

Living Labs as Engines for Systemic Change

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Join this interactive session to discover how students, educators and other stakeholders can build communities that bridge research, practice, education and policy, turning educational programs into powerful engines for systemic change and innovation.

Living labs are experimental spaces where we collaboratively explore innovative solutions for wicked problems with and for the target communities. Operating within a **quadruple helix** framework, living labs bring together citizens, researchers, students, industry partners, and policymakers to co-create knowledge, test ideas, and develop interventions that are grounded in real-world contexts. They provide a structured yet flexible environment in which we can experiment, innovate, and simultaneously create meaningful learning opportunities for students and professionals.

By working in close partnership with the target population, living labs enable us to tackle **complex, cross-sector societal challenges** that cannot be solved within traditional disciplinary or organizational silos. Instead of imposing predefined solutions, we build understanding from within the ecosystems in which these issues live. This allows us to develop context-specific, adaptive solutions that reflect the lived experiences, needs, and constraints of the people and communities involved.

At the **Centre of Expertise Urban Vitality in Amsterdam**, our three living labs demonstrate how systemic change can be activated at multiple levels. On the **micro level**, we work directly with citizens, neighborhood organizations, and front-line professionals to design and test interventions that support healthier, more active urban living. On the **meso level**, we collaborate with networks of organizations—such as healthcare providers, social services, local businesses, and educational institutions—to strengthen the infrastructure that supports change. Finally, on the **macro level**, we engage policymakers and municipal or regional authorities to translate insights from the living labs into policy recommendations, scalable practices, and long-term strategic directions.

Through concrete examples from our Urban Vitality labs, we illustrate how these three levels—micro, meso, and macro—interact and reinforce each other. A successful living lab does not operate in isolation; it functions as part of a **dynamic ecosystem**, connecting practical experimentation with organizational change and policy innovation. In this way, living labs can help shift systems rather than merely improving isolated components.

During this session, we will explore how students and educators can meaningfully participate in systemic change, and under which conditions educational programmes can become catalysts for innovation. Together, we will discuss:

- Under what conditions can educational programmes contribute to systemic change?
- What changes at the institutional level would make it easier for education to align with the long-term ambitions of living labs?
- How can curricula be designed to accommodate the open-ended, uncertain, and iterative nature of living lab processes?
- How do we balance student learning needs with the expectations of professional partners and citizens involved in the living lab?

We will run a highly **interactive, participant-centered session**. After a brief introduction, participants will engage in rapid idea exchange through rotating table discussions and structured dialogue formats (e.g., fishbowl or open rounds). Each group will tackle a focused question using design-thinking-inspired activities, generating practical insights and solutions. Key takeaways will be shared in plenary, ensuring collective learning and clear outcomes.