



SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENT-BUSINESS COLLABORATION

Good practice collection of support services for challenge-based student-business collaboration in sustainable entrepreneurship

Good Practice Profile: WUR Student Challenges



WUR STUDENT CHALLENGES

Wageningen University & Research (WUR) Student Challenges

University platform for student-business challenges

Est. 2017
Netherlands
Wageningen

Number of employees

5

Geographic scope of activities

International

Type of intermediary

- HEI-external
- HEI-internal
- Hybrid

Intermediary set-up

- Single organisation (unit)
- Partnership of multiple organisations

Intermediation for SBC as

- Primary role
- Secondary role

WUR Student Challenges at Wageningen University & Research is a university-internal unit specialising in enabling **international challenge-based student competitions**, both for students at Wageningen University & Research and students from all around the world. WUR Student Challenges enables students to work with experts and representatives from industry, government, academia and NGOs. Challenge topics are aligned with WUR's strategic themes, focusing on societal issues such as food production, protein transition, bio-based economy, and nature-based solutions.

Background

- * In 2017, WUR Student Challenges was launched at Wageningen University & Research under the Education & Student Affairs (ESA) unit, running under the subdivision of the Dean & Managers Office. WUR Student Challenges manager Rio Pals, expert in international cooperation, multi-stakeholder processes, and communication science and marketing, built a team to design several challenge formats for both WUR students specialised in the life-sciences domain and students from abroad.
- * The WUR Student Challenge philosophy is to bring academic and industry experts together with students as prospective innovators. On average, 200-400 students participate in a challenge, working with 15-20 partners such as companies and NGOs. Student teams are asked to register their team of between 4 to 10 people, including one supervisor from their university.
- * The design of student challenges is based on the understanding of CBL employed at WUR, meaning that challenges provided to students thematise a complex problem for which multiple solutions are possible. Student teams propose their own idea or solution to answer the question of the challenge.

Funding & Financing Model

- * Funding is provided through a university-internal and -external partner network, including the University Fund Wageningen which connects donors with socially relevant WUR projects to accelerate the work and people at WUR who are not eligible for regular funding. Further financial resources are provided by Friends of University Fund Wageningen, and Wageningen Ambassadors.
- * Sponsor fees are paid by most companies and organisations of the partner network who also provide expertise and coaches.



© Guy Ackermans

WUR STUDENT CHALLENGES

Intermediary Support Services & Activities

GENERAL SUPPORT

- × Recruitment of challenge partners through university network and contacts.
- × Definition of challenge cases in collaboration with academic staff and topic experts as well as company representatives.
- × Each academic year, organisation of one large challenge format integrating multiple cases. The annual focus switches between business innovation and conceptual design.
- × Organisation of smaller challenge formats focused on local impact creation and implementation of solutions in the student teams' own environment. The local impact challenges and international challenges are equally large in time requirements.
- × Monitoring and evaluation of challenge formats, including data collection through feedback forms and live feedback sessions.
- × Organisation of a selection committee that manages selection of student teams in two rounds throughout the challenge process, as well organisation of a jury that manages the selection of a winning team amongst the finalist teams.

TEACHER- AND STUDENT-SPECIFIC SUPPORT

- × Connection of students to the WUR start-up incubator who provide important services and expertise for challenge implementation, such as providing students with online workshops and coaching on business-related themes such as the business model canvas, as well as providing access to a partner network with experts who can answer student questions related to more specialised topics such as IP.
- × Provision of workspace for students to work on their ideas.
- × Provision of support to finalists and student teams after challenge completion in the form of after-care, in cooperation with partners such as the World Food Forum.
- × Organisation of events with alumni and former challenge participants who have continued to develop their innovation, to provide inspiration to student participants.

COMPANY-SPECIFIC SUPPORT

- × Pre- and post-challenge meetings with partners such as companies to prepare for participation in the challenge as a partner and coach to student teams, clarify and manage expectations, and discuss experiences, learnings, and take-aways.
- × Support in communication and contracting with the campaign agency that supports the challenge process. The contracting covers topics relating to confidentiality and student IP rights.



WUR STUDENT CHALLENGES



© Guy Ackermans

Curricular Integration

The WUR Student Challenges team specialises in carrying out extra-curricular challenges around societal grand challenges and real-life company cases that run between six to nine months. In the context of further developing its innovative programme offer, together with a consultant, the team is in the process of exploring new challenge formats that may be offered as in-curricular course activities, taking inspiration from existing curricular challenge programmes at WUR such as the Academic Consultancy Project. For instance, WUR Student Challenges will pilot new and shorter challenge formats to reach more students, offering them the opportunity to try out a challenge, without having to commit over half a year.

International & Virtual Collaboration

- ✖ The infrastructure for interaction between students and companies throughout the challenge is provided by external service partners, for example by Netherlands-based impact campaign agency Soapbox who build online platforms and construct digital learning environments for challenge participants, providing tools for sharing of information and updates and progress tracking, as well as organising live events such as the kick-off and grand finale events.
- ✖ During the challenges, company partners act as coaches, meeting with students online and in real-life. Coaching goes two ways: the company may reach out to student teams whose idea or solution they find interesting or may be approached by students with questions related to their specific expertise. Intermediate contact to company representatives is secured by organising online consultations and virtual interaction via email and chat. Some companies invite students to come work with them at their lab spaces, if available.

WUR STUDENT CHALLENGES

✓ Impact

VISION & MISSION STATEMENT

WUR Student Challenges empowers students, PhD candidates and fresh graduates to “explore, create and grow for a better future”. Its mission is to create a space for young people to learn, think out of the box, network, collaborate, and create impact.

RESULTS

- × Since 2017, the WUR Student Challenges team organised more than 16 global challenges in which more than 340 student teams and 2250 students from 251 universities and 72 countries worldwide have participated. Around a quarter of participants were WUR students. 97% of the student participants from WUR valued the student challenges (immensely), according to the 2021 Alumni Survey.
- × More than 153 partners have participated, out of which 100 made up private companies. Many business partners go on to form partnerships after the challenge, contributing to development of the innovation ecosystem.
- × WUR Student Challenges enables post-challenge cooperation between students and companies, e.g. Fuji Oil Global Innovation Centre Europe is in contact with the winning teams of the ReThink Protein and ReThink Waste challenges to explore future opportunities for collaboration.
- × Several winning and finalist teams of the WUR Student Challenges have developed their challenge ideas into start-ups, such as Proprotein (production of dairy proteins by fermentation with yeast, reducing cattle farming) who emerged out of the ReThink Protein Challenge, or LettUs Design (digital and in-person tools for community groups and professionals to plan and visualise public green spaces) who emerged out of the Urban Greenhouse Challenge.

SUCCESS FACTORS AND ENABLING CONDITIONS

- × Close cooperation with the WUR affiliated entrepreneurship and innovation bodies such as the university start-up incubator and maker space, benefiting from organisational connection and familiarity in organising challenge activities.
- × Established relationships and smooth processes with service delivery partners who support the WUR Student Challenges team in professional PR, communication and design activities as well as partner recruitment and consulting on interactive and hybrid design of events.
- × Building of strong partnerships to actively support the further development of student ideas into start-ups. For example, in October 2022, WUR established an Innovation Alliance with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) to “create follow up to teams in challenges like the Nature Based Solutions Challenge of WUR for even more impact”. The Innovation Alliance is planning to launch an Innovation Incubator to support students in turning “their idea-stage solutions into ready-to-launch business plans.”
- × Incorporation of student assistants into challenge formats who engage in multimedia activities such as vlog series to accompany the challenges boosts student motivation and supports visibility.
- × Flexibility regarding programme design and development, adapting the offer and developing shorter student challenges to suit students who cannot commit to extra-curricular challenges of up to half a year. Shorter challenges are set to launch in 2024 in the form of hackathons of 10 days, in collaboration with local municipalities who provide a case, for example on the topic of municipal waste processing.

WUR STUDENT CHALLENGES

☆ Exemplary Challenge Format: ReThink Waste Challenge 2023

- ✦ The ReThink Waste Challenge took place from January to June 2023 and challenged students to develop a business idea or prototype that contributes to a circular biobased economy and zero-waste future. The challenge format specifically asked for sustainable approaches to prevent, reduce, reuse, recycle or recover biomass side-streams. Several partners were involved in supporting the challenge format, for instance through media and funding partnerships, while 16 partners participated as direct business partners to the challenge.
- ✦ From September to December 2022, students were invited to create teams and submit their ideas. The challenge was organised in three rounds, officially launched on 18 January 2023 with a kick-off event. Entrepreneurship training was provided in the form of three sprints on the topics of “solution vs problem”, “business model canvas”, and “validation and impact”, as well as workshops on prototyping, pitching and PR. The training was carried out in collaboration with WUR’s start-up centre Starthub Wageningen, the open workspace provider Fablab Wageningen and Pitch Academy.
- ✦ Collaboration between students and companies was enabled during online consultations and one-to-one meetings as well as at events such as the kick-off event and sprint days. The grand finale event was organised as a public event and featured several panel discussions as well as an innovation market for presentation of student teams and partner companies.
- ✦ Student teams were asked to deliver three key milestones: in the first round, a document containing vision, problem statement, solution and validation plan as well as an up-to-date team profile. In the second round, they were asked to provide vision, market analysis, validated solution including revenue model, as well as a social media pitch and artist impression of the solution. The third round before selection of finalists asked for a 2.5 min video pitch for the jury as well as a Q&A with the jury.

RESULTS

- ✦ Participation of 190 students from 72 universities in 33 different countries.
- ✦ Creation of 27 business solutions contributing to the biobased economy.
- ✦ Next to personal development and attainment of new knowledge and skills, several student participants gained internships and jobs at the partner companies.
- ✦ With its concept of using fungal fermentation to convert agricultural food waste into a source of protein usable in meat alternatives, team “Afterlife” won first prize in the ReThink Waste Challenge and received the additional SDG Prize awarded by company partner Fuji Oil. The team received financial and professional support to join an accelerator programme and has developed its idea into a start-up. It also maintains close contact to Fuji Oil to explore sustainable production of staple ingredients.



© Guy Ackermans

PUBLIC CONTACT DETAILS

Rio Pals
Manager, WUR Student Challenges,
Wageningen University and Research
rio.pals@wur.nl

INFORMATION SOURCES

[Wageningen University & Research \(2023\). WUR Student Challenges – Official Website.](#)

[Wageningen University & Research \(2023\). ReThink Waste Challenge – Official Website.](#)

[Wageningen University & Research \(2023\). ReThink Waste Challenge Magazine.](#)

[Wageningen University & Research \(2023\). WUR Student Challenges: How do student challenges enhance entrepreneurial learning in life science universities? Workshop presentation, April 2023.](#)

[Fuji Oil Europe \(2023\). Fuji Oil cheering on young entrepreneurs: the ReThink Waste Student Challenge Final.](#)

[Wageningen University & Research \(2022\). FAO and WUR announce exciting collaboration plans aimed at empowering young innovators. News, 2.11.2022.](#)

[WUR Student Challenges \(2022\). New: Rethink Waste Vlog series. Vlog 1, Meet Ainhua, the face of the ReThink Waste Student Challenge.](#)

[4TU.Federation \(2020\). Challenge-Based Learning in Wageningen University & Research \(CBL@WUR\): Defining what CBL@WUR means.](#)

Expert interviews carried out with WUR Student Challenges manager (07.12.2022) as well as company representative of Fuji Oil Global Innovation Centre Europe, a WUR Student Challenge partner (20.02.2023).