partnerships, funding, infrastructure, job creation, and community improvement.



Barriers

The barriers are lack of university funding, public authorities funding, business funding, teachers/leaders' motivations, time, management support, interest from the community, awareness of possibilities, etc.



Challenges

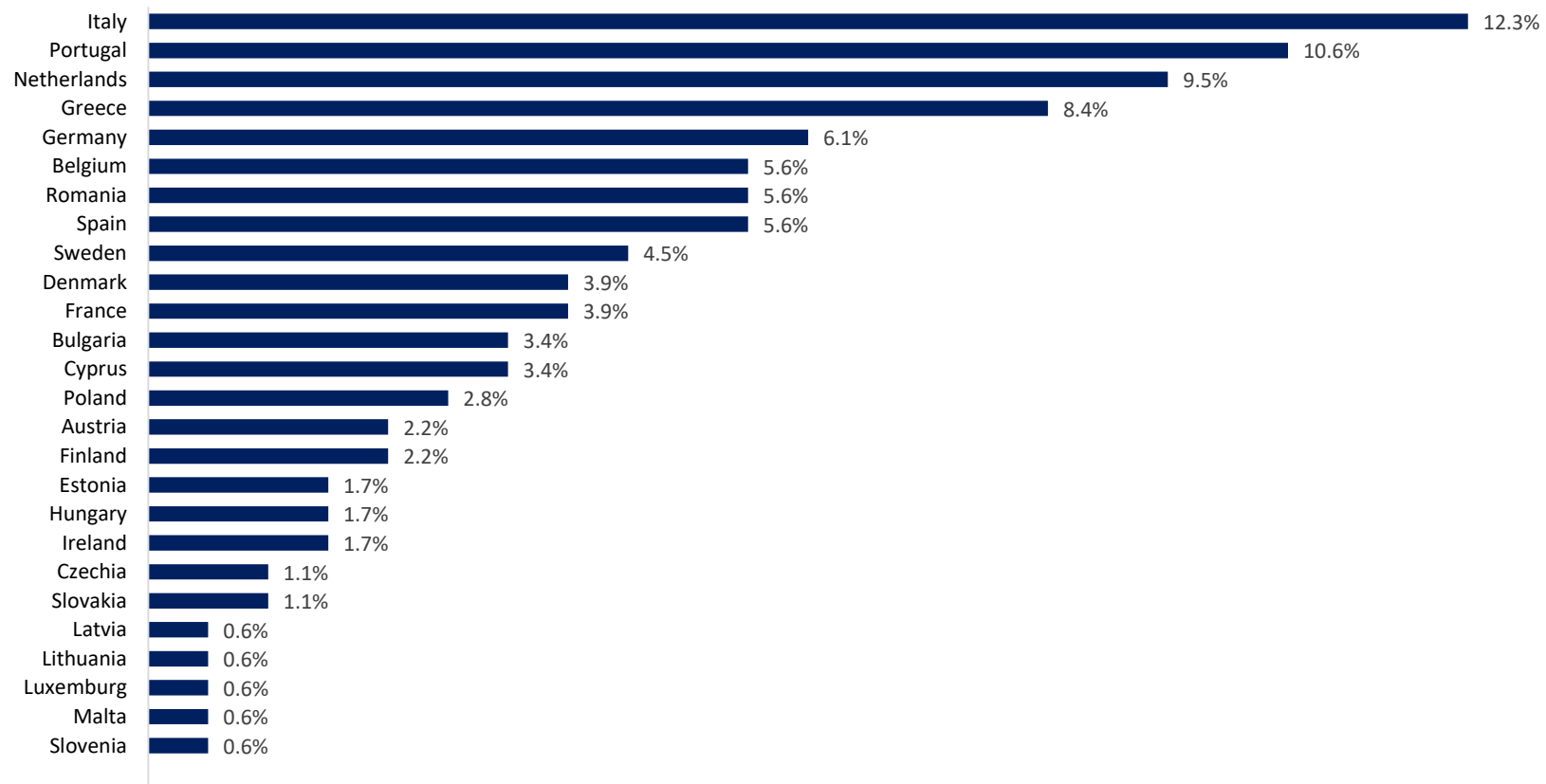
The challenges are related to political, economic, and environmental challenges that institutions face to embed student engagement with society.

Participating Countries

All the 27 countries of the European Union are represented

Twenty-seven countries are represented in the answers, all from the European Union. However, as shown in figure 1, 46.9% of the answers are concentrated in the first five countries: Italy, Portugal, Netherlands, Greece, and Germany. This figure offers a perspective on the diversity of the answers to the survey.

Figure 1: Countries represented in the survey



At the bottom, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, Slovenia, represent 3% with one answer for each country.

Demographics of the Respondents

97.8% of the respondents are active professors in universities

Academics aged 44 to 64 years old represent 69.8% of the respondents, and the majority (71.5%) are male academics. The concentration in the age range 44 to 64 may reflect the usual age range of academics in higher education in Europe. Nevertheless, the gender gap is misrepresented. Women represent 42.3% of academic staff in the European Union (European Commission, 2021). So, this survey is not representative in terms of gender since it does not represent the original attributes of the population. The primary demographic data of the respondents are:

Figure 2: Age ranges

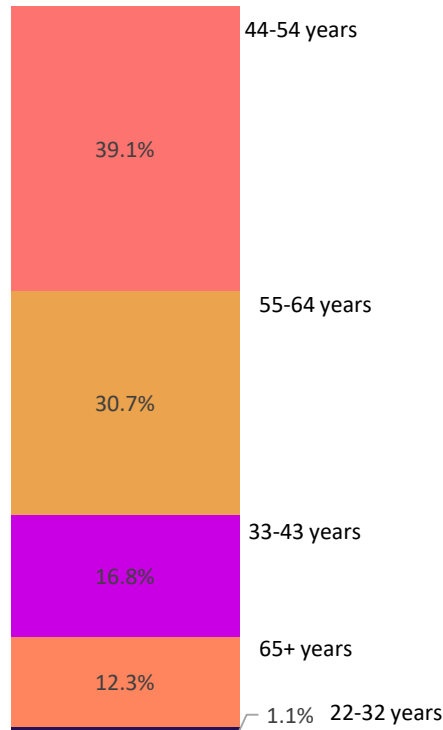


Figure 3: Gender

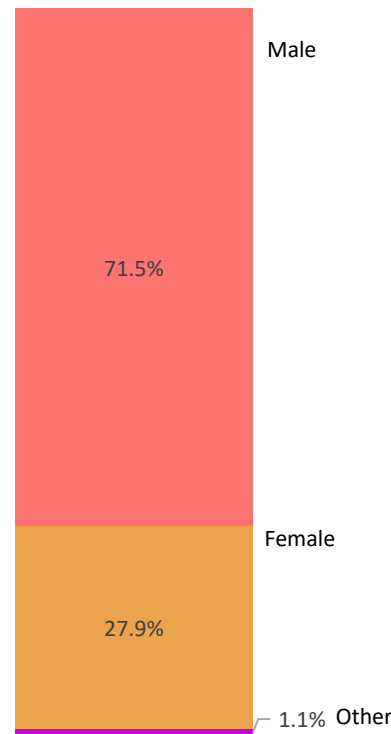
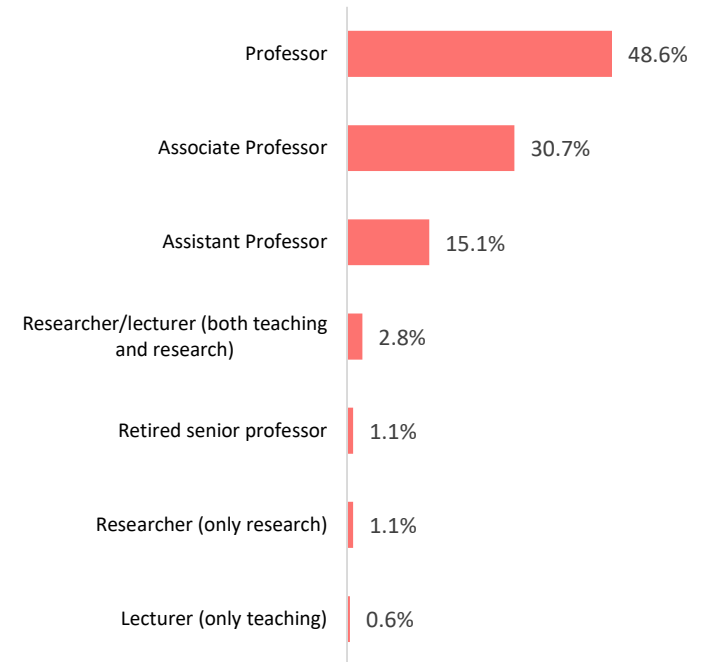


Figure 4: Academic Position



In terms of age, the least represented group are the academics under 32 years, which is an early age range to work as an academic in higher education. Similarly, genders different to male-female are scarcely represented in the sample.

Higher Education Sector

Wide variety of fields of study

The majority of the respondents are employed in comprehensive universities (77.2%), while technical, polytechnics and universities of applied sciences represent only 21.4% of the sample. When it comes to the field of study, social sciences, engineering, and business administration represent 41.3% of the sample. Additionally, there is a wide variety of other field of studies such as veterinary, pharmacy, tourism, and others.

Figure 5: Type of Institution

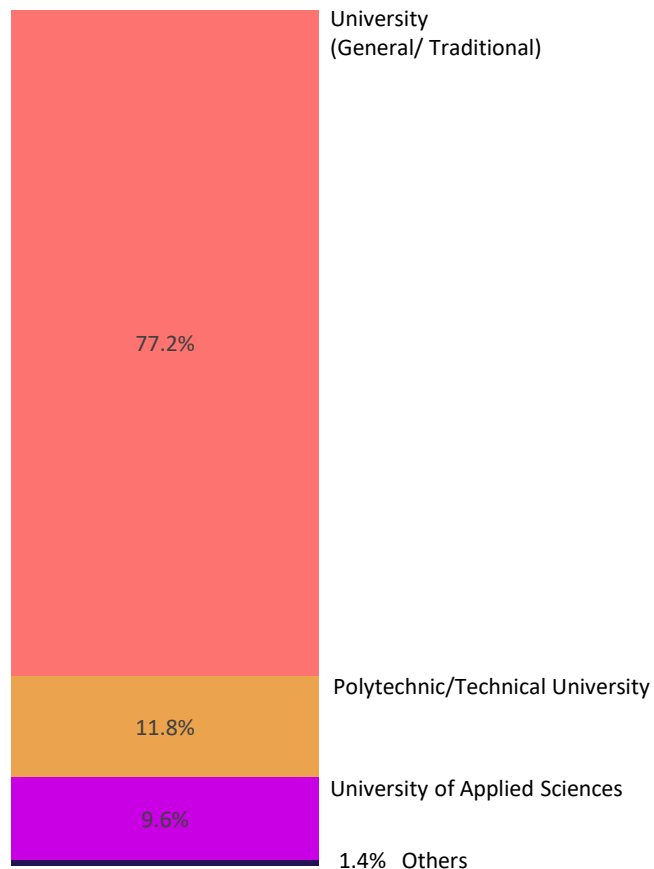
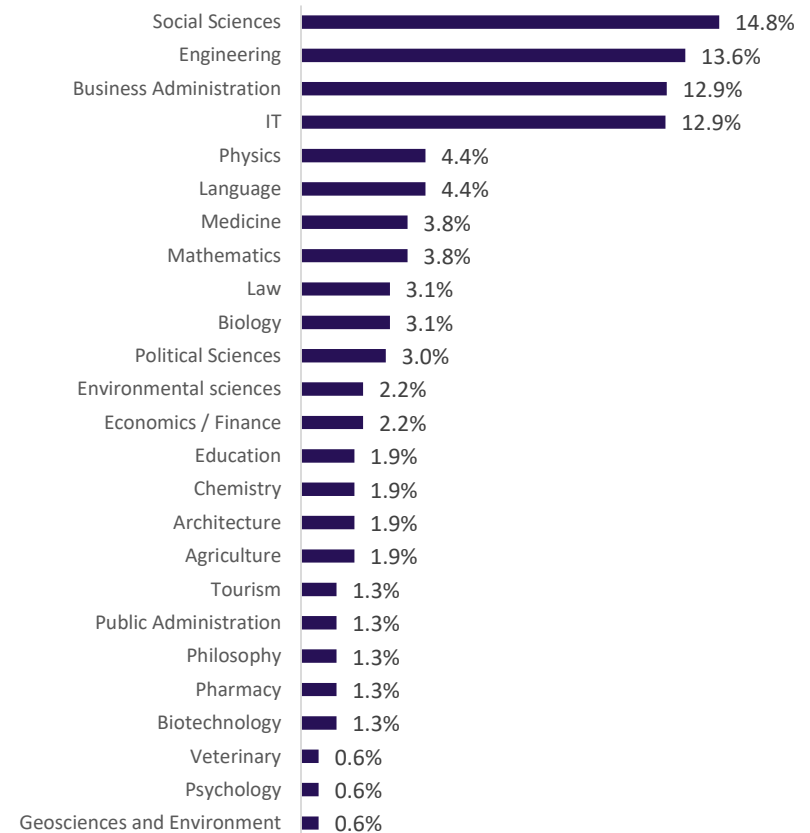
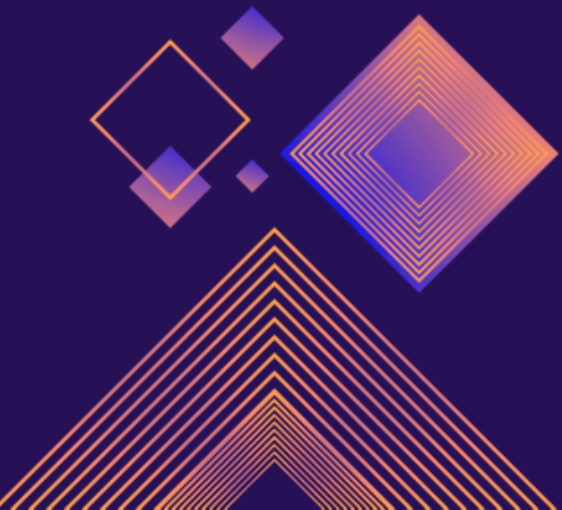
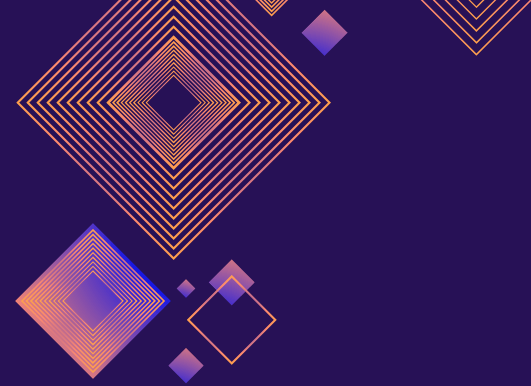


Figure 6: Faculty or School



2. ACTIVITIES ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



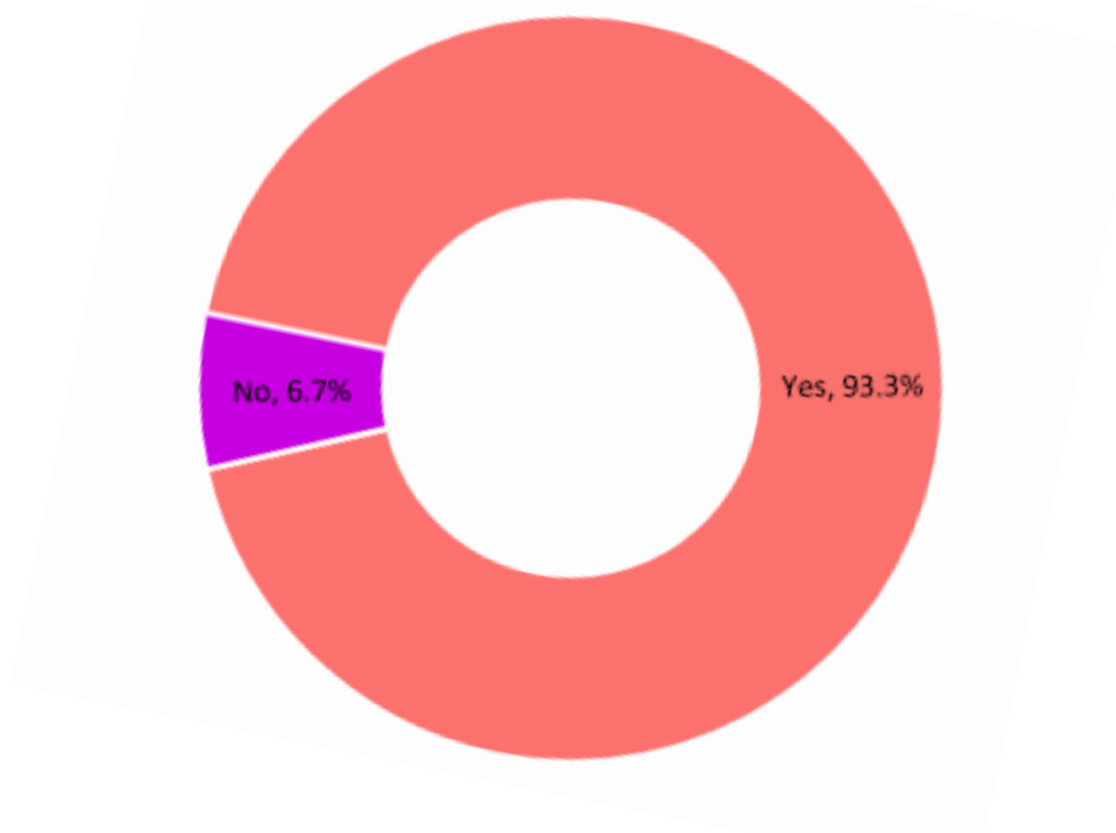
Activities on Student Engagement with Society

93.3% of the participants are aware of activities on student engagement with society in their institutions

After the demographic information that the respondents provided, they were asked about their knowledge of the activities on student engagement with society carried out by their institutions. Again, the majority, 93.3%, answered affirmatively, and only 6.7% responded negatively.

This answer allows us to see the current high level of awareness of the academics about the institutional efforts to foster student engagement with society through various means. The vision of higher education institutions as ivory towers disconnected from society and students as merely “class-takers” is not dominant. On the contrary, education has been enhanced with diverse activities on student engagement. This answer shows that practices such as socially relevant internships, integration of external communities in the design of the curricula, and the implementation of specific courses on engagement with society are standard practices in higher education institutions across Europe.

Figure 7: Participants with knowledge on the activities on student engagement with society in their institutions

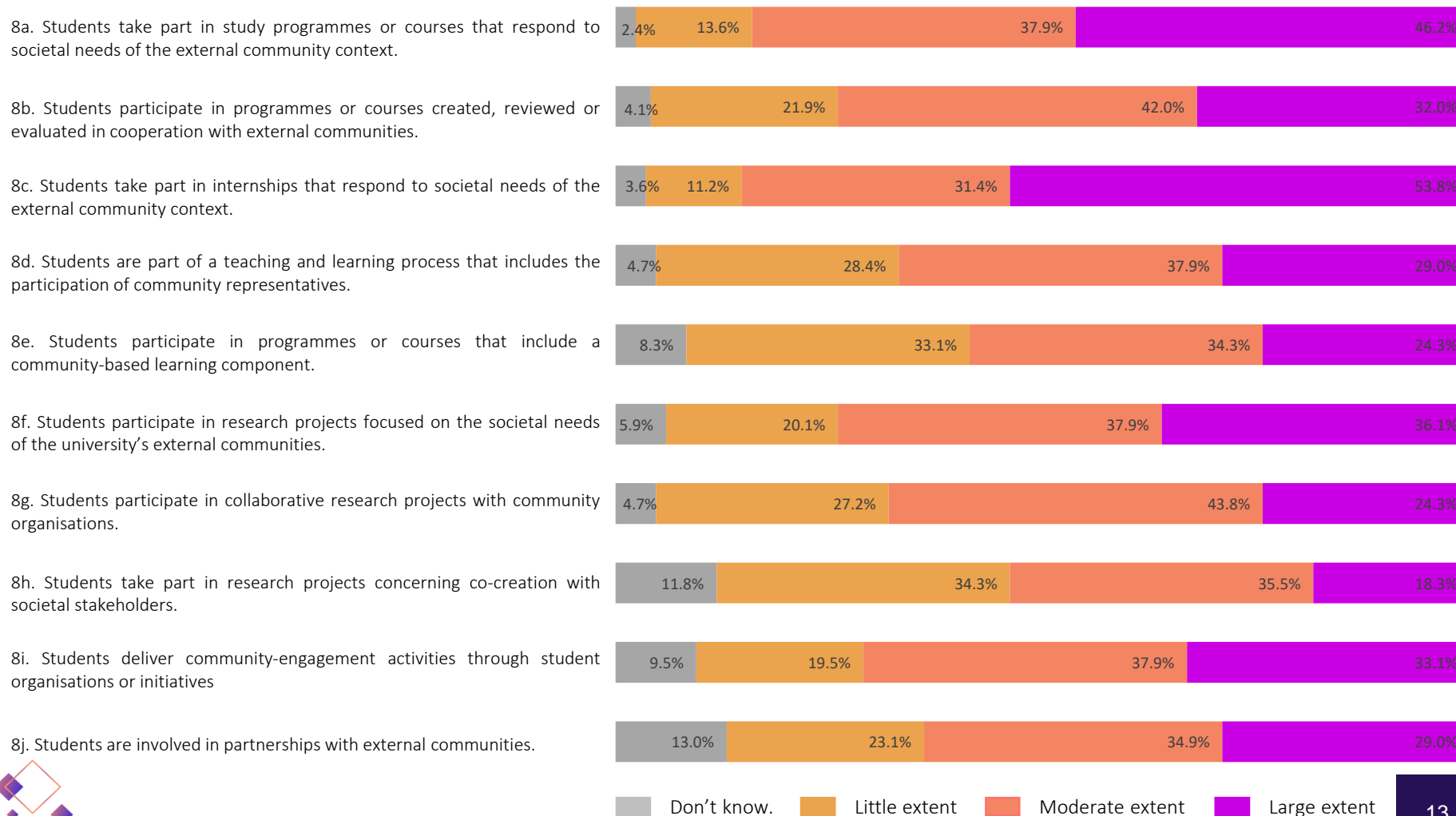


Activities in Student Engagement with Society

Institutions implement a wide range of activities in student engagement with society

Participants measured the extent to which students engage with society in their higher education institutions through the following ten activities. The most ranked activity was internships that respond to external needs of the external communities (58.8% of high extent), and the least ranked was the participation of students in research projects concerning co-creation with societal stakeholders (34.3% of low extent). This is the extent to which students engage with society through the following activities:

Figure 8: Activities on student engagement with society



Highlights on Activities in Student Engagement with society

Internships, specific programmes and involvement of external stakeholders are the key activities

After summing up the dimensions of the large and moderate extent, we obtained the five critical activities on student engagement with society in higher education institutions. These activities were identified by more than 70% of the respondents as the most common activities universities use to foster student engagement with society. Internships are exceptionally high, being highlighted by 89.7% of the respondents as the most used activity. These are the top five activities implemented by institutions in student engagement with society:

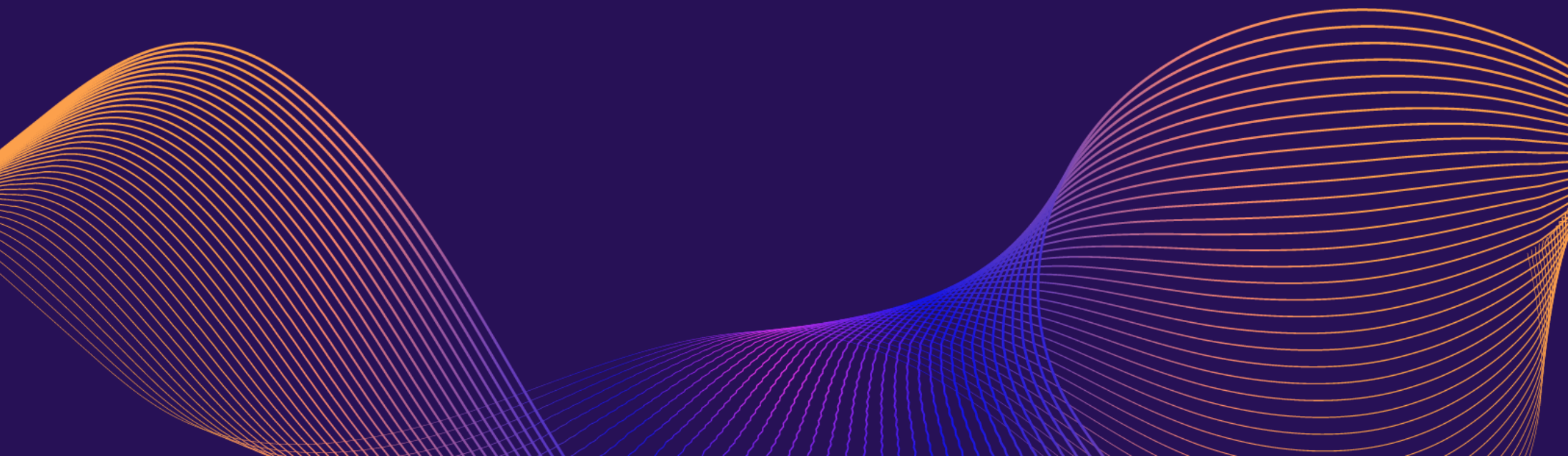
1. Internships that respond to societal needs of the external community context (89.7%).
2. Study programmes or courses that respond to societal needs of the external community context (84.1%).
3. Research projects focused on the societal needs of the university's external communities (74%).
4. Programmes or courses created, reviewed or evaluated in cooperation with external communities (74%).
5. Community-engagement activities through student organisations or initiatives (71%).

On the contrary, the least common activities in student engagement with society implemented by higher education institutions are:

1. Students taking part in research projects concerning co-creation with societal stakeholders (34.3%).
2. Students participation in programmes / courses including a community-based learning component (33.3%).
3. Students taking part in teaching and learning process that includes community representatives (28.4%).
4. Students participating in collaborative research projects with community organisations (27.2%).
5. Students are involved in partnerships with external communities (23.1%).

This distribution of activities between the highest ranked and the lowest priorities show that the direct involvement of external communities in co-creation, in courses involving diverse stakeholders, collaborative projects with external communities and partnerships still have a low priority. The primary involvement of the external stakeholders is in the design or as beneficiaries of research and other projects developed.

3. MOTIVATIONS

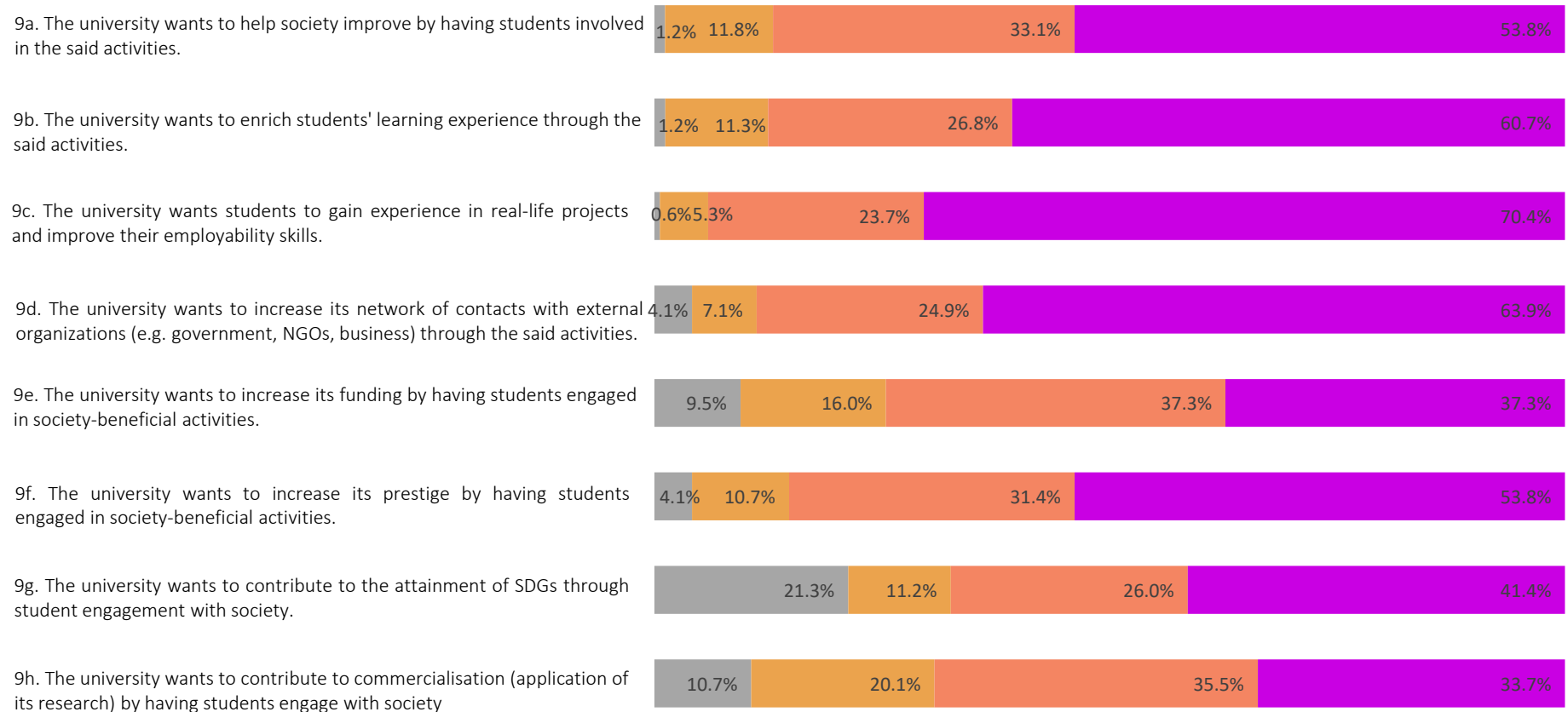


Motivations for Implementing Student Engagement with Society

Providing real-life experiences and improving employability skills are the key motivations

Participants measured the extent to which students engage with society in their higher education institutions through the following ten activities. The most ranked activities were internships that responded to the needs of the external communities (58.8%). The least ranked was the participation of students in research projects concerning co-creation with societal stakeholders (34.3% of low extent). This is the extent to which students engage with society through the following activities:

Figure 9: Motivations on student engagement with society



Don't know.
 Little extent
 Moderate extent
 Large extent

Highlights on Motivations in Student Engagement with society

Student engagement with society is a crucial way of improving the learning experience

Among the motivations incentivising higher education institutions to implement student engagement with society, the biggest one is providing experiences with real-life projects to improve employability skills (94.1%). This is followed by the motivation of increasing the institution's network (88.8%) and enriching learning experiences (87.5%). Interestingly, prestige is one of the motivations to implement student engagement (85.2%). These are the top motivations for higher education institutions to implement student engagement with society:

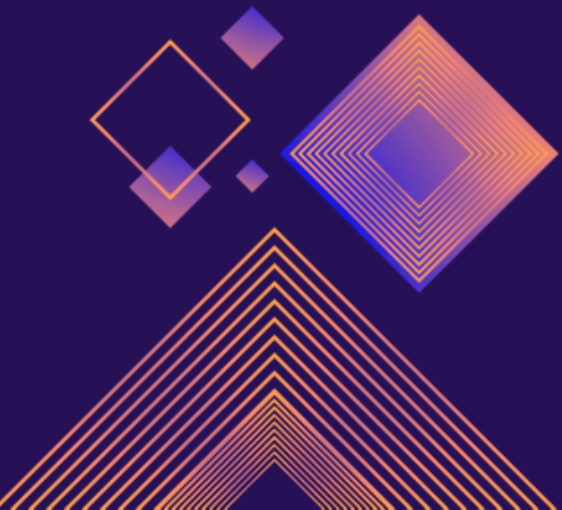
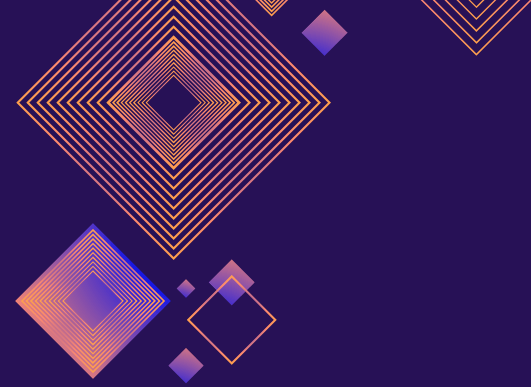
1. The university wants students to gain experience in real-life projects and improve their employability skills (94.1%).
2. The university wants to increase its network of contacts with external organizations (e.g. government, NGOs, business) through the said activities (88.8%).
3. The university wants to enrich students' learning experience through the said activities (87.5%).
4. The university wants to help society improve by having students involved in the said activities (86.9%).
5. The university wants to increase its prestige by having students engaged in society-beneficial activities (85.2%).

To the contrary, the least prioritized motivation is the commercialisation / application of research (20.1 %), increasing funding by having students engage with society (20.1%), or helping society to improve by having students involved with society (11.8%). These are the least prioritized motivations:

1. The university wants to contribute to commercialisation (application of its research) by having students engage with society (20.1%).
2. The university wants to increase its funding by having students engaged in society-beneficial activities (16%).
3. The university wants to help society improve by having students involved in the said activities (11.8%).

From this picture, we can conclude that the main motivations at the institutional level for implementing student engagement with society are related to providing real-life experiences and improving learning experiences while strengthening the institution's network and prestige.

4. INPUTS

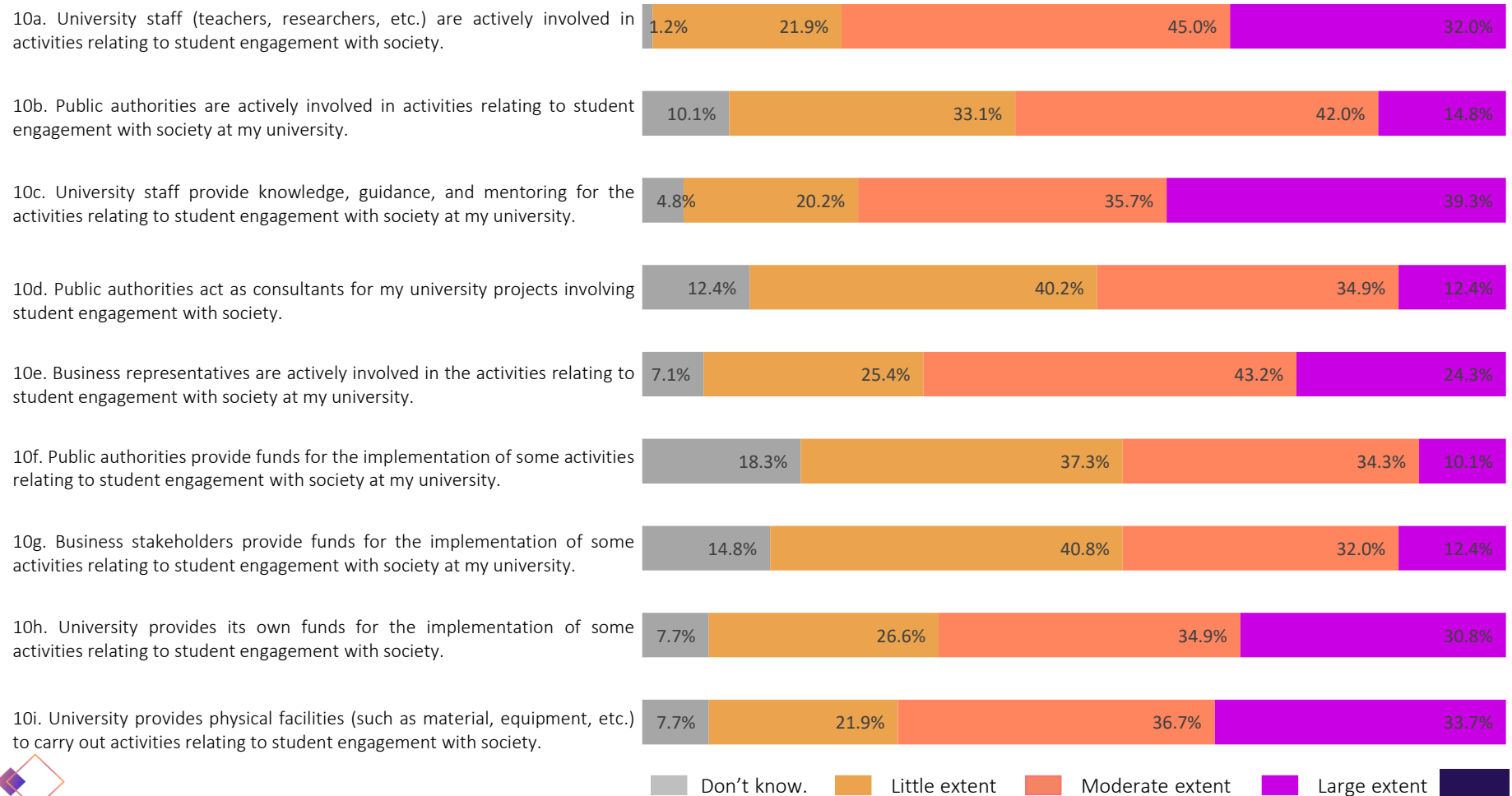


Inputs Enabling Student Engagement with Society

Academics and staff play a central role in enabling student engagement with society

The inputs are the elements that the institutions provide for enabling student engagement with society. Academics ranked as the most important inputs the involvement of them with social engagement (77%), the support of university staff (75%), and the physical facilities provided by the university. On the contrary, it is evident that there are few funds coming from business stakeholders to engage with society (40.8%). This are the inputs enabling student engagement with society:

Figure 10: Inputs for student engagement with society



Inputs enabling Student Engagement with Society

Academics and staff drive the implementation of student engagement with society

The main inputs for enabling student engagement with society are the involvement of academic staff (77%), the support of university staff (75%), the physical facilities of the institution (70.4%), the involvement of business representatives (67.5%) and the funds the university use for fostering student engagement with society:

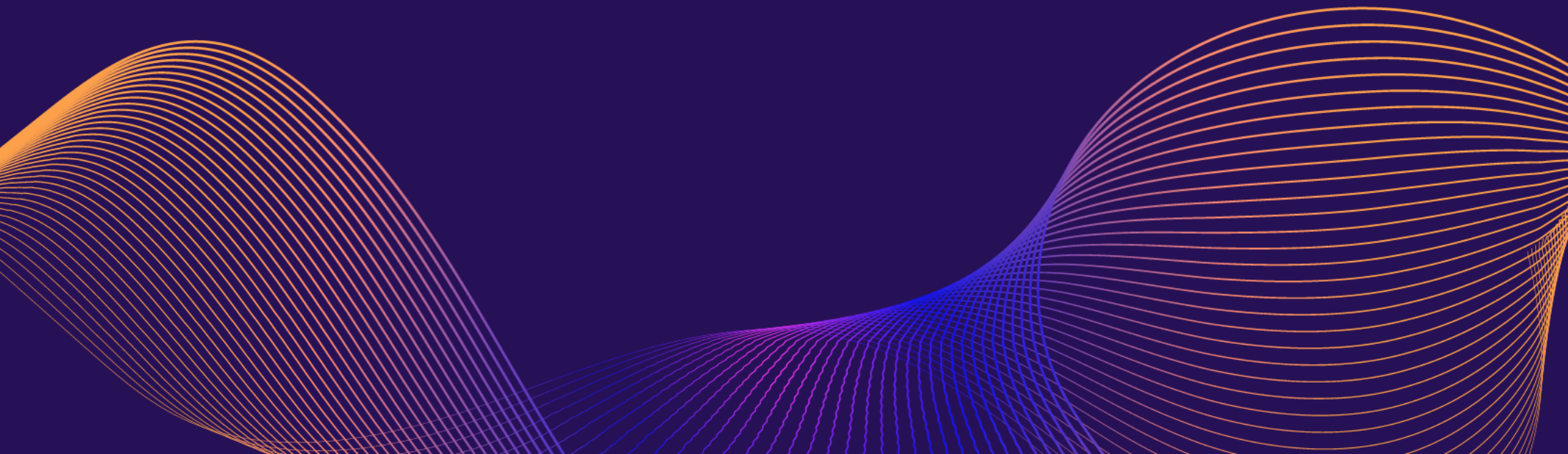
1. University staff (teachers, researchers, etc.) are actively involved in activities relating to student engagement with society (77%).
2. University staff provide knowledge, guidance, and mentoring for the activities relating to student engagement with society at my university (75%).
3. The university provides physical facilities (such as material, equipment, etc.) to carry out activities relating to student engagement with society (70.4%).
4. Business representatives are actively involved in the activities relating to student engagement with society (67.5%).
5. The university provides its own funds for the implementation of some activities relating to student engagement with society (65.7%).

On the other side, it is evident that businesses do not provide funds for student engagement with society in 40.8% of the cases. Also, the funds of the public authorities are absent in 37.7% of the cases.

1. Business stakeholders provide funds for the implementation of some activities relating to student engagement with society (40.8%).
2. Public authorities act as consultants for my university projects involving student engagement with society (40.2%).
3. Public authorities provide funds for the implementation of some activities relating to student engagement with society (37.3%).

So, while academics, staff, and the funding of the university are the main input for student engagement for society, businesses and public funding are absent for many cases.

5. SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

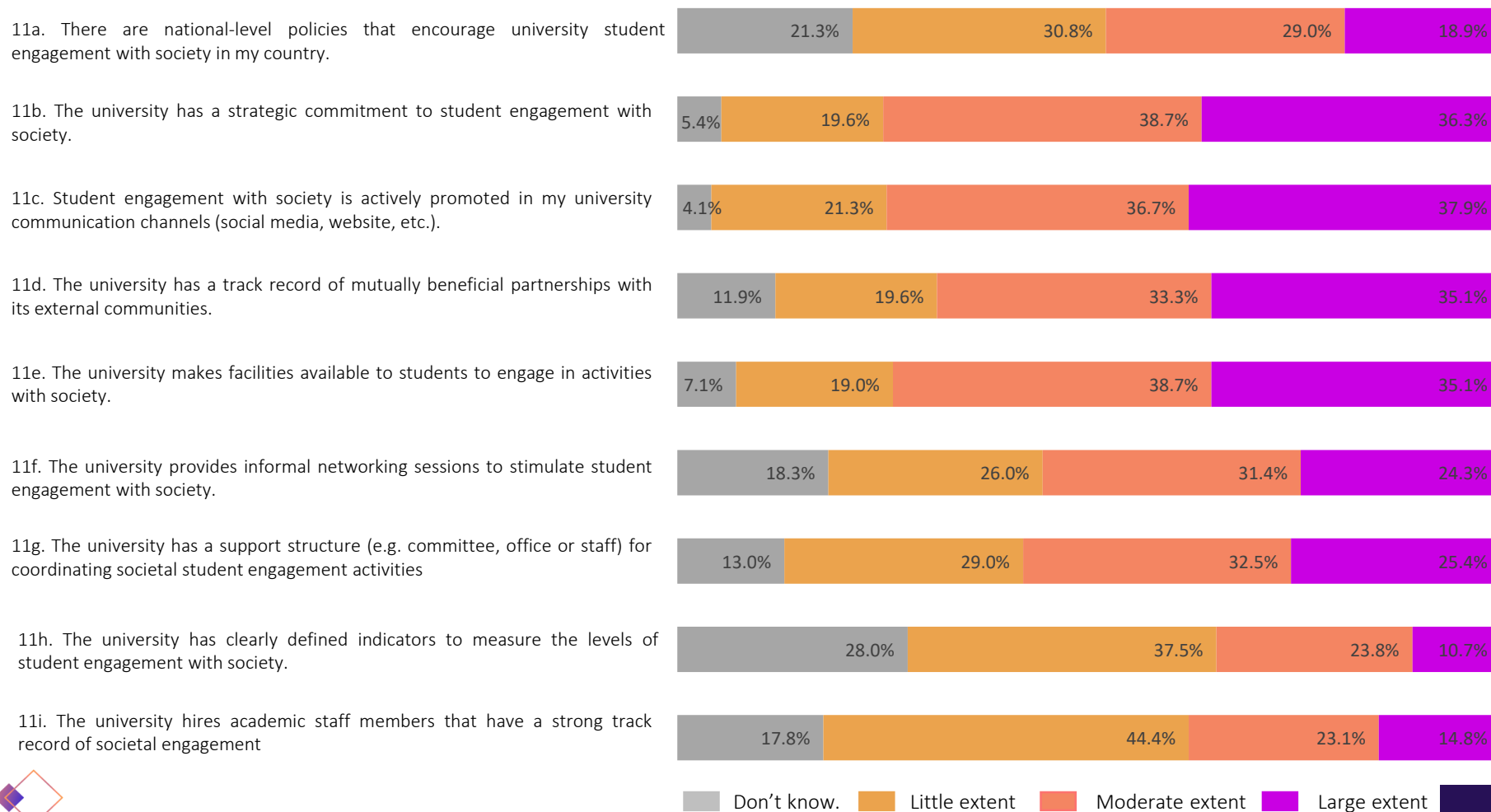


Supporting Mechanisms for Student Engagement with Society

Institutional commitment plays a central role in the development of supporting mechanisms

The supporting mechanisms are policies / strategies, operational and structural levels of support for student engagement with society in the higher education institutions. The crucial support mechanisms are the strategic institutional commitment to student engagement with society (75%), the active promotion in the university communication channels (74.6%), and the availability of facilities for students to engage in activities with society (73.8%).

Figure 11: Supporting mechanisms for student engagement with society



Supporting Mechanisms for Student Engagement with Society

Between institutional commitment and embedding student engagement with society

The supporting mechanisms reflect the intuitional strategic commitment to support student engagement with society (75%), followed by the promotion in the institutional channels (74.6%), the availability of facilities (73.8%), the track records for social engagement, (68.4%), and, in a lower extent, the existence of specific support structures coordinating student engagement with society (57.9%). These are the top five support mechanisms:

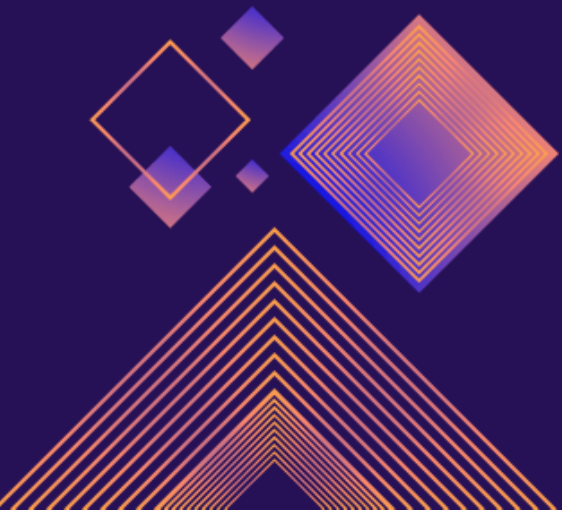
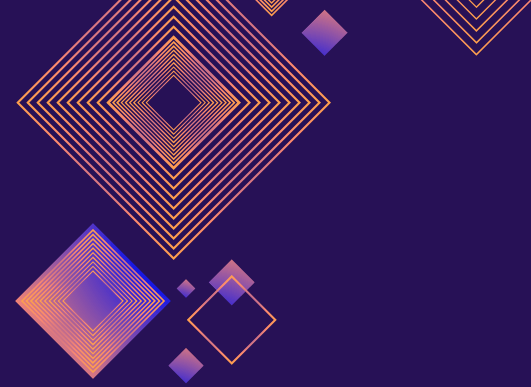
1. The university has a strategic commitment to student engagement with society (75%).
2. Student engagement with society is actively promoted trough communication channels (social media, website, etc.) (74.6%).
3. The university makes facilities available to students to engage in activities with society (73.8%).
4. The university has a track record of mutually beneficial partnerships with its external communities (68.4%).
5. The university has a support structure (e.g. committee, office or staff) for coordinating societal student engagement activities (57.9%).

On the other hand, universities do not prioritise hiring academic staff with solid records on social engagement (44.4%). Also, 37.5% of the intuitions have not clearly defined indicators to measure student engagement with society, and there are no national-level policies (30.8%) encouraging institutions to implement student engagement. These are the lowest priorities in the institutions regarding supporting mechanisms:

1. The university hires academic staff members that have a strong track record of societal engagement (44.4%).
2. The university has clearly defined indicators to measure the levels of student engagement with society (37.5%).
3. There are national-level policies that encourage university student engagement with society (30.8%).

In sum, despite the institutional commitment, many institutions still do not have specialized staff on the topic, and they have not established specific indicators for student engagement with society. It shows that despite the growing priority of student engagement with society, the subject is still developing at different institutional levels.

6. IMPACT



Impact of Student Engagement with Society

Student satisfaction and experience are the most impacted areas with student engagement with society

The impact of student engagement with society could be reflected in various improvements for the students, institutions, and society. However, the most important impacts are related (adding moderate and large extent) are improvements in student satisfaction rates (65.5%), university teaching and learning (63.1%), and partnerships with external partners (58.6%). These are the significant impacts of student engagement with society:

Figure 12: Impact of student engagement with society

12a. Activities relating to student engagement with society in my university improved my university teaching and learning.



12b. Activities relating to student engagement with society in my university improved my student satisfaction rates.



12c. Activities relating to student engagement with society in my university improved my university research.



12d. Activities relating to student engagement with society in my university improved my university rankings.



12e. Activities relating to student engagement with society in my university increased the number of partnerships at my university.



12f. Activities relating to student engagement with society in my university generated additional funding for my university.



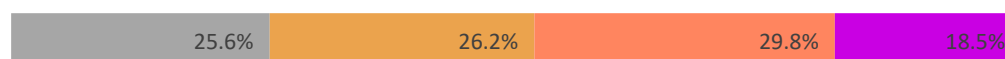
12g. Activities relating to student engagement with society in my university led to improved lives of people in my communities.



12h. Activities relating to student engagement with society my university participated in led to improved infrastructure in my communities.



12i. Activities relating to student engagement with society in my university led to job creation.



Don't know. Little extent Moderate extent Large extent

Impact of Student Engagement with Society

Student engagement with society seems not to play a particular role in attracting funding

The most critical impacts of student engagement with society at an institutional level are improvements in student satisfaction rates (65.5 %), teaching and learning (63.1%), of partnerships with external partners (58.6%), improvement of lives of people in the surrounding communities (56.3%), and improvements in the university research (56%). These are the top five impacts:

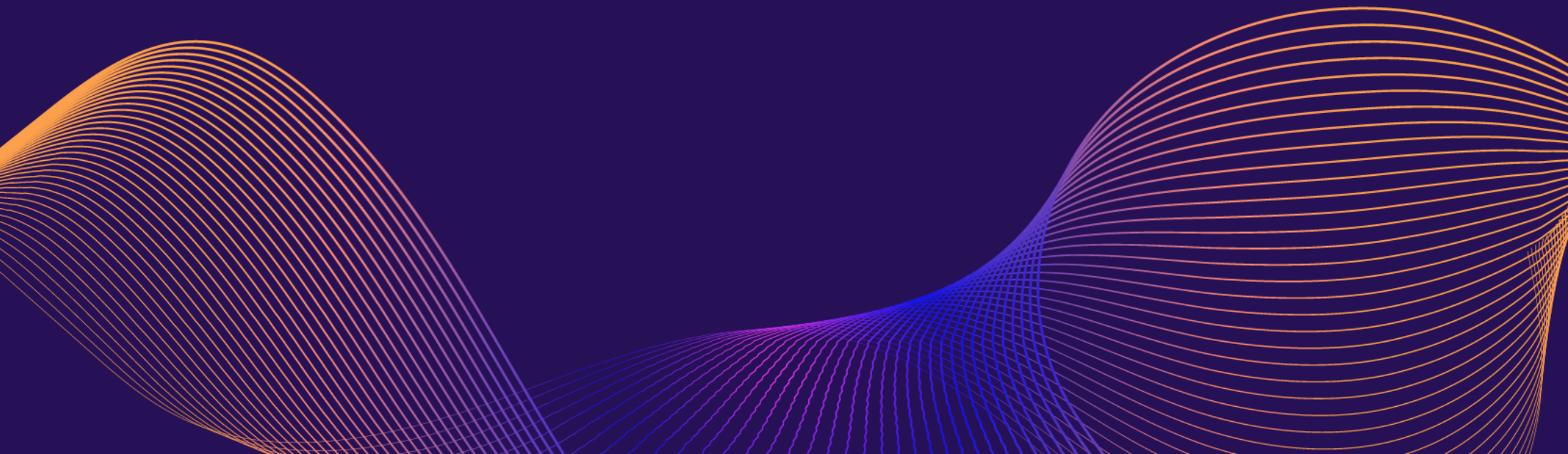
1. Activities relating to student engagement with society improved student satisfaction rates (65.5%).
2. Activities relating to student engagement with society improved teaching and learning (63.1%).
3. Activities relating to student engagement with society increased the number of partnerships (58.6%).
4. Activities relating to student engagement with society led to improved lives of people in the surrounding communities. (56.3%).
5. Activities relating to student engagement with society improved the university research (56%).

On the contrary, fewer impacts are expected in the generation of additional funding for the university (35.5%), improvement of university research (33.3%), and improvement in university rankings (32%):

1. Activities relating to student engagement with society generated additional funding for the university (35.5%).
2. Activities relating to student engagement with society improved the university research (33.3%).
3. Activities relating to student engagement with society improved the university rankings (32%).

In conclusion, most of the impacts of student engagement with society are related to student satisfaction and teaching and learning, while attracting funding is not exceptionally high.

7. BARRIERS

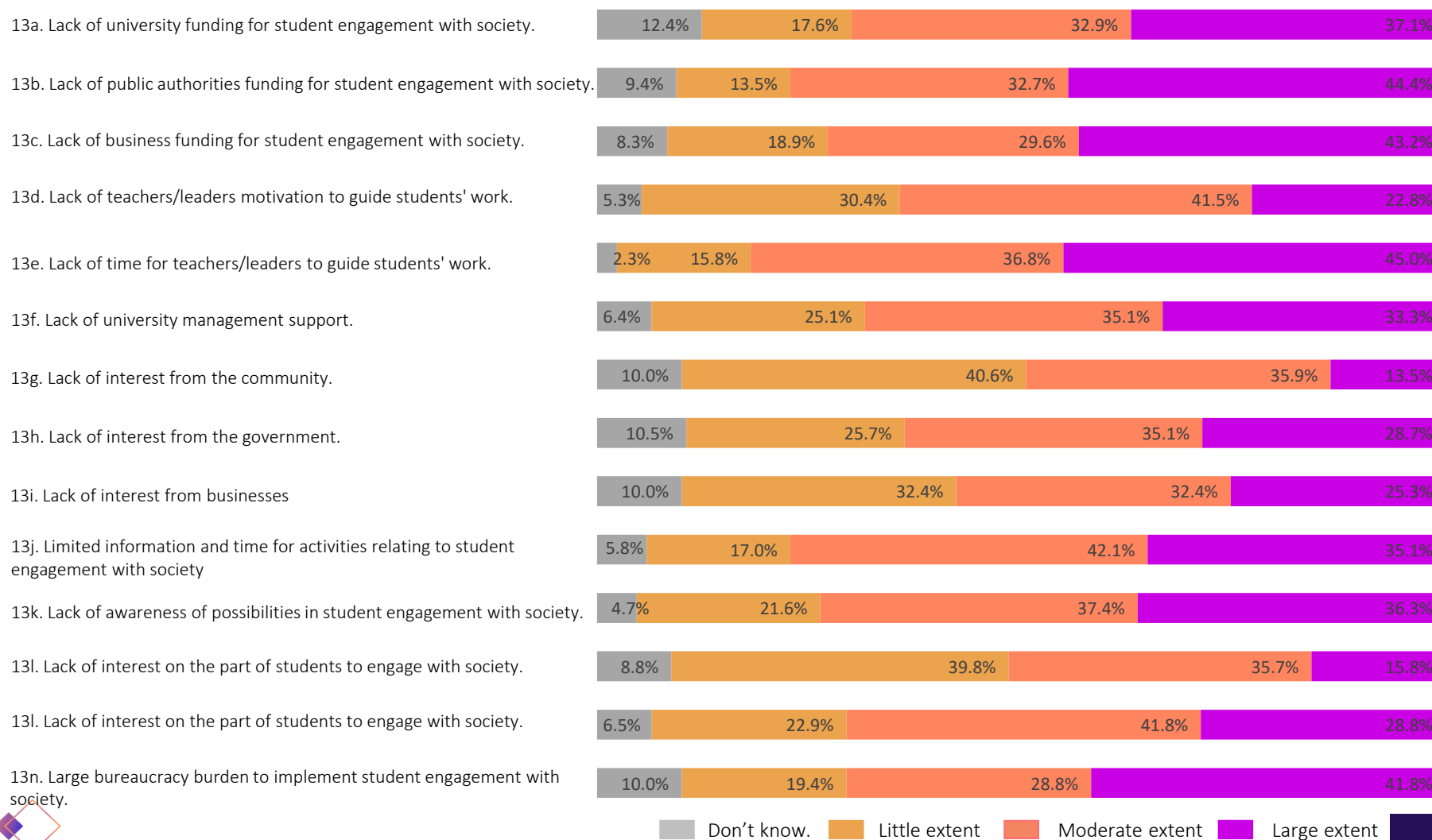


Barriers to Implement Student Engagement with Society

Lack of time for academics and availability of information are the most important barriers

The barriers hindering the consolidation of student engagement with society as a transversal topic in higher education are the lack of time of academics, the lack of information, and the lack of public funding for the activities. They are the main barriers to consolidating student engagement with society:

Figure 13: Barriers on student engagement with society



Barriers to Implement Student Engagement with Society

Barriers to implement student engagement with society

The main barriers for implementing student engagement at an institutional level are the lack of time for academics (81.8%), information (77.2%), public funding (77.1%), awareness of the potential (74%), and lack of business funding. These are the top five barriers: 13e. Lack of time for teachers/leaders to guide students' work (81.8%)

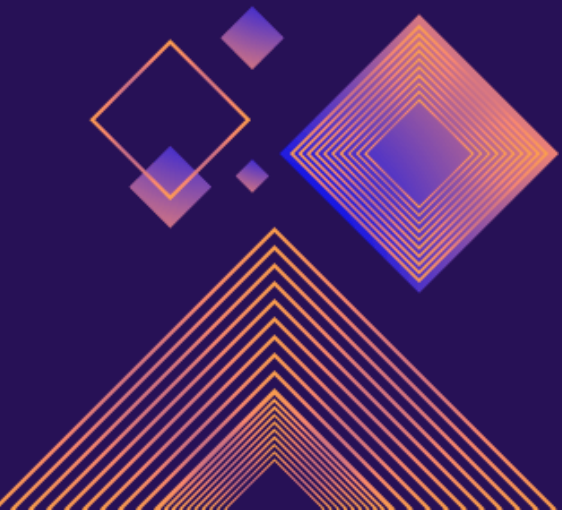
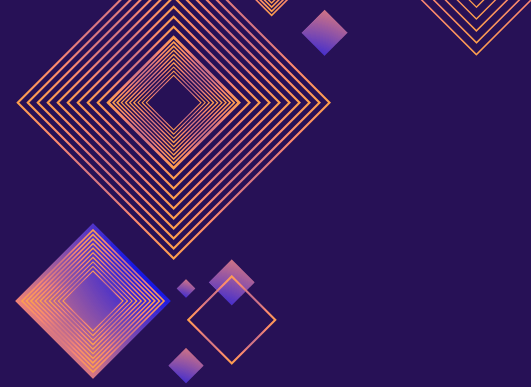
1. Limited information and time for activities relating to student engagement with society (77.2%).
2. Lack of public authorities funding for student engagement with society (77.1%).
3. Lack of awareness of possibilities in student engagement with society (74%).
4. Lack of business funding for student engagement with society (72.8%).

On the other hand, the elements that are less considered a barrier are the interest from the communities (40.6 %), the lack of interest of the students (39.8 %), and the lack of interest in the businesses. These are the elements considered the less as barriers:

1. Lack of interest from the community (40.6%).
2. Lack of interest on the part of students to engage with society (39.8%).
3. Lack of interest from businesses (32.4%).

In sum, the barriers are at the institutional level with the constraints of time of the academics and the lack of clear information on student engagement and its potential. On the other hand, external communities, students, and businesses have a substantial interest in student engagement with society.

8. CHALLENGES



Challenges for Implementing Student Engagement with Society

The economic challenges are considered the main issue to implement student engagement with society

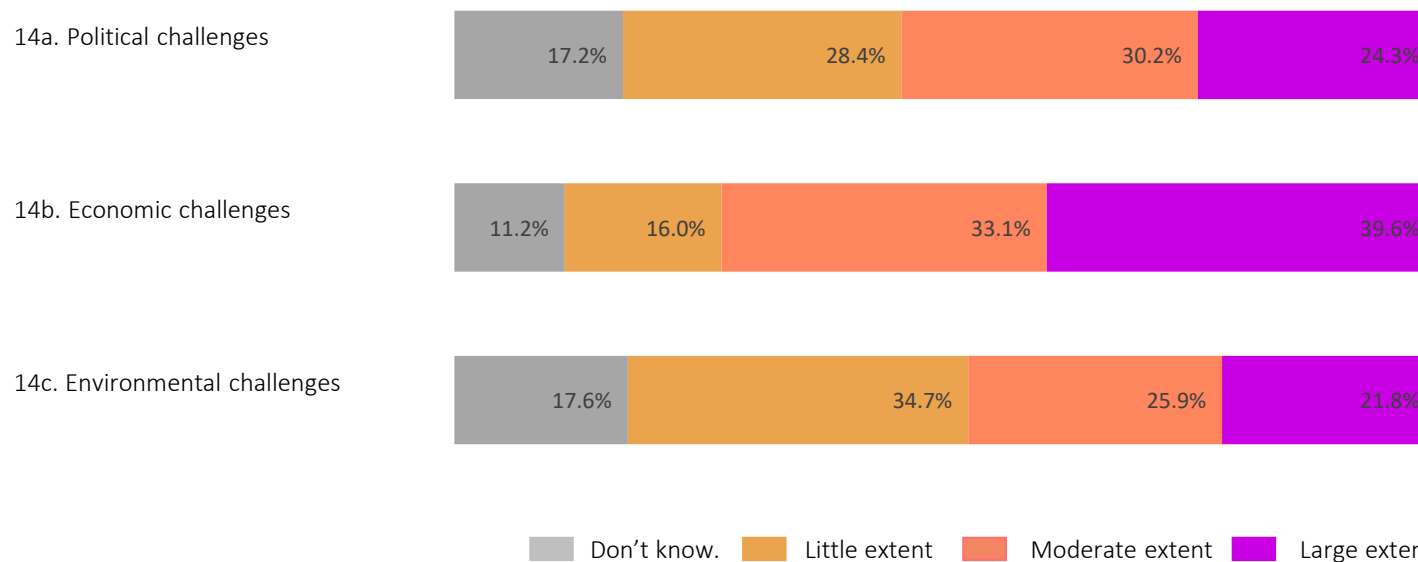
The most critical challenge for implementing student engagement with society at an institutional level is the economic one (73 %). The second most important one is the political challenge (54.6 %). Finally, the least important challenge is the environmental one (34.7 %).

Additionally, the academics also mentioned as challenges:

- Lack of awareness on student engagement with society.
- Lack of an institutional strategic vision on the topic.
- Constraints of time of the academics.
- Lack of a rewards system (incentives).
- Lack of dissemination of the information on the topic.

Figure 14 represents the answers of the academics on the challenges for student engagement with society.

Figure 14: Challenges for student engagement with society



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Project Number: 2020-1-LV01-KA203-077578

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