DeSciCoLab

Decentralized Science Collaboration Laboratory

D18: Stakeholder Feedback Report

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Authors	Andreas Delladetsimas (UNRF), Athanasios Anastasiou (UNRF), Marianna Charalambous (INNOV-ACTS), Irini Charalambous (INNOV-ACTS)
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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CKTO: Central Knowledge Transfer Office
DeSci: Decentralized Science
DeSciCoLab: Decentralized Science Collaboration Laboratory
EU: European Union
GDPR: General Data Protection Regulation
INNOV:INNOV-ACTS Ltd
IPR: Intellectual Property Rights
KER: Key Exploitable Result
PMO: Project Management Office
RIF: Research and Innovation Foundation
TRL: Technology Readiness Level
UNRF: University of Nicosia Research Foundation

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1. Executive Summary

Deliverable D18 (Stakeholder Feedback Report) reports findings from stakeholder engagement carried out to understand current practices, challenges, and needs in early-stage research collaboration, to inform the DeSciCoLab platform concept, **wireframes (WP4), and technical specifications and roadmap (WP5).**

The study used a mixed-methods approach: five semi-structured interviews with academic researchers (law, finance, distributed ledger technologies, and interdisciplinary research) and an online survey completed by 50 respondents from academia, industry, and SMEs (55 participants total).

Early-stage research collaboration is largely informal and relies on basic tools such as email, shared folders, messaging apps, document editors, and code repositories. These tools work for small teams but become inefficient in larger, cross-institutional, or long-running projects. Common issues include fragmented workflows, manual version control, and the lack of clear records of decisions and contributions, increasing the risk of later disputes over authorship and responsibility.

Regarding research reproducibility, expectations vary across disciplines. Data-driven fields emphasise precise data snapshots, code versions, and well-documented methods, often within data-sharing constraints. In contrast, legal and conceptual research prioritises transparent reasoning and clearly tracked revisions. Despite these differences, all disciplines value clear and reliable records of work over time.

The use of decentralised research platforms remains limited. No interviewees reported direct experience with such platforms, and survey respondents indicated only moderate levels of satisfaction. Adoption appears to depend on ease of use, minimal onboarding effort, and compatibility with existing tools such as ORCID, document editors, and code repositories. Furthermore, blockchain technologies are considered necessary only when they support practical functions, such as time-stamped records, without introducing additional complexity. Finally, governance and dispute resolution are expected to remain human-led, supported by reliable records rather than automated decisions.

Overall, stakeholders prioritise interoperability, clear contribution and version records, support for sensitive data, a simple user experience, and use of decentralised technologies only where they provide clear practical value.

This deliverable fulfils the requirements of Work Package 3 (WP3), Task 3.2 – Stakeholder Engagement, as defined in the approved Technical Annex of the DeSciCoLab proposal. Stakeholder engagement activities involved a total of 55 participants, and were conducted through a combination of semi-structured interviews and an online survey. The analysis resulted in the identification of more than 20 validated insights and recommendations, which inform user needs, collaboration practices, governance expectations, and adoption conditions relevant to the

design of a decentralised platform for early-stage research collaboration. In line with the project's TRL 1 scope, these insights are exploratory and provide structured input for subsequent design and specification activities in WP4 (Wireframe Development) and **WP5 (Technical Specifications and Roadmap)**.

2. Objectives and Scope of Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement plays a central role in DeSciCoLab, as the project aims to define the conceptual foundations of a decentralised platform for early-stage research collaboration. Given the exploratory nature of the project and its positioning at TRL 1, understanding how researchers currently collaborate, where they encounter friction, and what they realistically expect from new digital tools is essential.

Rather than starting from predefined technical assumptions, DeSciCoLab places stakeholder input at the core of its analytical and design activities. Engagement with researchers allows the project to capture real-world practices, constraints, and disciplinary differences that would not be visible through desk research alone. In this sense, stakeholder engagement is not treated as a validation exercise at the end of the process, but as a formative activity that shapes how problems are framed and how potential solutions are conceptualised.

The stakeholder engagement activities directly support the objectives of **WP3**, which focuses on analysing the state of the art and identifying user needs and requirements for decentralised research collaboration. Insights explained in this deliverable contribute to a clearer understanding of current collaboration workflows, governance expectations, and adoption barriers across disciplines.

By systematically gathering and analysing stakeholder perspectives, this work informs subsequent work packages, particularly **WP4 (Wireframe Development)** and **WP5 (Technical Specifications and Roadmap)**. The findings help ensure that design and architectural choices are grounded in user experience rather than abstract assumptions, and that the project's conceptual outputs remain aligned with practical research realities.

More broadly, stakeholder engagement supports the overall project objective of developing a credible, user-centred blueprint for a future decentralised collaboration platform that reflects the needs of diverse research communities.

The scope of stakeholder engagement within DeSciCoLab is intentionally focused on **early-stage research collaboration**, rather than later phases such as publication, peer review, or research commercialisation. The engagement activities prioritise understanding how collaborations are initiated, coordinated, and managed before formal outputs are produced.

Given the project's timeline and TRL-1 scope, stakeholder input is exploratory rather than exhaustive. The interviews and surveys aim to surface patterns, tensions, and recurring needs rather than to produce statistically representative findings. It is assumed that participants speak from their own disciplinary and institutional contexts, and that their experiences may not fully generalise across all research fields.

These limitations are acknowledged explicitly and do not detract from the value of the findings. Instead, they reflect the project's role in laying conceptual groundwork that can be refined and expanded in future phases.

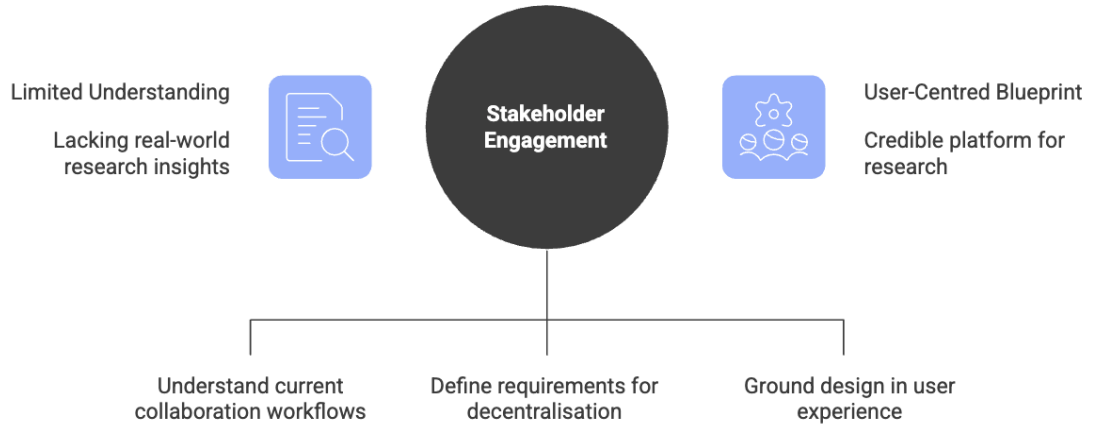


Figure 1: Stakeholder Engagement Driving DeSciCoLab

3. Methodology

3.1 Stakeholder Identification and Selection Criteria

Stakeholders were selected based on their active involvement in research collaboration and their ability to reflect critically on existing workflows and challenges. The primary focus was on academic researchers across different disciplines, career stages, and institutional environments.

Selection criteria included:

- Direct experience with early-stage research collaboration
- Exposure to cross-institutional or interdisciplinary work
- Familiarity with issues related to data sharing, attribution, or governance

The aim was not to maximise the number of participants, but to ensure diversity of perspectives and depth of insight.

3.2 Engagement Methods

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to capture both detailed qualitative insights and broader patterns. The methods were chosen to balance depth, flexibility, and feasibility within the project's scope.

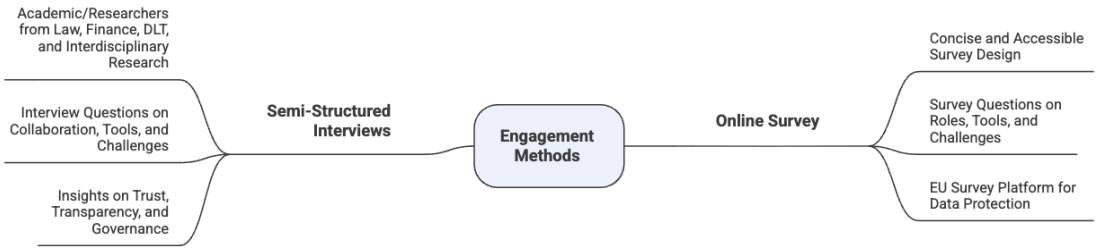


Figure 2: Engagement methods in Research Collaboration Study

3.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary qualitative engagement method to capture in-depth insights into how researchers currently initiate, manage, and experience early-stage research collaboration. This approach was particularly well suited to the project's exploratory scope, as it allowed interviewees to describe their workflows, constraints, and expectations in their own terms, while still ensuring coverage of key thematic areas relevant to DeSciCoLab.

The interviews were conducted with academic researchers across **law, finance, distributed ledger technologies, and interdisciplinary research**, and included both senior academics and early-career researchers. This diversity made it possible to surface not only common challenges, but also discipline-specific differences in collaboration practices, data handling, and perceptions of decentralised approaches.

Interview questions focused on:

- how collaborations are typically initiated and coordinated,
- tools currently used for communication, writing, and data sharing,
- challenges related to version control, attribution, and trust,
- expectations around reproducibility and transparency,
- views on decentralised governance and dispute resolution,
- perceived barriers to adopting new collaboration platforms.

The semi-structured format proved valuable in allowing interviewees to move beyond surface descriptions and reflect on underlying issues, such as informal reliance on trust, the effort required to document decisions retrospectively, and the tension between transparency and institutional or licensing constraints. Several interviewees also raised topics unprompted, including switching costs, long-term sustainability of research infrastructures, and the importance of legitimacy and procedural fairness in governance decisions.

Insights from the interviews form the core qualitative evidence base for this deliverable. They informed the identification of recurring patterns, disciplinary differences, and design-relevant

requirements that are synthesised in later sections and carried forward into platform design and specification activities.

3.2.2 Online Surveys

Online surveys were used to complement the qualitative interviews by capturing **structured input from a broader group of stakeholders** and by examining whether themes acknowledged in the interviews are reflected more widely. The survey was designed to be concise and accessible, recognising the limited time availability of researchers, while still allowing for meaningful feedback on collaboration practices and expectations.

The survey collected information on:

- respondents' roles and areas of expertise,
- tools and workflows used in early-stage research collaboration,
- perceived challenges related to coordination, reproducibility, and data sharing,
- attitudes toward transparency, attribution, and trust,
- expectations and concerns related to decentralised or blockchain-based collaboration platforms.

The survey responses gathered provide **additional support for patterns identified through the interviews**, particularly with regard to reliance on familiar tools, fragmented collaboration workflows, and cautious attitudes toward adopting new platforms unless they clearly reduce effort or address concrete problems. The structured nature of the survey also allows for comparison across roles and disciplines, supporting the identification of common priorities as well as areas where perspectives diverge.

Survey findings are used in this deliverable to **reinforce and contextualise the qualitative insights**, rather than to produce statistically representative conclusions. This approach is consistent with the exploratory scope of DeSciCoLab and supports the identification of validated insights that can inform design and specification activities in subsequent work packages.

The online survey was hosted on **EU Survey**, the official web-based survey management platform provided by the European Commission. Using EU Survey ensured compliance with European data protection standards and supported secure collection and storage of responses. The platform allowed the project to design an anonymous questionnaire, manage responses centrally, and export data in a structured format for analysis. The use of EU Survey also aligned with the project's commitment to responsible data handling and transparency, while offering a familiar and trusted environment for participants from European research institutions.

3.3 Data Collection, Analysis, and Validation Approach

Data collection combined qualitative and structured inputs gathered through semi-structured interviews and online surveys. Interviews were conducted using a common interview guide to ensure consistency across participants, while still allowing flexibility to explore discipline-specific

experiences and emerging topics. Survey responses were collected through an online questionnaire designed to capture comparable information across respondents.

The analysis focused on **understanding stakeholder experiences in context**, rather than mechanically coding responses. Interview transcripts and notes were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring themes, shared challenges, and meaningful differences across disciplines and career stages. Particular attention was paid to issues that appeared consistently across multiple interviews, such as coordination overhead, attribution challenges, data-sharing constraints, and expectations around trust and governance.

Survey responses were analysed in parallel to examine whether these qualitative patterns were reflected more broadly. Rather than treating survey results as standalone evidence, they were used to **support, nuance, or challenge** insights emerging from the interviews. This cross-checking helped reduce reliance on isolated viewpoints and strengthened confidence in the findings presented.

Validation was achieved through **triangulation across methods**, comparing interview narratives with survey trends and assessing internal consistency across responses. Where perspectives diverged, these differences were retained and explicitly discussed, as they often reflected legitimate disciplinary or contextual variation rather than inconsistencies. This approach ensured that the resulting insights are grounded, balanced, and relevant for informing subsequent design and specification activities.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Anonymisation

All stakeholder engagement activities were conducted in line with accepted ethical research practices and applicable data protection requirements. Participation in both interviews and surveys was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the DeSciCoLab project and the intended use of their input.

Semi-structured interviews were treated as identifiable at the point of collection. Where interviewees provided explicit consent for attribution, their names and affiliations are disclosed in Section 5.1 and Annex I. In all other analysis and reporting, findings are presented in aggregated or paraphrased form to protect confidentiality.

The online survey was designed to be **anonymous**, and no mandatory personal identifiers were collected. However, some respondents chose to voluntarily include contextual details—such as institutional affiliation, geographic location, or professional background—in open-ended responses. These details are treated as self-disclosed information and are used only at an aggregated level to support contextual interpretation (for example, identifying disciplinary or institutional patterns), without linking responses to identifiable individuals.

Survey data are analysed and reported in a way that avoids singling out specific respondents, even where affiliations or locations are mentioned. All data are stored securely and used exclusively for analytical purposes within the scope of the project, in accordance with GDPR principles.

By combining anonymisation, aggregation, and careful contextual handling of self-disclosed information, the project ensures that stakeholder contributions are respected and protected while still allowing meaningful insights to be drawn.

4. Overview of Stakeholders Engaged

This section provides an overview of the stakeholders engaged in the study, outlining the categories of participants involved and their relevance to early-stage research collaboration. It summarises the profiles of interviewees and survey respondents whose perspectives inform the subsequent qualitative and quantitative analyses.

4.1 Stakeholder Categories

Two main stakeholder categories were engaged in this study: academic interviewees and survey respondents. Together, these groups provide complementary qualitative and quantitative perspectives on early-stage research collaboration.

Academic Interviewees

This category draws on insights from five semi-structured interviews conducted with academic researchers representing diverse disciplines, institutional contexts, and career stages. The interviewees were selected to reflect variation in research practices, data sensitivity, and familiarity with digital and decentralised technologies, while all being actively engaged in early-stage research collaboration.

Survey Respondents

The second stakeholder category consists of survey respondents from academic, industry, and SME contexts, reflecting a broader range of perspectives beyond the academic interview sample. These respondents contribute quantitative evidence on research practices, challenges, and platform requirements, complementing the in-depth qualitative insights presented in Section 5.

4.2 Disciplinary and Institutional Profiles

In total, the study engaged 55 participants across two data collection methods. This included five academic stakeholders who participated in semi-structured interviews and 50 respondents who completed the survey. Interview participants were exclusively academic researchers, while survey respondents represented a broader mix of academic, industry, and SME roles across multiple disciplinary backgrounds. Detailed demographic and disciplinary breakdowns of survey respondents are presented in Section 6.1.

5. Qualitative Findings – Academic Interviews

5.1 Profile of Interviewed Academic Stakeholders

This section draws on insights from **five semi-structured interviews** conducted with academic researchers representing diverse disciplines, institutional contexts, and career stages. The

interviewees were selected to reflect variation in research practices, data sensitivity, and familiarity with digital and decentralised technologies**,** while all being actively engaged in early-stage research collaboration.

The interviewed stakeholders were:

- **Ioannis Revolidis**, Director of the Centre for Distributed Ledger Technologies and Lecturer in Media, Communications & Technology Law at the University of Malta
- **Dimitris Kogias**, Senior Researcher at the University of West Attica and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
- **Apostolos Kourtis**, Associate Professor in Finance at Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia
- **Dr Ifigenia Georgiou**, Associate Professor in the Department of Accounting, Economics, and Finance at the University of Nicosia's School of Business
- **Lambis Dionysopoulos**, PhD candidate in Finance at Henley Business School, University of Reading**,** and Visiting PhD Researcher at the Department of Informatics, King's College London

Collectively, the interviewees span **law, finance, distributed ledger technologies, and interdisciplinary research**, and include both **senior academics and early-career researchers**. This diversity provides a nuanced view of how early-stage research collaboration is currently organised, the constraints faced across disciplines, and the varying expectations placed on transparency, reproducibility, governance, and technological adoption.

While none of the interviewees reported systematic use of existing Decentralised Science (DeSci) platforms, all demonstrated **high awareness of collaboration challenges**, particularly regarding attribution, version control, data access, and trust. Their perspectives therefore offer a grounded and credible basis for identifying user needs and design requirements relevant to the conceptual development of the DeSciCoLab platform.

5.2 Current Practices in Early-Stage Research Collaboration

Across disciplines, early-stage research collaboration remains **highly informal and relationship-driven**. Collaborations are typically initiated through:

- Personal networks and prior co-authorships
- Conferences, workshops, and seminars
- Direct outreach via email following relevant publications

As one interviewee noted, collaborations often begin "**through personal networks, email exchanges, or academic conferences**," with coordination handled via "**OneDrive, Google Docs, and Slack or Microsoft Teams**" .

Similarly, finance academics described workflows centred around **email, shared folders, and discipline-specific tools**, with one researcher stating:

“We exchange Word files and excel files through e-mail.”

Despite differences in tooling (e.g. Overleaf and GitHub in finance, Word documents in legal research), a common pattern emerged: **collaboration depends heavily on trust, manual coordination, and fragmented tools**, rather than on integrated systems designed for early-stage research work.

5.3 Key Challenges and Pain Points

Fragmentation and Coordination Overhead

A recurring issue across interviews was the **lack of a single, coherent environment** for managing early research collaboration. Interviewees highlighted:

- Long and difficult-to-follow email threads
- Delayed responses due to time zones and competing academic duties
- Manual effort required to track versions, decisions, and contributions

One interviewee described the process as ***“fragmented and reliant on informal understandings and individual diligence rather than structured tooling”*** **.**

Attribution and Contribution Tracking

Concerns around who contributed what, and when**,** were especially prominent. An interviewee noted difficulties in ***“verifying each partner’s contribution and when this took place”*** **,** while others emphasised the lack of reliable early-stage records to support authorship claims or resolve disputes later.

Data Access and Sharing Constraints

Finance researchers consistently raised licensing and institutional restrictions as a major barrier. As one senior academic explained:

“I typically work with secondary data obtained by commercial data vendors… This often means I cannot even share data with collaborators.”

This highlights the need for **flexible data handling**, where not all data can be openly shared, but provenance and methodology still need to be verifiable.

5.4 Reproducibility and Provenance Requirements

While all interviewees valued reproducibility, **its meaning varied significantly by discipline**.

- In **finance**, reproducibility focuses on versioned code, exact data snapshots, and documented filters**,** with one researcher emphasising that what matters most is **“**reliable and fast access to the exact data snapshot and code used in a project**” .**
- Another finance academic stressed the importance of tracking ***“****the download date from Refinitiv, exactly how I filtered the sample, and examples of tricky coding calls****” .***

- In legal research**,** reproducibility is less about data replication and more about transparency of reasoning and conceptual development**.** As one interviewee explained, reproducibility relies on ***"****citation practices, footnoting, and peer review, rather than technical provenance tools****" .***

This diversity suggests that a future platform must support **multiple reproducibility models**, rather than imposing a single, data-centric approach.

5.5 Views on DeSci Platforms and Blockchain-Based Collaboration

None of the interviewees reported active use of existing DeSci platforms. The reasons varied:

- **Lack of awareness** ("*I was not aware they existed*")
- **Low adoption within their discipline**
- **Concerns about switching costs and learning effort**

However, there was **conditional openness** to adoption. Interviewees consistently stated that they would consider a new platform if it:

- Solves real, existing pain points
- Integrates seamlessly with tools they already use
- Makes blockchain ***"****invisible to the user****"*** rather than a focal point

As one interviewee put it:

"Blockchain on its own is not a compelling selling point… If it reduces friction around collaboration, provenance, and reproducibility, adoption becomes realistic."

5.6 Governance, Trust, and Dispute Resolution

Interviewees expressed caution toward fully automated governance mechanisms. While decentralisation and immutability were seen as useful for **record-keeping**, most favoured **human-led decision-making** for disputes and retractions.

Suggestions included:

- Hybrid models combining expert panels with transparent records
- Community involvement supported by clear procedures
- Separation between evidence preservation and judgment

One interviewee summarised this balance clearly:

"A platform could support such processes by preserving reliable evidence… but ultimate decisions should remain with identifiable human bodies operating under transparent rules."

5.7 Cross-Cutting Patterns and Disciplinary Differences

Across all interviews, early-stage research collaboration was consistently described as informal, relationship-driven, and heavily reliant on trust rather than on dedicated collaboration infrastructures. Regardless of discipline or career stage, interviewees reported initiating collaborations primarily through personal networks, conferences, and direct outreach, with coordination managed through a patchwork of generic tools such as email, shared folders, and messaging applications. While these practices are familiar and functional, they were widely perceived as inefficient when collaborations grow in complexity or span multiple institutions.

A shared concern across disciplines relates to the difficulty of maintaining clear records of contributions, decisions, and versions at early stages of collaboration. Interviewees highlighted that attribution and traceability are often addressed only retrospectively, typically when preparing submissions or responding to disputes, rather than being supported throughout the research process. This gap was seen as a source of friction and risk, particularly in multi-author projects or when research evolves over extended periods.

At the same time, the interviews revealed important disciplinary differences in how reproducibility and transparency are understood. In finance and data-driven research, reproducibility is closely linked to access to precise data snapshots, filtering decisions, and versioned code. Interviewees in these fields emphasised the need to document "what data was used, when, and how," while recognising that licensing constraints frequently prevent the direct sharing of raw datasets. In contrast, legal scholarship places less emphasis on data replication and more on the transparency of reasoning, conceptual development, and interpretative choices. For legal researchers, versioned drafts and time-stamped records of substantive revisions were considered more relevant than technical provenance mechanisms.

Perspectives also diverged with respect to decentralised governance and automation. While several interviewees saw value in decentralised or hybrid governance models—particularly for preserving evidence and increasing transparency—there was broad caution against fully automated decision-making in cases of disputes or retractions. Across disciplines, legitimacy, procedural fairness, and expert judgment were viewed as essential, with technology expected to support these processes rather than replace them.

Despite these differences, there was strong convergence around adoption conditions. Interviewees consistently stressed that any new collaboration platform must integrate seamlessly with existing academic infrastructure, such as ORCID, discipline-specific repositories, and familiar writing or version-control tools. Blockchain technology, while understood and in some cases appreciated, was not seen as a sufficient driver of adoption on its own. Instead, interviewees emphasised that the technology should remain largely invisible to users and deliver clear, immediate benefits by reducing coordination overhead, improving provenance tracking, and lowering the effort required to manage collaboration.

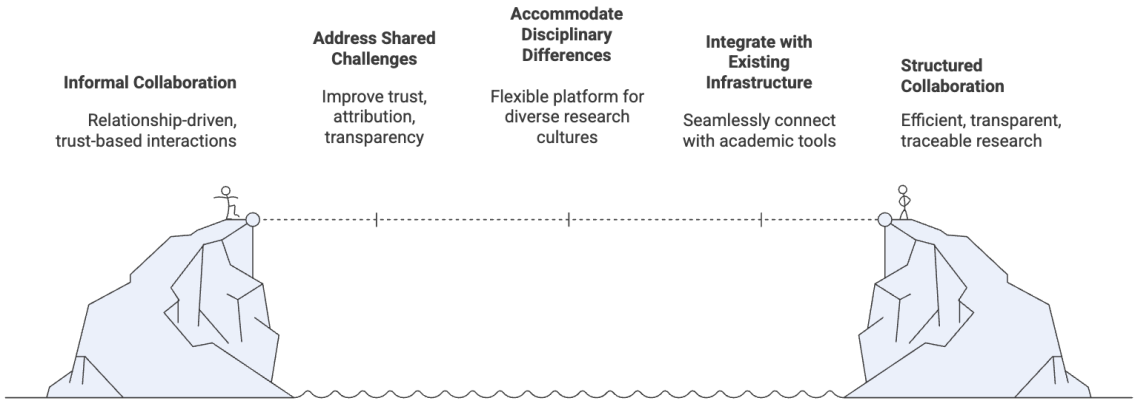


Figure 3: Transforming Early-Stage Research Collaboration

Taken together, these findings highlight both the **shared structural challenges** of early-stage research collaboration and the **context-sensitive requirements** that vary by discipline. They underline the importance of designing a flexible, modular platform that accommodates different research cultures while addressing common pain points related to trust, attribution, and transparency. These cross-cutting patterns and differences directly inform the design principles and architectural assumptions developed in subsequent work packages.

6. Quantitative and Structured Findings – Surveys

6.1 Profile of Respondents

This section is based on the analysis of 50 survey questionnaire responses from participants across academic, industry, and SME settings. As shown in Table 1 below, the sample encompasses a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds, with respondents primarily drawn from Engineering and Technology (47%) and the Social Sciences (34%), with more limited representation from the Life Sciences (6%) and other interdisciplinary fields, such as Finance and IT (13%).

Table 1: Respondents' Primary Field of Expertise

Field	%
Engineering & Technology	47%
Social Sciences	34%
Life Sciences	6%
Other	13%

With respect to professional experience, the sample was relatively senior. The largest proportion of respondents reported more than 10 years of experience in their field (42.9%), followed by those with 6–10 years of experience (28.6%). Early- and mid-career researchers with 0–2 years (10.2%) and 3–5 years (18.4%) of experience were also represented.

Regarding gender, the respondent sample comprised 56% male and 40% female participants, while a small proportion (4%) preferred not to disclose their gender.

Finally, respondents were geographically diverse. The largest proportion were based in Greece (20,4%), followed by Cyprus (16,3%) and the United Kingdom (14,3%). The remaining participants (49%) were distributed across a range of other European and non-European countries, including India, Malta, Nigeria, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, France, and Iran, reflecting the international scope of the sample.

Table 2: Respondents' Geographical Distribution

Country	%
Greece	20,4%
Cyprus	16,3%
United Kingdom	14,3%
Other	49%

6.2 Research Practices & Tools

Respondents reported using a mix of established research collaboration tools and emerging DeSci platforms, often in combination. Widely used tools such as **GitHub**, **GitLab**, **Zenodo**, and **Overleaf** featured prominently across responses.

About half of the respondents (45%) reported having used platforms explicitly identified as DeSci platforms most commonly **ResearchHub** and **VitaDAO**. Other DeSci platforms, including Molecule, NobleBlocks, and Scienceroot, were mentioned less frequently and were used primarily by respondents who also reported using the more commonly cited DeSci platforms.

A small proportion of respondents (12%) reported that they do not currently use any research collaboration tools.

6.3 Challenges & Pain Points in Research Collaboration

Satisfaction with current research collaboration tools was moderate (M = 3.16 on a 5-point scale). Most respondents selected a neutral satisfaction level (3), while a smaller proportion reported being satisfied or very satisfied (scores of 4 or 5). A limited number of respondents indicated low satisfaction (scores of 1 or 2).

Respondents were asked to select from five predefined options regarding challenges in research collaboration. The results show that difficulty finding collaborators was reported most frequently (53.1%), followed by lack of transparency in data sharing (46.9%), limited access to funding opportunities (44.9%), concerns about data security or intellectual property (42.9%), and inefficient communication (38.8%). Many respondents selected multiple options, indicating that these challenges were frequently experienced in combination.

In participants' open-text responses, fragmented communication and version control emerged as recurring themes. Respondents frequently described research data, code, manuscripts, and feedback being distributed across multiple, non-interoperable tools (e.g. institutional servers, GitHub, Overleaf, email, and messaging platforms). This fragmentation was reported to make it difficult to track changes, manage versions, and clearly attribute contributions, particularly in collaborations spanning institutions and time zones. Several respondents further noted challenges related to the absence of standardized collaboration platforms, unclear data-sharing and authorship agreements, onboarding barriers, and concerns about the confidentiality and interoperability of existing tools.

Table 3: Reported Challenges in Research Collaboration

Challenge	%
Difficulty finding collaborators	53.1%
Lack of transparency in data sharing	46.9%
Limited access to funding opportunities	44.9%
Concerns about data security / intellectual property	42.9%
Inefficient communication	38.8%

Note: Respondents could select multiple challenges.

6.4 Evaluation of Platform Features

Satisfaction with current research collaboration tools was assessed among respondents who reported using at least one such platform (n = 44). Overall satisfaction was moderate (M = 3.3 on a 5-point scale). Nearly half of respondents selected a neutral satisfaction level (3), while approximately one third reported being satisfied or very satisfied (scores of 4 or 5). No respondents reported very low satisfaction (score of 1).

Reported Strengths

Across open-text responses, one of the most frequently reported strengths of these tools was transparency in research collaboration. While respondents described a lack of transparency in data sharing and coordination as a major challenge in current research practice, they also highlighted clearer visibility of research processes, contributions, and outputs as a key benefit of collaborative platforms. This included support for verifiable attribution and provenance, which participants associated with greater trust and stronger ownership and control over research outputs compared to more centralised or proprietary systems.

Another recurring theme related to collaboration and version control. Respondents highlighted practical benefits such as real-time collaboration, clear version histories, reduced duplication of documents, and easier tracking of changes across projects. These features were considered

particularly useful for collaborative writing, code-based work, and coordination within distributed research teams. Some participants also noted benefits at the community level, including quicker feedback outside traditional publication processes and opportunities for early-stage collaboration.

Reported Limitations and Pain Points

Despite these strengths, respondents listed several limitations. A prominent concern was the limited adoption and low maturity of DeSci platforms, which reduces their usefulness for mainstream research collaboration. Limited awareness and technical knowledge among colleagues and insufficient communication or outreach were also frequently mentioned.

Another common challenge related to integration with existing academic systems. Respondents noted that research-collaboration platforms often do not connect well with institutional repositories, publication workflows, researcher identifiers (e.g., ORCID) and peer-review processes, making them difficult to incorporate into everyday research practices.

Respondents also raised concerns about usability and technical complexity, describing interfaces as difficult to navigate and noting steep learning curves, particularly for researchers without technical backgrounds or prior exposure to blockchain-related concepts.

Additional limitations mentioned by some respondents included onboarding difficulties, unclear incentive structures and governance, usability and performance issues, concerns about data privacy, and the lack of more advanced features (e.g., AI support better aligned with research workflows). Finally, a small number of participants also reported limited experience with platforms or indicated that they do not currently use them.

Importance of Platform Features

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the following features for a research collaboration platform on a 5-point scale (1 = not important, 5 = very important).

- **Transparent data sharing and access:** Respondents rated this feature as highly important, with an average score of **4.44 out of 5**. Most participants assigned ratings of 4 or 5, indicating strong agreement on its importance for research collaboration.
- **Secure storage of research data:** Respondents rated this feature as highly important, with an average importance score of **4.38 out of 5**.
- **Immutable record of contributions:** Respondents rated this feature as important, with an average importance score of **4.00 out of 5.**
- **Decentralized peer review process:** Respondents rated this feature as moderately important, with an average importance score of **3.34 out of 5.**
- **Access to funding opportunities:** Respondents rated this feature as important to highly important, with an average importance score of **4.10 out of 5.**
- **User-friendly Interface:** Respondents rated this feature as important to highly important, with an average importance score of **4.38 out of 5.**

- **Integration with existing tools:** Respondents rated this feature as important to highly important, with an average importance score of **4.02 out of 5.**
- **Portable credentials for reviews/replication:** Respondents rated this feature as moderately to highly important, with an average importance score of **3.63 out of 5.**
- **Automatically captured provenance:** Respondents rated this feature as moderately important, with an average importance score of **3.55 out of 5.**

Table 2 below presents the importance ratings of research collaboration platform features in descending order of average score. Transparent data sharing and access, user-friendly interface, and secure storage of research data emerged as the highest-rated features, each receiving an average importance score above 4.3.

Table 4: Importance Ratings of Research Collaboration Platform Features

Feature	Average Importance Score (1–5)
Transparent data sharing and access	4.44
User-friendly interface	4.38
Secure storage of research data	4.38
Access to funding opportunities	4.10
Integration with existing tools (e.g., ResearchGate, ORCID)	4.02
Immutable record of contributions	4.00
Portable credentials for reviews/replication	3.63
Automatically captured provenance	3.55
Decentralized peer review process	3.34

6.5 Desired Functionalities and Suggestions for a DeSci Platform

This section synthesises respondents' expectations, adoption drivers, and unmet needs related to DeSci collaboration platforms.

Intended Use Cases and Research Activities

Participants indicated that they would primarily use a decentralized research platform for collaborative project planning (72%), data sharing and management (62%), peer review and validation (60%), and accessing funding opportunities (64%), all of which were selected by a majority of respondents. Collaborative project planning and data sharing and management were among the most frequently selected use cases.

Publishing and disseminating research outputs (42%), as well as finding collaborators or research partners, were also highlighted as important use cases by a substantial proportion of respondents. Overall, responses suggest that participants view decentralized platforms as supporting both core research collaboration activities and broader functions such as

coordination, dissemination, networking, and funding across the research lifecycle, often within a single integrated environment.

Table 5: Most Intended Use Cases for a DeSci Platform

Intended Use Case	%
Collaborative project planning	72%
Accessing funding opportunities	64%
Data sharing and management	62%
Peer review and validation	60%
Publishing and disseminating research outputs	42%

Note: Respondents could select multiple use cases.

Adoption Drivers and Decision Factors

Ease of onboarding (69.4%) and integration with existing tools (69.4%) were the most influential factors in participants' decisions to adopt a decentralized research platform. These were closely followed by likelihood of recommendation by peers (55.1%) and institutional endorsement (55.1%), highlighting the importance of both usability and social or institutional validation. Overall, adoption decisions reflected a combination of practical considerations and confidence in peer and institutional support.

Table 6: Top Adoption Drivers for a DeSci Platform

Adoption Driver	%
Ease of onboarding	69.4%
Integration with existing tools	69.4%
Recommendation by peers	55.1%
Institutional endorsement	55.1%

Note: Respondents could select multiple factors.

Adoption Barriers and Concerns

Concerns most frequently focused on ease of use and practical adoption. Some highlighted technical complexity and the learning curve for researchers unfamiliar with blockchain, as well as difficulties onboarding non-technical users. Data protection and GDPR compliance were also common concerns, particularly around handling sensitive or personal data. Several respondents noted poor integration with existing research tools and institutional systems, which they felt could increase barriers instead of improving workflows. Other concerns included cost, access to

or control over funding and platform entry points, security and confidentiality of data, and performance issues such as speed and scalability. At the same time, a number of respondents reported having no concerns.

Platform Requirements and Desired Functionalities

Respondents most frequently identified verifiable contribution tracking and provenance among the most valuable functionalities, including immutable records of datasets, analyses, document versions, and authorship linked to verified researcher identities. Transparency and auditability, alongside secure data sharing and access controls, were repeatedly emphasised as essential for trust, attribution, and protection of intellectual contributions.

A second key priority was interoperability with existing research tools and infrastructures (e.g. GitHub, Overleaf, Zenodo, ORCID, institutional repositories), enabling integrated workflows for data, code, and documentation. Participants also highlighted the importance of version control, and collaboration features to support research teams.

Additional recurring functionalities included funding-related features (e.g. decentralised funding mechanisms), researcher discovery tools, project and task management capabilities, and governance mechanisms. Some respondents also emphasised the importance of openness, user autonomy, a user-friendly interface, and free access to research outputs.

Missing Capabilities in Existing Tools

Participants were asked to identify features missing from existing research collaboration tools. Responses most often pointed to the lack of end-to-end, verifiable audit trails and provenance, including automated links between research outputs, contributions, funding, and project deliverables.

Several respondents also highlighted the absence of systems that can encode and enforce collaboration agreements, such as authorship, data access, funding distribution, and credit allocation, without relying on informal or manual processes. In addition, they noted poor cross-platform interoperability, particularly the lack of real-time synchronization across repositories, publishers, funding platforms, and institutional systems while preserving version control and provenance.

Other missing capabilities included reputation-based contribution and peer-review systems, stronger protection of unpublished ideas, and fine-grained control over data confidentiality. Overall, these responses show that existing tools do not adequately support trust, clear credit for contributions, or reliable collaboration rules across the research process.

Usability, Accessibility, and Devices

Respondents considered a user-friendly interface to be highly important. Nearly half rated it as essential (49.0%), and a further 40.8% rated it as very important, while only a small proportion (10.2%) considered it somewhat important or not important.

Furthermore, they overwhelmingly indicated that they would primarily access the platform via desktop or laptop computers (100%), with a smaller proportion also using smartphones (26.5%) and tablets (26.5%) alongside desktop devices.

Most respondents reported no specific accessibility requirements beyond standard web accessibility practices. However, among those who did identify needs, common preferences included adjustable text size, clear visual hierarchy, sufficient color contrast, and screen reader compatibility.

Institutional, Ethical, and Regulatory Constraints

Respondents most frequently reported institutional policies and ethics approval requirements as applicable constraints affecting their research, often in combination. Jurisdictional or legal constraints were also cited by a substantial number of participants. A smaller group of respondents indicated that no formal constraints currently apply to their research.

Furthermore, respondents reported that research involving human participants or personal data typically requires approval from an institutional ethics committee. Compliance with data protection regulations, primarily GDPR under UK and EU frameworks, alongside institutional policies on data management, data sharing, and cloud use, was also commonly required. In addition, respondents noted that certain projects are subject to additional national regulations or specific requirements linked to funding programmes such as Horizon Europe. For cross-border collaborations, the need for formal data transfer agreements was frequently highlighted.

6.6 Summary of Key Findings and Implications

Research collaboration was widely reported as challenging due to fragmented workflows, limited transparency, and poor coordination across tools. Respondents frequently described difficulties with version control, verifiable contribution tracking, and managing research materials distributed across multiple platforms, including GitHub, Overleaf, institutional systems, and email. These challenges were particularly pronounced in cross-institutional and international collaborations.

Across both closed- and open-ended responses, transparent data sharing, secure storage of research data, and a user-friendly interface emerged as the most highly valued platform features. Integration with existing research tools and infrastructures was also identified as a key priority, reflecting the importance of fitting new platforms into established research workflows. Clear and verifiable attribution of contributions was consistently associated with trust, accountability, and stronger ownership over research outputs, whereas features such as decentralised peer review and more advanced provenance mechanisms were viewed as secondary to everyday usability and coordination needs.

Adoption of decentralised research platforms was primarily driven by practical considerations, particularly ease of onboarding, compatibility with existing tools, and alignment with

institutional systems. Peer uptake and institutional endorsement further influenced adoption decisions, highlighting the role of social and organisational validation alongside technical functionality. Key barriers included technical complexity, low platform maturity and awareness, limited interoperability with current research infrastructures, and concerns related to data protection, ethics approval, and regulatory compliance.

Funding was both a challenge and a motivation. Limited access to funding opportunities was reported as a challenge in current research practice, while platform features supporting grant discovery and clearer links between funding and research outputs were viewed as potential incentives for adoption.

Overall, the findings suggest that DeSci platforms are more likely to be adopted if they reduce fragmentation, are easy to use, integrate with existing systems, and comply with institutional and regulatory requirements. These results provide a quantitative baseline for comparison with the qualitative interview findings.

7. Cross-Method Synthesis and Validated Insights

This section synthesizes qualitative insights from academic interviews with quantitative evidence from survey responses to provide a consolidated view of current early-stage research collaboration practices, challenges, and user needs. Survey and interview findings point to the same core issues in research collaboration and largely reinforce each other. The key points are as follows:

1) **Research collaboration remains informal and fragmented.**

Interviewees described early-stage collaboration as relationship-driven and coordinated through email, shared folders, and generic tools. Survey open-text responses similarly highlighted fragmented workflows across multiple platforms. These approaches are workable at small scale but are perceived as increasingly inefficient as projects expand, span institutions, or extend over time.

2) **Weak record-keeping increases risks around attribution and accountability.**

Both interviewees and survey respondents emphasised difficulties in tracking who contributed what and when. Attribution is often resolved late in the process, increasing friction in multi-author and long-running projects. Consistent with this, survey respondents rated transparent data sharing and contribution records as highly important platform features.

3) **Tool fragmentation drives coordination overhead and version-control problems.**

Across both datasets, research materials (data, code, drafts, and feedback) were described as distributed across email, GitHub, Overleaf, cloud storage, and messaging platforms. This

fragmentation complicates version control, slows coordination across time zones, and makes it harder to maintain traceable decision histories and contribution records.

4) **Reproducibility expectations differ by discipline, but transparency is a shared priority.**

Interviews highlighted discipline-specific models of reproducibility: data-driven fields emphasised exact data snapshots, filters, and code versions (often under licensing constraints), while legal and conceptual research prioritised transparent reasoning and tracked revisions. Survey results indicate broad agreement on the importance of transparency and secure, reliable records over time.

5) **Interest in decentralised research platforms exists, but adoption remains cautious.**

None of the interviewees reported active use of DeSci platforms, though most expressed conditional openness if key pain points are addressed. In the survey, around half of respondents reported experience with DeSci platforms, with overall satisfaction remaining moderate. Reported benefits centred on transparency, contribution tracking, and version control, while barriers included low maturity, usability challenges, and limited integration with academic systems.

6) **Blockchain is not a driver of adoption; usability and integration are.**

Across both methods, blockchain was not viewed as a sufficient value proposition on its own. Adoption was consistently linked to ease of onboarding, seamless interoperability with existing tools and institutional infrastructure, and a user experience in which blockchain functionality is largely invisible.

7) **Governance and dispute resolution are expected to involve human oversight.**

Interviewees valued immutable records for evidence preservation but expressed clear caution toward fully automated governance in disputes or retractions. Survey responses were consistent with this cautious stance, reflected in the relatively lower importance assigned to decentralised peer review and recurring concerns about governance maturity.

8) **Funding is both a collaboration challenge and a platform adoption incentive.**

Across the survey findings, limited access to funding opportunities emerged as a recurring challenge, while access to funding was also one of the most important intended uses of a future DeSci platform. This suggests that funding-related functions are not peripheral, but could play an important role in platform relevance and adoption, especially if they are linked clearly to collaboration activities and research outputs.

8. From Stakeholder Insights to Platform Design and Exploitable Results

8.1 Overview and Purpose

This section translates insights from the academic interviews and survey responses into concrete implications for platform design and implementation. Drawing on the cross-method synthesis in Section 7, it explains how observed collaboration practices, challenges, and adoption conditions inform the design of the platform wireframes (WP4) and the definition of the technical specifications and development roadmap (WP5). The goal is to ensure that both the user-facing design and the underlying technical architecture respond directly to documented stakeholder needs and operate within existing institutional and regulatory constraints.

8.2 Implications for Platform Wireframes (WP4)

The cross-method findings indicate that the DeSci platform wireframes should prioritise support for everyday early-stage research practices rather than introducing complex or technology-driven features that are misaligned with research practices. Instead of replacing established workflows, the interface should integrate with familiar tools, reduce fragmentation, and support coordination, attribution, and provenance throughout the research process. Flexibility is essential: the platform must accommodate different disciplinary approaches to reproducibility, support both open and restricted data environments, and preserve human-led governance and dispute resolution. From this perspective, decentralisation and blockchain-based mechanisms should function as underlying infrastructure that enables transparency and verifiable records without disrupting established academic practices.

At the wireframe level, these findings point to interfaces that follow familiar research workflows, with clear entry points for creating projects, collaborating on documents, tracking versions, and viewing contributions. Provenance and attribution should be communicated through simple visual indicators and activity histories rather than complex technical dashboards. Data access and permission settings should enable collaboration without requiring full data sharing, reflecting common licensing and institutional constraints. Integration with widely used tools, such as document editors, code repositories, and researcher identifiers, should be easy to locate and use. From a user experience perspective, the platform should minimise cognitive load and onboarding effort, while governance-related actions, such as resolving disputes or clarifying authorship, should be presented as transparent, human-led processes rather than automated decisions.

8.3 Implications for Technical Specifications and Roadmap (WP5)

According to the cross-method synthesis presented above, the following technical requirements emerge for the design and implementation of the platform:

1) **Modular system design:** Design the platform as a set of separable components (e.g. collaboration workspace, provenance records, access control, and governance support) that can be adopted incrementally and integrated into existing workflows without requiring disruptive changes to established research practices.
2) **Integration with existing research tools:** Provide APIs and connectors to enable seamless integration with commonly used tools, including document editors, code

repositories, data repositories, researcher identifiers (e.g. ORCID), and institutional systems, thereby reducing duplication and lowering adoption barriers.

3) **Built-in contribution and provenance records:** Implement persistent audit trails that link document versions, code, dataset references, and other research outputs to verified contributor identities and timestamps, supporting traceability across the research lifecycle.
4) **Support for restricted and licensed data:** Enable collaboration through metadata, provenance records, and controlled permissions when raw data cannot be shared due to licensing, ethical, or institutional constraints.
5) **Targeted use of blockchain for verification:** Apply blockchain-based mechanisms only where immutability and verification provide clear benefits, such as contribution timestamps and audit trails, while keeping these mechanisms invisible at the user interface level.
6) **Human-led governance support:** Design governance features that preserve evidence and process transparency while ensuring that disputes, retractions, and authorship decisions remain human-led.
7) **Usability and onboarding as technical priorities:** Treat usability as a core technical requirement by minimising onboarding effort, reducing configuration complexity, and ensuring system performance suitable for routine, everyday research collaboration.

Together, these requirements translate the identified user needs and adoption conditions into concrete architectural and implementation priorities for the platform.

8.4 Relationship to Key Exploitable Results (KERs)

Deliverable D18 (Stakeholder Feedback Report) is not intended to be a standalone Key Exploitable Result. Instead, it plays a supporting role by providing the evidence base on which several of the project's key results are built. The insights gathered through interviews and consultations help clarify real user needs, constraints, and expectations, and these are directly reflected in the platform concept, the wireframes, and the technical direction defined in later work packages.

Most notably, D18 feeds into **KER 4 (Stakeholder Insights & Requirements Repository)** and supports the design- and architecture-related KERs by grounding them in practical research workflows rather than abstract assumptions. The way these results are captured, managed, and eventually used is described in more detail in Deliverable D10 (IPR Management & Exploitation Plan)**,** which outlines how stakeholder-driven knowledge is treated as a core asset for future scientific, public-sector, and community use.

By keeping the project's conceptual and design outputs in the lived experiences of researchers, this deliverable helps ensure that the results of DeSciCoLab remain relevant, credible, and useful beyond the lifetime of the project. In this sense, D18 acts as a bridge between stakeholder engagement, platform design, and the project's longer-term exploitation pathway.

9. Conclusion

This deliverable presents the outcomes of the stakeholder engagement activities carried out under WP3 of the DeSciCoLab project and provides a validated overview of user needs, expectations, and challenges related to early-stage research collaboration. Through a mixed-methods approach combining semi-structured interviews and a structured online survey, the project engaged a diverse group of academic and industry stakeholders and captured both qualitative insights and quantitative trends.

The findings confirm that while existing research collaboration practices rely heavily on informal coordination and fragmented digital tools, there is a clear interest in platforms that improve transparency, attribution, coordination, and reproducibility, provided that such platforms integrate smoothly with existing workflows and respect disciplinary, legal, and governance constraints. Stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of human-centred governance, flexibility in handling restricted or licensed data, and the need for decentralised technologies to operate as enabling infrastructure rather than as an additional layer of complexity.

In line with the project's TRL 1 scope, the insights documented in this deliverable are exploratory and conceptual in nature. They do not constitute implementation-ready requirements, but rather define validated design considerations and boundary conditions that will guide subsequent project activities. As such, Deliverable D18 constitutes a completed output of WP3 and formally closes the stakeholder engagement phase of the project.

The results of this deliverable will be taken forward in the next project phases as follows:

- **WP4 – Wireframe Development:**
  Stakeholder-derived insights will inform the design of high-fidelity wireframes and user interface concepts, particularly with regard to user workflows, collaboration mechanisms, visibility of contributions, and usability expectations.

- **WP5 – Technical Specifications and Roadmap:**
  The findings will support the definition of indicative technical components, governance considerations, and architectural assumptions, as well as the development of a phased roadmap for future platform implementation.

The insights presented in this deliverable provide a structured foundation for subsequent project activities and support a coherent transition from exploratory analysis to conceptual design and technical planning. By grounding the next project phases in empirically informed stakeholder perspectives, DeSciCoLab ensures continuity across its research, design, and specification activities, while remaining aligned with the objectives, scope, and Technology Readiness Level defined in the approved Technical Annex.

Annex I – Interviews

Ioannis Revolidis, Director of the Centre for Distributed Ledger Technologies and Lecturer in Media, Communications & Technology Law at the **University of Malta**

1. **Can you describe your current process for initiating and managing early-stage research collaborations, including any tools or platforms you use, and what specific challenges you encounter in this process?***Please include details about the tools (e.g., email, ResearchGate) and specific issues (e.g., data sharing, communication delays) you face.*

As a legal academic, my research collaborations are typically initiated through established scholarly networks rather than dedicated collaboration platforms. These include prior co-authorships, conference encounters, workshops, research seminars, and direct introductions by colleagues. Early-stage collaboration is usually managed through conventional tools such as email, shared document platforms (e.g. Word with track changes, cloud-based folders), and video conferencing.

This approach reflects the current norms of legal scholarship, where research is often conceptual, interpretative, and text-driven, rather than data-intensive. While functional, this process is fragmented and relies heavily on trust, informal understandings, and individual diligence rather than structured tooling.

2. **What would make reproducibility and data verification low effort in your current workflow, and which provenance signals or checks would you consider most important?**

In legal research, reproducibility does not primarily concern experimental replication, but rather transparency of sources, reasoning, and interpretative choices. At present, this is ensured mainly through citation practices, footnoting, and peer review, rather than through technical provenance tools.

Low-effort improvements would include better version tracking of drafts, clearer documentation of conceptual contributions at early stages, and time-stamped records of substantive revisions. However, any tooling must respect the discursive and iterative nature of legal analysis, where ideas often evolve gradually rather than through discrete data-processing steps.

3. **If you have used Decentralised Science (DeSci) platforms such as ResearchHub, NobleBlocks, VitaDAO, Molecule, or Scienceroot, what has been your experience, and how could a new platform improve on these to better support your research collaboration needs?** *If you haven't used a DeSci platform, please share why (e.g., lack of awareness, complexity) and what would encourage you to try one.*

I have limited direct experience with DeSci platforms. This is largely due to their very low adoption within legal academia and regulatory research, where collaboration remains heavily institution- and journal-centred. Awareness of such platforms exists, but they are not yet embedded in the standard research infrastructure used by legal scholars.

Adoption would likely depend on whether such tools can demonstrate clear added value for legal research—particularly in relation to authorship attribution, early idea protection, or interdisciplinary collaboration—without requiring legal scholars to adopt unfamiliar technical paradigms.

4. **What specific features or functionalities would you prioritize in a blockchain-based platform to enhance transparency and trust in early-stage research collaboration?** *Consider features like immutable records, secure data sharing, or decentralized governance, and explain why these matter to you.*

From a legal academic perspective, the most valuable features of any decentralised research platform would be those that enhance clarity around authorship, contribution, and responsibility. Immutable records or time-stamped logs could be useful in documenting early intellectual input, provided they are legally intelligible and compatible with existing academic norms.

Trust in legal research is grounded less in technical guarantees and more in clear procedures, accountability, and recognised standards. Any technological layer should reinforce—not replace—these foundations.

5. **In your view, who should decide in cases of disputes or retractions, and what would neutrality look like in such decisions?**

I would be cautious about fully automated or decentralised decision-making mechanisms in the context of legal research. Questions of misconduct, authorship disputes, or retractions typically require nuanced judgment and procedural fairness.

A platform could usefully support such processes by preserving reliable evidence of contributions and changes, but ultimate decisions should remain with identifiable human bodies operating under transparent rules. From a legal standpoint, legitimacy matters as much as efficiency.

6. **How important is it for a research collaboration platform to integrate with existing tools (e.g., ResearchGate, ORCID) or be accessible across different devices, and what would make the platform intuitive and user-friendly for you?** *Please specify any preferred integrations or usability features (e.g., simple navigation, mobile access) that would enhance your experience, and share how you currently use such identifiers for attribution (e.g., ORCID, DOIs) or how verifiable credentials could support trust and recognition in collaborations.*

Integration with established identifiers such as ORCID would be essential. Legal academics are already required to operate within recognised institutional and publishing frameworks, and any new platform would need to complement—not compete with—these systems.

Ease of use is critical. Tools that require legal scholars to understand blockchain mechanics, tokenisation, or decentralised governance structures would face significant barriers to adoption.

7. **What concerns or barriers do you foresee in adopting a decentralized, blockchain-based platform for research, and how could DeSciCoLab address these to encourage widespread use among researchers?** *Consider barriers like complexity, learning curve, or data privacy, and suggest ways to overcome them (e.g., user training, clear interfaces).*

The main barriers are cultural and institutional rather than ideological. Legal academia tends to adopt new research tools slowly, particularly where they raise questions about intellectual property, confidentiality, or long-term archiving.

For a DeSci platform to gain traction among legal scholars, it would need to demonstrate compliance with academic norms, legal certainty regarding data and IP, and clear institutional acceptance.

8. **Are there any compliance, ethical, or intellectual property constraints (e.g., data protection rules, institutional approvals) that affect how or when you can share data or collaborate?**

Compliance considerations are central in legal research. Issues such as data protection, confidentiality, and intellectual property often restrict early sharing of drafts or ideas, especially in policy-relevant or commissioned work.

Any decentralised collaboration platform would need to offer granular access controls, clear ownership structures, and legally robust governance arrangements to be viable in this context.

Dimitris Kogias, Senior Researcher at the University of West Attica and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

1. **Can you describe your current process for initiating and managing early-stage research collaborations, including any tools or platforms you use, and what specific challenges you encounter in this process?***Please include details about the tools (e.g., email, ResearchGate) and specific issues (e.g., data sharing, communication delays) you face.*

Until now, most of my early-stage research collaborations begin through personal networks, email exchanges, or academic conferences, followed by informal coordination via OneDrive, Google Docs, and Slack or Microsoft Teams. While these tools are convenient, they lack traceability and version control, especially when sharing early drafts, datasets, or simulation results.

Regarding the challenges, there are delays in communication response, difficulties in verifying each partner's contribution and when this took place. Overall, the process depends heavily on trust and manual organization rather than transparent systems.

2. **What would make reproducibility and data verification low effort in your current workflow, and which provenance signals or checks would you consider most important?**

To make reproducibility and data verification low effort, I would value automated provenance tracking for datasets, hash-based verification of uploaded files to protect against any post-publication modification, use of contributor IDs (linked to ORCID for example), and timestamped ledger entries.

Things that can be handled by a blockchain backend that could improve both reproducibility and data verification dramatically without extra user burden.

3. **If you have used Decentralised Science (DeSci) platforms such as ResearchHub, NobleBlocks, VitaDAO, Molecule, or Scienceroot, what has been your experience, and how could a new platform improve on these to better support your research collaboration needs?** *If you haven't used a DeSci platform, please share why (e.g., lack of awareness, complexity) and what would encourage you to try one.*

I haven't dived into the use of DeSci platforms yet, even though it is on my plans to do so. Mainly because people that I collaborate with will not be able to follow on this. Despite that, I would be greatly intrigued to use such a platform in my next research steps.

4. **What specific features or functionalities would you prioritize in a blockchain-based platform to enhance transparency and trust in early-stage research collaboration?** *Consider features like immutable records, secure data sharing, or decentralized governance, and explain why these matter to you.*

Decentralized governance is a very important characteristic. Additionally, smart-contract agreements, immutable version control and permissioned data sharing are important features that blockchain technology can support and apply.

5. **In your view, who should decide in cases of disputes or retractions, and what would neutrality look like in such decisions?**

In case of disputes or retractions, it would be best to have a DAO that brings together community votes and expert opinions. Neutrality can be ensured through open voting records, rotating review members, and clear conflict-of-interest rules.

6. **How important is it for a research collaboration platform to integrate with existing tools (e.g., ResearchGate, ORCID) or be accessible across different devices, and what would make the platform intuitive and user-friendly for you?** *Please specify any preferred integrations or usability features (e.g., simple navigation, mobile access) that would enhance your experience, and share how you currently use such identifiers for attribution (e.g., ORCID, DOIs) or how verifiable credentials could support trust and recognition in collaborations.*

Integration with existing solutions is critical as it can heavily affect adaption rate. Especially with: ORCID for identity, ResearchGate/Google Scholar for visibility and DOI for attribution.

7. **What concerns or barriers do you foresee in adopting a decentralized, blockchain-based platform for research, and how could DeSciCoLab address these to encourage widespread use among researchers?** *Consider barriers like complexity, learning curve, or data privacy, and suggest ways to overcome them (e.g., user training, clear interfaces).*

The main barrier is related to overall blockchain adoption and compliance with data privacy regulations (e.g., GDPR). I believe that techniques like account abstraction (EIP4337) and Zero Knowledge Proofs can heavily contribute by making the blockchain layer transparent to the masses while benefitting from the many advantages it brings to the table.

8. **Are there any compliance, ethical, or intellectual property constraints (e.g., data protection rules, institutional approvals) that affect how or when you can share data or collaborate?**

There are some constraints, yes, mainly around GDPR compliance or publication restrictions imposed by institution policies. A decentralized platform should let users control who can access their data, share it only with consent, and keep automatic records for transparency and compliance.

Apostolos Kourtis, Associate Professor in Finance at Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia

1. **Can you describe your current process for initiating and managing early-stage research collaborations, including any tools or platforms you use, and what specific challenges you encounter in this process?***Please include details about the tools (e.g., email, ResearchGate) and specific issues (e.g., data sharing, communication delays) you face.*

My current process involves reaching out to potential collaborators via email, LinkedIn or academic conferences. Once we start working on the project, communication is managed mainly

via email and a shared folder (typically SharePoint). However, there can be significant challenges in this process, especially when the collaborators are in different institutions and/or time zones. These can be as simple as delayed responses due to involvement in other academic activities to more impactful challenges, such as long email threads that are hard to follow and slow data-sharing due to institutional processes.

2. **What would make reproducibility and data verification low effort in your current workflow, and which provenance signals or checks would you consider most important?**

In most of my research projects, two researchers independently verify the data and produce the results to ensure accuracy and reduce potential errors in the analysis. In this context, automatic comparisons of datasets, tables and code would be helpful. Also, automatic versioning of code and timestamped updates for each workflow stage would support a more transparent version history and help attribution of authorship.

3. **If you have used Decentralised Science (DeSci) platforms such as ResearchHub, NobleBlocks, VitaDAO, Molecule, or Scienceroot, what has been your experience, and how could a new platform improve on these to better support your research collaboration needs?** *If you haven't used a DeSci platform, please share why (e.g., lack of awareness, complexity) and what would encourage you to try one.*

I have not used these platforms due to lack of awareness, but I would be interested in learning more about them.

4. **What specific features or functionalities would you prioritize in a blockchain-based platform to enhance transparency and trust in early-stage research collaboration?** *Consider features like immutable records, secure data sharing, or decentralized governance, and explain why these matter to you.*

I would prioritise features that increase accountability while minimising extra work. These could include immutable time-stamped records of individual contributions to project and secure data sharing facilities which are consistent with institutional requirements.

5. **In your view, who should decide in cases of disputes or retractions, and what would neutrality look like in such decisions?**

I feel this requires a hybrid approach where a field expert or panel of experts lead the decision-making process with the support of (preferably) immutable high-quality records. There is also a need for a transparent process for dealing with such issues.

6. **How important is it for a research collaboration platform to integrate with existing tools (e.g., ResearchGate, ORCID) or be accessible across different devices, and what would make the platform intuitive and user-friendly for you?** *Please specify any preferred integrations or usability features (e.g., simple navigation, mobile access) that would enhance your experience, and share how you currently use such identifiers for attribution (e.g., ORCID, DOIs) or how verifiable credentials could support trust and recognition in collaborations.*

I feel the importance of the integration of such a platform with existing tools, such as ResearchGate or ORCID depends on the discipline. In Finance, for example, platforms such as ResearchGate are not commonly used, while researchers prefer SSRN or institutional repositories for circulating their work. However, I think that integration with ORCID is more important due to its increasing use for author identification. Therefore, in terms of preferred integrations, I can see value in integration with ORCID, generally, and SSRN in my field. Other attractive features would be easy navigation and mobile access as well as dashboard-type information sharing.

7. **What concerns or barriers do you foresee in adopting a decentralized, blockchain-based platform for research, and how could DeSciCoLab address these to encourage widespread use among researchers?** *Consider barriers like complexity, learning curve, or data privacy, and suggest ways to overcome them (e.g., user training, clear interfaces).*

As personally I have a good understanding of and extensive experience with using blockchain platforms, the main barrier for me would be compliance with data vendors and institutional privacy and security regulations. More generally, the platform needs to promote ease-of-use which is often lacking in blockchain-based systems, and essentially make blockchain features invisible to the user.

Dr Ifigenia Georgiou, Associate Professor in the Department of Accounting, Economics, and Finance at the University of Nicosia's School of Business

1. **Can you describe your current process for initiating and managing early-stage research collaborations, including any tools or platforms you use, and what specific challenges you encounter in this process?***Please include details about the tools (e.g., email, ResearchGate) and specific issues (e.g., data sharing, communication delays) you face.*

I usually meet new people to collaborate with at conferences (face-to-face ones!). It usually starts with a comment that grabs my attention (or the other person's attention) during a presentation and follow up discussion during the coffee break. Or meeting someone new at the coffee break / social, and new ideas emerge from the conversation. I also collaborate a lot with

current colleagues, old colleagues from past jobs, and friends (who are in the same / neighbouring fields of course).

We usually communicate through e-mail, but also through (phone) message apps – a bit old fashioned, I know! We exchange Word files and excel files through e-mail.

2. **What would make reproducibility and data verification low effort in your current workflow, and which provenance signals or checks would you consider most important?**

I'm a Finance academic who mostly uses commercial databases like Refinitiv, plus some (carefully) hand-collected data. Anyone with database access can replicate my work if they follow the methodology in my papers (which includes descriptions on how I chose the data).

What would make reproducibility low effort: If Refinitiv let me export my exact query parameters and filters automatically, that would save a ton of time documenting everything manually. For hand-collected data, I'd want a simple way to log sources and decisions as I go, instead of trying to remember it all later when writing up the paper.

Most important provenance signals: Three things matter most: the download date from Refinitiv (the database changes over time), exactly how I filtered the sample (that's usually where replications go wrong), and for hand-collected data, examples of tricky coding calls I made so others can see my logic.

3. **If you have used Decentralised Science (DeSci) platforms such as ResearchHub, NobleBlocks, VitaDAO, Molecule, or Scienceroot, what has been your experience, and how could a new platform improve on these to better support your research collaboration needs?** *If you haven't used a DeSci platform, please share why (e.g., lack of awareness, complexity) and what would encourage you to try one.*

I haven't used any of these platforms. Honestly, I wasn't aware they existed or what they could do for my research. As I'm already stretched thin with teaching, research deadlines, and administrative work, learning a completely new system feels risky because if it doesn't work out or takes too long to figure out, that's time away from actually doing research. I'd need to see a very clear, immediate benefit that's worth the switching cost.

What would encourage me to try one: I'd consider it if: (1) there was a simple onboarding specific to finance researchers showing exactly how it helps my workflow, (2) other finance academics I trust were already using it successfully, and (3) it solved a real pain point I currently have, like making data documentation less tedious.

4. **What specific features or functionalities would you prioritize in a blockchain-based platform to enhance transparency and trust in early-stage research collaboration?** *Consider features like immutable records, secure data sharing, or decentralized governance, and explain why these matter to you.*

The features that would matter most are around proving what analysis was actually done and when. Immutable records could be useful for timestamping datasets and code before submission, making it harder to manipulate results after seeing reviewer feedback. Secure data sharing might help with making replication feasible and verifiable, so journals or other researchers can confirm they're getting the exact data I used, not a changed / manipulated version. What I'd prioritize: a system that creates an auditable trail from raw data through to published results, so if questions arise later about a paper, there's a clear record of what was done. In finance research, (most) data access is already limited by paywalls, but proving that my Refinitiv pull on a specific date matches what I reported would add credibility.

5. **In your view, who should decide in cases of disputes or retractions, and what would neutrality look like in such decisions?**

This is a fascinating topic for me because it's fundamentally a governance problem, which was my PhD focus. The current system has the classic agency problems: journals, universities, and professional associations all have reputational and financial stakes in outcomes, creating conflicts of interest. Who should decide depends on the type of issue. For clear-cut data fabrication, you need independent expert panels with no institutional ties. For disputed interpretations or methodological disagreements, the academic community through open discourse makes sense. The key is matching governance structure to the decision type. Neutrality requires three things: independence (no financial or reputational stake in the outcome), transparency (clear criteria and published reasoning), and accountability (decisions can be reviewed or appealed). You also need proper incentive alignment. Right now, everyone involved has incentives to either bury problems or overcorrect to signal virtue. The challenge is who monitors the monitors. In corporate governance, we use boards, auditors, and regulators with checks and balances. Academic research lacks this structure. I'm curious whether decentralized mechanisms could create accountability without concentrating power, but you'd still need expert judgment. Blockchain might help with transparency and creating immutable records of the process, though.

6. **How important is it for a research collaboration platform to integrate with existing tools (e.g., ResearchGate, ORCID) or be accessible across different devices, and what would make the platform intuitive and user-friendly for you?** *Please specify any preferred integrations or usability features (e.g., simple navigation, mobile access) that would enhance your experience, and share how you currently use such identifiers for*

attribution (e.g., ORCID, DOIs) or how verifiable credentials could support trust and recognition in collaborations.

Integration with existing tools is critical. I already use ORCID (passively, but it's connected to most systems I work with) and Google Scholar daily. I have ResearchGate but don't actively use it. A new platform would need to pull from these automatically, I don't have time to manually re-enter information I've already provided elsewhere. That would be a dealbreaker. ORCID and DOIs are required by journals and funding agencies I work with, and they do help unify things across systems.

For collaboration, I use email, Dropbox, Google Docs, and occasionally GitHub when journals require it (also there may be sharing restrictions from the paid database I got the data from). The platform would need to work seamlessly with these, not replace them. I work across devices, mainly my laptop for travel and a desktop at work for running models and accessing Refinitiv, which has licensing and compatibility issues with my MacBook. Mobile access matters for communication and reviewing documents when I'm traveling for conferences or Erasmus teaching, but I can't do actual analysis work on a phone or tablet. I need screen space.

Usability features that matter: Simple navigation and not making me learn a complicated new system. My biggest friction points are version control chaos and large file transfers, so the platform should handle those smoothly. If it's not intuitive immediately, I won't use it.

Attribution and verifiable credentials: Verifiable credentials showing specific contributions could be useful. I once had to write a letter explaining a co-author's contributions for an award application, which was time-consuming. Having that documented would help. But I'm cautious about over-quantification. Any credibility system would need to weight journal quality and citation context, not just count contributions. Some researchers win Nobels with few publications because their work is transformative. We need to balance verifiable records with recognizing that not everything important is easily quantifiable (and I’m a quantitative data researcher!).

7. **What concerns or barriers do you foresee in adopting a decentralized, blockchain-based platform for research, and how could DeSciCoLab address these to encourage widespread use among researchers?** *Consider barriers like complexity, learning curve, or data privacy, and suggest ways to overcome them (e.g., user training, clear interfaces).*

The biggest barrier is time and switching costs. Academics are already stretched thin, and learning a new system needs to offer clear, immediate value that outweighs the effort. While I understand blockchain technology, the challenge is translating its features into tangible research workflow benefits. Researchers need to see how it solves their specific problems, not just understand the underlying technology.

My main concern isn't data privacy, since I mostly use publicly available databases like Refinitiv, but I can see it matter for colleagues with sensitive data. What I do wonder about is long-term sustainability. Academic careers span decades, and I need confidence that when someone wants to replicate my 2025 paper in 2035, the platform and its records will still be accessible. How will maintenance, updates, and support work over time? This is where clarifying the governance and funding model would be really helpful.

Another practical barrier is network effects. Even if I'm willing to adopt DeSciCoLab, if my co-authors aren't using it or journals don't recognize outputs from the platform, adoption becomes difficult. Getting critical mass is challenging in any new system.

How DeSciCoLab could address these: Focus on demonstrating clear value propositions for specific use cases. Show concrete examples of how the platform solves real problems like version control chaos or proving dataset integrity, with discipline-specific walkthroughs. Design the interface to feel familiar to tools researchers already use, minimizing the learning curve for core functions. For sustainability, be transparent about the governance structure and how the platform will be maintained long-term. Consider partnerships with journals, funding agencies, or professional associations to create incentives for adoption and build credibility. Starting with pilot groups and sharing success stories could help demonstrate value before expecting widespread use. User support will be important, not just training materials but responsive help when issues arise. Making basic functions intuitive enough that training isn't required for getting started would lower the barrier significantly.

8. **Are there any compliance, ethical, or intellectual property constraints (e.g., data protection rules, institutional approvals) that affect how or when you can share data or collaborate?**

Yes, data sharing constraints are a significant concern, particularly with commercial databases like Refinitiv. Even though much of the underlying data Refinitiv aggregates may be publicly available elsewhere (such as in company annual reports), the terms of service typically restrict redistribution of their datasets. This creates a challenge for replication: I can share my code and methodology, but not the actual data file I used, meaning others need their own Refinitiv subscription to replicate my work. I've had similar concerns with GitHub when journals required datasets. I can share the analysis scripts, but the raw data can't be included in the repository due to licensing restrictions. This limits full reproducibility to those with database access. For hand-collected data, intellectual property is less of an issue, though institutional review board approval can be required if data involves human subjects or sensitive information. I haven't faced major constraints there, but I can see how it would complicate sharing in other fields.

These constraints mean any collaboration platform needs to handle different levels of data access: some data can be fully shared, some only as metadata or summary statistics, and some

only as code with instructions for others to pull their own copy. A one-size-fits-all approach won't work across different data types and licensing agreements.

Lambis Dionysopoulos, PhD candidate in Finance at Henley Business School, University of Reading, and Visiting PhD Researcher at the Department of Informatics, King's College London

1. **Can you describe your current process for initiating and managing early-stage research collaborations, including any tools or platforms you use, and what specific challenges you encounter in this process?** *Please include details about the tools (e.g., email, ResearchGate) and specific issues (e.g., data sharing, communication delays) you face.*

I usually start collaborations either by meeting people at conferences or by emailing researchers directly when they publish something related to what I am working on. If they are interested, we set up a short call over Zoom to see whether the idea is worth developing and what data or methods it would require. From there, I set up the workflow using the following tools: Overleaf for writing, Google Sheets for the initial structure or variable mapping, and Google Drive or OneDrive for storing and sharing datasets. If the project involves multiple people working on code, we use GitHub to keep everything in sync. Day to day coordination generally happens on WhatsApp because it is faster than waiting for email replies.

The main challenges are getting in touch with people in the first place and managing data across institutions. Sensitive datasets cannot always be moved freely.

2. **What would make reproducibility and data verification low effort in your current workflow, and which provenance signals or checks would you consider most important?**

Most of what I consider important for reproducibility is already covered by the tools I use. Version control is handled through GitHub and Overleaf, provenance metadata comes through proper citations and documented data sources, and shared drives provide basic audit trails showing who uploaded or edited files. Integration across these tools also keeps verification relatively low effort.

3. **If you have used Decentralised Science (DeSci) platforms such as ResearchHub, NobleBlocks, VitaDAO, Molecule, or Scienceroot, what has been your experience, and how could a new platform improve on these to better support your research collaboration needs?** *If you haven't used a DeSci platform, please share why (e.g., lack of awareness, complexity) and what would encourage you to try one.*

Even though I work in decentralised systems, I have not used any of these platforms. I have only been vaguely aware that decentralised science tools exist, but not enough to make them part of my workflow.

4. **What specific features or functionalities would you prioritize in a blockchain-based platform to enhance transparency and trust in early-stage research collaboration?** *Consider features like immutable records, secure data sharing, or decentralized governance, and explain why these matter to you.*

A system like this would be most useful if it made datasets and code openly available for replication in a transparent and verifiable way. Global accessibility and clear auditability matter far more to my workflow than strong immutability guarantees. In some sciences, immutable records are essential, but in finance this is less of a priority. What I would prioritise instead is reliable and fast access to the exact data snapshot and code used in a project, along with simple verification that nothing was altered after upload.

5. **In your view, who should decide in cases of disputes or retractions, and what would neutrality look like in such decisions?**

A fair model would combine two layers. First, a small jury of researchers drawn at random from active participants and second, a decentralised committee of arbiters selected through sortition from a larger pool, where eligibility depends on reputation or verifiable credentials rather than token holdings.

6. **How important is it for a research collaboration platform to integrate with existing tools (e.g., ResearchGate, ORCID) or be accessible across different devices, and what would make the platform intuitive and user-friendly for you?** *Please specify any preferred integrations or usability features (e.g., simple navigation, mobile access) that would enhance your experience, and share how you currently use such identifiers for attribution (e.g., ORCID, DOIs) or how verifiable credentials could support trust and recognition in collaborations.*

Integration with the tools researchers already rely on is essential for adoption. If a platform does not connect cleanly with things like ORCID, DOIs, GitHub, or even Google Drive, it becomes extra work rather than something that simplifies collaboration. Cross device access matters less for me, since most research tasks happen on a computer. Verifiable credentials would also help, but I do not see them as a major hurdle at this point.

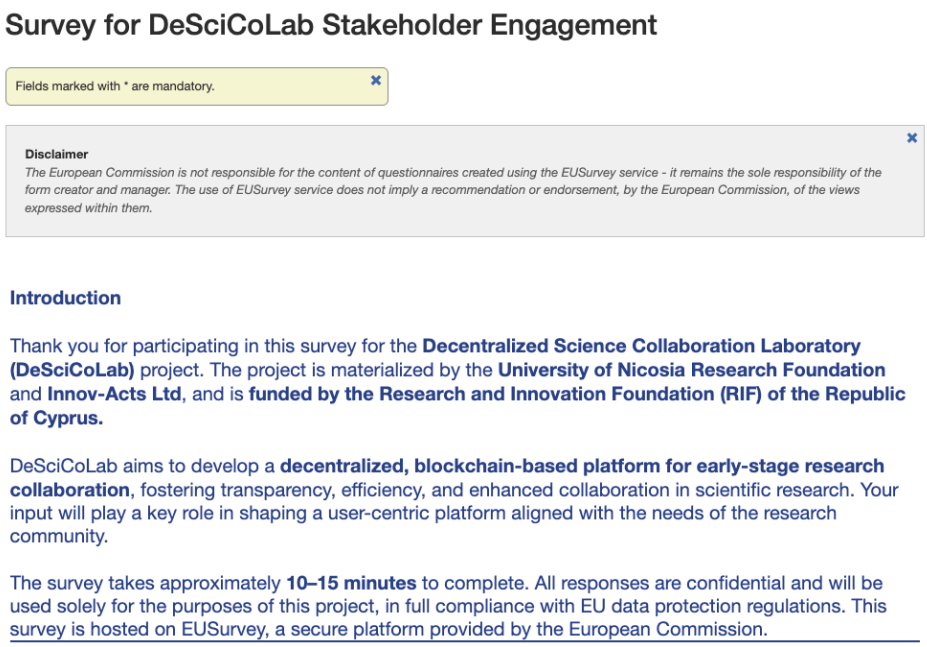
7. **What concerns or barriers do you foresee in adopting a decentralized, blockchain-based platform for research, and how could DeSciCoLab address these to encourage widespread use among researchers?** *Consider barriers like complexity, learning curve, or data privacy, and suggest ways to overcome them (e.g., user training, clear interfaces).*

The main barrier is that blockchain on its own is not a compelling selling point in 2025 or 2026. Most researchers will not adopt a new system unless it clearly solves real problems they actually face. Complexity, unfamiliar interfaces, and concerns about data privacy make this even harder. A platform like DeSciCoLab needs a clear value proposition, strong integration with the tools people already use, and a focus on the parts where blockchain genuinely adds value rather than hype. If it reduces friction around collaboration, provenance, and reproducibility, adoption becomes realistic. If it feels like extra work, it will be ignored.

8. **Are there any compliance, ethical, or intellectual property constraints (e.g., data protection rules, institutional approvals) that affect how or when you can share data or collaborate?**

In my area of finance this is generally less of a concern. Most of the data I work with is either public or commercially sourced, so compliance and IP constraints rarely limit collaboration in a meaningful way.

Annex I I– Snapshot of Survey Form



Survey for DeSciCoLab Stakeholder Engagement

Fields marked with * are mandatory.

Disclaimer

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Introduction

Thank you for participating in this survey for the **Decentralized Science Collaboration Laboratory (DeSciCoLab)** project. The project is materialized by the **University of Nicosia Research Foundation** and **Innov-Acts Ltd**, and is **funded by the Research and Innovation Foundation (RIF) of the Republic of Cyprus.**

DeSciCoLab aims to develop a **decentralized, blockchain-based platform for early-stage research collaboration**, fostering transparency, efficiency, and enhanced collaboration in scientific research. Your input will play a key role in shaping a user-centric platform aligned with the needs of the research community.

The survey takes approximately **10–15 minutes** to complete. All responses are confidential and will be used solely for the purposes of this project, in full compliance with EU data protection regulations. This survey is hosted on EUSurvey, a secure platform provided by the European Commission.

Section 3: Needs and Preferences for a Decentralized Research Platform

This section gathers your requirements for a blockchain-based platform for early-stage research collaboration.

How important are the following features for a research collaboration platform?
(Rate each on a scale of 1-5, where 1 = Not important and 5 = Very important)

	1	2	3	4	5
* Transparent data sharing and access	○	○	○	○	○
* Secure storage of research data	○	○	○	○	○
* Immutable record of contributions	○	○	○	○	○
* Decentralized peer review process	○	○	○	○	○
* Access to funding opportunities	○	○	○	○	○
* User-friendly interface	○	○	○	○	○
* Integration with existing tools (e.g., ResearchGate, ORCID)	○	○	○	○	○
* Portable credentials for reviews/replication	○	○	○	○	○
* Automatically captured provenance	○	○	○	○	○

* What types of research activities would you primarily use a decentralized platform for?

- ☐ Data sharing and management
- ☐ Collaborative project planning
- ☐ Peer review and validation
- ☐ Publishing and disseminating research outputs
- ☐ Finding collaborators or research partners
- ☐ Accessing funding opportunities
- ☐ Other (please specify below):

* What factors would influence your decision to adopt such a platform?

- ☐ Ease of onboarding
- ☐ Likelihood to recommend by peers
- ☐ Institutional endorsement
- ☐ Integration with existing tools

The Project is financed by the Republic of Cyprus through the Research and Innovation Foundation