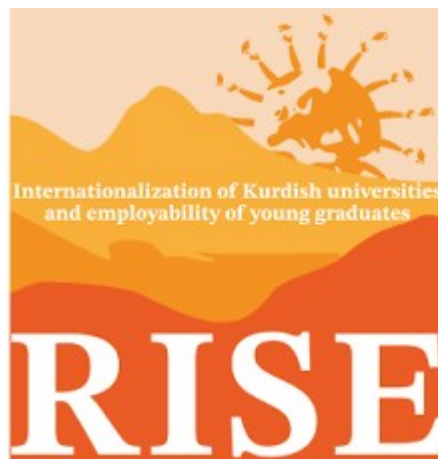


# **FOCUS GROUP REPORT**

**External Evaluation. Training Week WP3 T3.3,  
University of Murcia, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2025**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY — Focus Group Findings

The focus group conducted with representatives from the seven Kurdish partner universities provided clear and consistent evidence that the RISE project is progressing effectively toward its strategic objectives of reinforcing internationalisation, employability, and institutional capacity in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Discussions highlighted strong relevance, early institutional impact, high levels of ownership, and positive perceptions of coordination. Several challenges and contextual constraints were also identified, offering guidance for the next phases of implementation.

**Relevance.** Partners unanimously confirmed that RISE objectives are closely aligned with their institutional priorities. For many universities, the project has introduced—often for the first time—strategic planning tools such as roadmaps for internationalisation and employability. Participants also stressed that they now understand the rationale for integrating IRO and CDC functions, recognising the value of a coordinated institutional approach. As well, examples of relevant activities and components – at this stage of implementation and development of RISE Project-, compiled.

**Impact.** Important early impacts are already visible across institutions. These include the introduction of new entrepreneurship and employability courses, the creation or strengthening of CDC and entrepreneurship units, increased student engagement in planning processes, and significant progress in building internal and external networking. Participation in RISE activities has also enhanced staff capacities in project management and internationalisation. Some success stories, compiled and shared within the Consortium.

**Sustainability.** The translation and internalisation of institutional roadmaps into Kurdish demonstrates strong commitment to embedding results. Universities report increasing engagement with local labour-market stakeholders, including private companies and NGOs, which reinforces the long-term sustainability of employability services. These developments indicate that RISE is creating structural changes rather than temporary project-driven actions. To be noted, the importance of, European partners, remaining involved after project closure.

**Implementation and Effectiveness.** Partners expressed very high satisfaction with the coordination and communication provided by UNIMED and EU partners. Training activities conducted under WP3 were described as well-designed, relevant, and responsive to the needs of both IRO and CDC staff. The project is viewed as well-organised and professionally managed, contributing to trust and smooth implementation.

**Entrepreneurship and Employability.** Significant progress has been made in building an entrepreneurial mindset among students and strengthening university–industry collaboration. Universities reported initiatives such as entrepreneurship courses, job fairs involving several companies, internships, alumni–industry linkages, volunteering programmes, and engagement with more than 70 companies or NGOs in some cases. These actions directly support RISE’s objectives and demonstrate increasing institutional ownership.

**Challenges.** Despite the strong progress, several challenges remain. Partners highlighted difficulties in securing funding for industry collaboration, the need to contextualise European practices to local realities, and the early stage of roadmap implementation. Some universities estimated progress at approximately 45%, indicating the need for continued support, follow-up, and mentoring during the next implementation phase.

**Overall Assessment.** The focus group confirms that RISE is highly relevant, strategically aligned with the needs of Kurdish partner institutions, and already generating meaningful institutional and cultural change. The project enjoys strong ownership, excellent coordination, and solid prospects for sustainability. Continued attention to contextualisation, resource mobilisation, and structured follow-up will further strengthen its long-term impact.

# 1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of the Focus Group (November 20<sup>th</sup> 2025) with Kurdish partner universities conducted during the Training Week in Murcia (18–21 November 2025), organised under Work Package 3 T3.3 – Capacity Building of the RISE project. The focus group constitutes a core component of the external evaluation, aimed at gathering qualitative evidence on the project's progress, emerging changes, perceived relevance, and implementation challenges.

The session followed a semi-structured format, guided by the evaluation areas defined in the presentation delivered during the workshop, which include: (1) Relevance; (2) Impact; (3) Sustainability; (4) Challenges; (5) Implementation & Effectiveness; and (6) Entrepreneurship & Employability .

A total of seven Kurdish partner universities participated, represented by staff from International Relations Offices (IROs), Career Development Centres (CDCs), and faculty members, in line with the project's design to strengthen both institutional units and promote synergies between them. Participation was balanced across institutions, and the discussion was facilitated by the external evaluation team.

The Focus Group aimed to:

- Collect perceptions of project progress and alignment with institutional needs.
- Identify emerging changes at institutional and individual levels.
- Assess early effects of capacity building actions implemented under WP3.
- Detect remaining challenges that may affect implementation.
- Capture insights on sustainability and ownership.

This qualitative evidence is triangulated with the project's Description of Work, WP2 Roadmap objectives, and the logical framework indicators to support the external evaluation of RISE.

## 2. Overview of the Focus Group Session

The Focus Group took place during the Training Week hosted by the University of Murcia, which formed part of the intensive capacity-building programme for IRO and CDC staff under WP3: Skills and Competences Development. The session lasted approximately two hours and was structured around the same thematic areas presented to participants in the introductory slide deck .

### 2.1 Methodology

Participants were first asked an initial “*warming-up*” question on their most positive experience in the project so far. Subsequently, they discussed in small groups and reported back on eight clusters of evaluation questions aligned with RISE objectives. The evaluation team ensured an open and participatory environment, in line with RISE's bottom-up and multi-stakeholder approach described in the project's methodology section .

### 2.2 Participation

Representatives from all seven Kurdish universities contributed actively, including:

- University of Zakho
- University of Duhok

- University of Garmian
- Erbil Polytechnic University
- Duhok Polytechnic University
- Sulaimani Polytechnic University
- Akre University for Applied Sciences

This provided a rich cross-institutional perspective, confirming internal networking as one of the project's emerging benefits, as also mentioned by participants themselves ("internal networking among our universities" was highlighted as an immediate positive effect) .

## 2.3 Focus Areas

The session explored the following dimensions:

- **Relevance** of RISE objectives and activities to institutional priorities.
- **Impact** on employability, internationalisation, staff roles, and student engagement.
- **Sustainability** and institutional embedding of the roadmaps.
- **Challenges** affecting implementation at structural, financial, or organisational levels.
- **Implementation & Effectiveness** of coordination and project management.
- **Entrepreneurship & Employability**, particularly university–industry linkage efforts.
- **Final reflections**, including expectations for the next phases.

This structure mirrors the evaluation framework presented to participants and aligns with the overarching goals and indicators of the RISE logical framework (WP1), particularly those relating to internationalisation, employability, and enhanced institutional capacities .

## 3. Key Findings by Evaluation Criterion

This section presents the consolidated findings from the Focus Group discussions, organised according to the evaluation dimensions defined in the External Quality Plan and aligned with the RISE Description of Work. Evidence is drawn from the full transcriptions and reflects the perceptions of Kurdish partner universities at the mid-implementation stage.

### 3.1 Relevance

#### **Strong alignment between RISE objectives and institutional priorities**

Participants consistently affirmed that the project responds directly to the strategic needs of their institutions, both in internationalisation and employability, the two pillars around which RISE is designed. One university representative explicitly stated that *"RISE aligns with our university objectives for both internationalisation and employability... mobility programmes help students obtain skills needed for employment"* .

Similarly, another participant highlighted that the training and project structure *"reflect our needs at our local universities... both in terms of institutional structure and the approach to internationalisation and CDC functions"* .

Other inputs from participants include aspects such as the alignment with the Government Plan or the addressing of the confirmed and existing gap between academia and private sector

The emergence of roadmaps for internationalisation and employability, which did not exist prior to the project, was frequently mentioned as a transformative change:

- *“Before RISE, none of the universities had a strategy... now all partner universities have a roadmap on internationalisation and employability”* .

This is fully consistent with the RISE objectives in the Description of Work, which emphasise the creation of synergic roadmaps for institutional development (WP2) and the establishment of integrated IRO–CDC strategies.

### **High relevance of IRO–CDC integration**

Initially, some participants questioned why internationalisation and employability were placed together under one project, but later realised the coherence of this approach:

- *“We asked why RISE combines CDC and International Office... but through the project we understood the link”* .

This validates one of the foundational assumptions of RISE: that a combined strategy is necessary to bridge academic development with labour-market needs, as described in the Needs Analysis.

### **Relevant components and activities, at this stage**

Given examples during the Focus Group: Mobility programs, internships, RISE Master Class, Community Service, Entrepreneur and Employability as class subjects or linking with stakeholders.

## **3.2 Impact**

### **Institutional changes already visible**

Several universities reported new structures, units, or academic offerings that emerged as a direct consequence of RISE activities.

Examples include:

- Introduction of compulsory courses on entrepreneurship and employability
- Creation of an entrepreneurship unit within the CDC .
- Establishment of mechanisms for student participation, with one university noting that *“for the first time, students were engaged in all our plans”* when designing roadmaps .

These changes indicate early institutional transformation consistent with RISE’s objective of *strengthening institutional capacity and embedding internationalisation and employability structures*.

Some other participants, confirmed, the mentioned institutional changes, as being in a “work in progress” stage.

### **Improved project management and networking culture**

A participant from Garmian University highlighted increased internal and external networking, describing it as *“very important... a bridge has been built between undergraduate students and alumni, and internal networking among universities”* . Or, DPU, underlining the connection between stakeholders.

The gaining of project management skills was also mentioned, reinforcing the competence-building effect expected under WP3.

### **Success stories/Best practices shared within the Consortium**

- Connecting Professional Training Office with NGOs, with the positive result of 2 businesses having started
- Plan to invite international students (Student Week)
- Creating an App for linking HEI and Alumni

## **3.3 Sustainability**

### **Roadmaps serve as long-term institutional tools**

All universities confirmed they are translating and internalising their roadmaps:

- *“We developed the roadmaps... now we are in the process of translating them into Kurdish, which is a challenging but necessary step”*.

The translation effort demonstrates a commitment to institutional embedding, ensuring accessibility and alignment with internal governance processes. This is an explicit indicator under the sustainability objectives of the project (WP2 and WP5).

### **Growing integration with local labour market stakeholders**

Universities reported engaging private companies during events and consultations, which supports long-term sustainability of employability services:

- *“We invited private companies... we listened to what they think about the project”*.

This is consistent with RISE’s ambition to build stronger university–industry links to sustain employability outcomes beyond the project.

### **Involvement of European RISE partners after project closure**

- Signing MoUs
- Mobility for staff and students
- Training
- Start working on accreditation (Dual Degree)
- Maintaining the created network at university/staff level

## **3.4 Implementation & Effectiveness**

### **Coordination and communication perceived as excellent**

There was unanimous agreement that communication with UNIMED and EU partners is working well:

- *“Communication has been excellent, top level... nothing to improve”*.

This observation aligns with the project management principles set out in the Description of Work, which emphasise shared decision-making, transparency, and frequent communication across the consortium.

### **Training activities well-received and relevant**

Participants noted that the training weeks accurately matched their needs, especially regarding structuring IRO and CDC offices, operationalising roadmaps, and engaging students:

- *“What they prepared for us reflects our needs... both institutionally and in terms of office structure”*.

## 3.5 Entrepreneurship & Employability

### Significant progress in curriculum and services

Universities shared various new initiatives aligned with WP4 and institutional roadmaps, including:

- Adding entrepreneurship courses
- Implementing project-based learning methods (entrepreneurship)
- Running start-up competitions
- Offering workshops, seminars, and training on entrepreneurship
- Focus groups
- Establishing or expanding job fairs, with participation from up to *160 companies* in one example .

These developments demonstrate meaningful progress toward the project's objective of improving students' entrepreneurial mindset and reinforcing the link between academia and industry.

### Strengthened university–industry connections

Multiple universities reported active collaboration with industry:

- internships
- volunteering schemes
- alumni engagement
- job fairs
- collaboration with 70+ companies or NGOs in some cases
- Practical classes, including stakeholders and alumni.

These examples confirm that RISE is fostering practical, labour-market-oriented services, as intended.

## 3.6 Challenges

### Funding constraints for industry collaboration

Participants emphasised the difficulty of securing resources to support university–industry engagement:

- *“One main problem is getting funding from the private sector... we need mechanisms to align research with market needs”* .

### Adaptation of European models to local realities

One university noted that activities developed in Europe require adaptation:

- *“What happens in Murcia cannot be applied directly to our context; we must tailor it”* .

This highlights the need for contextualisation, which RISE recognises as essential in its methodology (no “one-size-fits-all” approach).

### Roadmap implementation still in early stages

Some partners hesitated to assess progress quantitatively, indicating moderate progress:

- *“We cannot say yes or no... we believe we have achieved around 45% of the project”* .

### Other challenges

- Delay, due to geopolitical tensions, of the face-to-face WP2 event in Kurdistan (June 2025)
- Language barrier, for students
- Internal awareness of internationalisation
- Absence of proper mentality in some cases (private sector)
- Lack of autonomy for implementing change-s at administrative level
- Updating the curricula may take up to 4 years

## 3.7 Other Reflections

### Cultural and mindset benefits

Participants valued the *Internationalisation at Home* session highly:

- *“Students understood the culture of European people... this promotes an entrepreneurial and independent mindset”* .

### Growing student engagement

Multiple universities recognised that RISE is fostering a more participatory university culture, particularly involving students in planning and outreach activities.

## 4. Cross-Cutting Themes

The focus group discussions revealed several transversal dimensions that cut across the evaluation criteria and reflect the deeper dynamics of change emerging in the RISE project.

### 4.1 Strengthening Synergies Between IRO and CDC

A central theme was the increasing understanding of the synergies between International Relations Offices and Career Development Centres. Initially perceived as separate units with different mandates, partners now recognise the strategic value of their integration:

- *“We asked why RISE combines CDC and IRO... later we understood the link.”*

This confirms progress towards RISE’s objective of creating a **coordinated institutional approach** to internationalisation and employability (WP2).

### 4.2 Participation and Inclusion of Students

A recurring insight was the value of student engagement. One university noted that, *“for the first time, we involved students in all our plans”* — a significant cultural shift in Kurdish institutions, where decision-making is often centralised.

This shift supports RISE’s participatory and bottom-up methodology, aiming to empower the academic community at multiple levels.

### 4.3 Internal Networking Within Kurdish Universities

Participants highlighted improvements in collaboration not only between Kurdish and European partners but also among Kurdish universities themselves:

- *“Internal networking among our universities has been important.”*

This demonstrates the development of an emerging community of practice, aligned with RISE's ambition to foster peer learning, shared practices, and collective institutional development.

## 4.4 Bridging the Gap Between Academia and Industry

Across the universities, there is a clear recognition that industry engagement is essential for improving graduate employability:

- Engagement of private companies during project events.
- Student internships, volunteering, and alumni-industry matching services.
- Job fairs involving up to 160 companies in one case.

This resonates with RISE's strategic objective to strengthen the entrepreneurial mindset and university-industry linkages.

## 4.5 Contextualisation of European Approaches

Participants emphasised the need to adapt European practices to local realities:

- *“What happens in Murcia cannot be applied directly; we must tailor it to our context.”*

This reflects a healthy and mature understanding of capacity building: the absorption of knowledge is strongest when adapted to the cultural, political, and economic context of the Kurdistan Region.

## 4.6 Enhanced Understanding of Project Management and Governance

Several participants highlighted improved understanding of project management, reflecting more structured approaches to internal coordination and communication. This is consistent with RISE's focus on strengthening institutional capacities beyond specific technical skills.

# 5. Conclusions

The focus group results provide strong, evidence-based confirmation that RISE is advancing meaningfully toward its strategic objectives. The testimonies reflect early but tangible institutional change, increased ownership, and a clear internalisation of project goals.

## 5.1 Relevance

RISE is highly relevant to the partner universities' priorities. The integration of internationalisation and employability is now widely understood and valued. Roadmaps produced under WP2 have provided new strategic directions where none previously existed.

## 5.2 Impact

Important early impacts are visible:

- introduction of new entrepreneurship and employability courses;
- establishment of new units and strengthened CDC operations;
- increased student involvement and internal networking;
- early improvements in university–industry relations.

These outcomes demonstrate institutional change consistent with RISE's Theory of Change and logical framework.

### 5.3 Sustainability

The translation of roadmaps into Kurdish and active engagement with local labour-market actors indicate strong prospects for medium-term sustainability. Universities are integrating roadmap actions into their internal processes, signalling structural rather than project-dependent change.

### 5.4 Implementation & Effectiveness

Coordination is perceived as excellent, and training activities are highly valued and responsive to needs. This supports effective implementation and enhances the credibility of the consortium.

### 5.5 Entrepreneurship & Employability

The project is catalysing the establishment of new academic offerings, CDC services, start-up initiatives, and regular job fairs. These developments show clear progress on WP4 goals.

### 5.6 Challenges

Despite the progress, challenges remain:

- resource constraints, particularly in private-sector engagement;
- adapting European models to local constraints;
- the need to accelerate full roadmap implementation.

Overall, RISE is on a strong trajectory, with visible progress toward its structural and institutional goals.

## 6. Recommendations

The recommendations derived from the focus group analysis prioritise strengthening roadmap implementation, contextualising training, improving monitoring systems, and deepening collaboration across institutions and with EU partners. In the **short term**, Kurdish universities should reinforce the operationalisation of their internationalisation and employability roadmaps. This includes developing simple tracking tools to monitor progress at institutional level and organising targeted mentoring sessions to ensure that planned actions are realistic, phased, and aligned with each university's internal capacities. Training materials from WP3 should be further localised by integrating examples and case studies relevant to the Kurdish context, and by encouraging peer-exchange sessions where universities present how they have adapted European practices to local needs. Short-term efforts should also focus on improving the monitoring of employability outcomes: CDCs require basic, easy-to-use graduate tracking systems, and universities should establish or update alumni databases to strengthen follow-up, career services, and industry engagement.

**Medium-term** recommendations aim at consolidating organisational synergies and strengthening external partnerships. IROs and CDCs should prepare joint annual work plans and receive guidance on reducing service duplication, improving coordination, and achieving a more integrated delivery of internationalisation and employability services. Universities should also expand their engagement with the private sector by developing formal collaboration frameworks—such as MoUs, partnership agreements, and structured liaison mechanisms—with support from templates and guidance provided by EU partners. Student participation should be enhanced by including student representatives in IRO–CDC coordination committees and by systematically using student feedback in updating and refining institutional roadmaps.

**Recommendations directed to the European partners** (UNIMED, UMU, UNINT) emphasise the importance of continuity and accompaniment. EU partners should provide ongoing online mentoring between training weeks and roadmap implementation phases, and apply peer-review mechanisms to help Kurdish universities refine their plans. They should also reinforce the cascade model of capacity building by supporting Kurdish institutions in organising Local Training sessions and by producing practical materials—such as guidance documents, checklists, and short instructional videos—to facilitate replication.

Finally, at the **consortium governance level**, strong communication practices should be maintained. The clarity, responsiveness, and transparency shown by the coordination team have been recognised as strengths. Kurdish partners should be encouraged to reflect and adopt similar communication practices internally, ensuring coherence, alignment, and effective implementation across all institutions.