

## ECOSTAR: THE NATURE-ACCELERATOR

At the beginning of most Knowledge Alliances (KA) stands the commitment of its participants to change something: The passion for technology, the desire to adapt and improve existing forms of education or a pioneering idea to connect institutions of higher education (HEI) with enterprises. Alessandro Leonardi, project developer and coordinator of the KA ECOSTAR, describes his initial moment in the following way: **“The problem was my dissatisfaction with the current state of entrepreneurship education in the forestry and environmental sectors. I was 30, completing my PhD and having just started my own business in this sector, it frustrated me how little support, education and training there was for young entrepreneurs seeking to develop their business ideas.”**

Starting from this initial idea, ECOSTAR created a virtual hub to link research and business at a European level. Students and researchers, scientific and business mentors, and investors find here a platform to create value for nature and engage with ecology-related topics through new business ideas. ECOSTAR supports and provides its participants with the necessary skills to respond to trends and challenges our societies face, such as the green and the digital transition.

With an innovative concept and an international consortium of partners, ECOSTAR managed to set up its alliance, between 2016 - 2018, to train 150 students, gain a network of 300 new members and present the project to more than 15 000 people online. However, it is not simply about the numbers. The KA successfully designed eLearning courses and training materials to allow the participants to continue their work and reach a wider audience. Moreover, **audiences and markets, impressed by ECOSTAR, joined the alliance, helping it to grow even more.** This ensures that the project's achievements subsist by improving students' skill-specific education, supporting start-ups and **generating new opportunities.**

### A SPARKLING APPROACH

The KA involves HEIs and businesses at the same level. With the Università Degli Studi Di Padova as the lead organisation, the KA included nine partners from Italy, Romania, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Together, they elaborated a project design where every party could contribute its specific expertise, stimulating the flow and exchange of knowledge. This synergy supported positive outcomes for all parties involved, from students and researchers with a background in forestry, agriculture and environment faculties, to enterprises, and to local economies and job markets.

The concept of ECOSTAR is based on three main pillars of activities:

- JOIN: Facilitating access to the international researchers-business network and fostering the links between these two sectors

#### What are: Erasmus+ Knowledge Alliances?

This initiative of the European Commission supported (2014 – 2020\_ 158 international collaborations between partners from higher education institutions and businesses. Still, it is open to any sector and involves a wide range of stakeholders at all levels. These consortia bring their particular expertise together, amplifying innovation across their fields through collaboration, by developing new and multi-disciplinary teaching & learning approaches, providing entrepreneurial mindsets and relevant skills to participants, and stimulating knowledge exchange.

The fields of action are broad and include current topics such as ICT, (green) economy and sustainable energy, education, life sciences, societal challenges, etc.

In the end, the results of KAs strengthen Europe's innovation capacity in the form of novel curricula and study programs, open educational and e-learning resources, accelerators, hubs and start-ups, new products and prototypes.

- LEARN: Offering specialised training on entrepreneurship and innovation, it targets MScs and PhDs through multi-disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning
- GROW: Accelerating the co-creation of knowledge through the support of start-ups

This last point attracted plenty of attention. Acceleration programs, where researchers and investors are brought together, **are proven institutions for scaling projects** in the tech world. In contrast, bioeconomy and "nature-based" businesses face a more delicate situation and lack of opportunities. This is surprising, especially with the European Green Deal being a common topic on many ecologically sustainable agendas. ECOSTAR managed to close this gap and connect modern research, focused on nature and ecology, with investment.

**“Our approach in ECOSTAR was not to view challenges as problems, but more as opportunities for improvement.”**

Furthermore, **with its accelerator**, ECOSTAR turned research effectively into action. It managed to attract students and young entrepreneurs from various EU countries and beyond to present their ideas and answers to today's challenges. **Eight teams from seven different countries were selected** to gather skills on entrepreneurial mindsets and provision of investments; in connection with higher visibility and contacts with investors they had the chance to put their environmental conscious

start-ups into effect. In the entire process, 49 countries were involved with over 500 mentors, offering all applicants visibility, sustainable investments and contact with other innovators.

In the end, ECOSTAR endowed impressively diverse projects and helped them to arise. These included for example, sustainable beekeeping, the usage of dead trees for furniture production, and the development and distribution of insect-based food products, which are both environmentally friendly and tasty. **Alessandro Leonardi explains: “Five of these [eight] businesses are still going strong and now have sustainable business models. The Nature-Accelerator actually paved the way to many initiatives promoting nature-based businesses globally.”**

### A LUCKY ECO-STAR?

Another important moment of a successful KA arrives when the official project time comes to an end - especially if the Alliance manages to resonate through its impact and sustainability. In this case, the knowledge gained and created was consolidated in accredited programs and eLearning courses available for future users. With this and the general approach, ECOSTAR contributes to the modernisation of the EU's higher education system, positively affects its partners' socio-economic environments and boosts a sector with the need for innovation, upskilling and awareness of its market value. The new network of partners and a constant will for collaboration on a European and international level, as well as the funding system, secures the financial and personnel sustainability of the project and fosters its replicability in other contexts.

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*For further information on the Alliance, please consult the following links:*

ECOSTAR official website: <https://www.ecostarhub.com>

The Nature Accelerator: <https://www.ecostarhub.com/nature-accelerator/>

Contact:

[etifor@etifor.com](mailto:etifor@etifor.com) (ETIFOR)

[info@ecostarhub.com](mailto:info@ecostarhub.com) (ECOSTAR)

## DIRECT IMPRESSIONS

Q&As with ECOSTAR and the project developer and coordinator Alessandro Leonardi (Founder of Etifor | Valuing Nature)

### **How and in what moment of your life did you come up with the idea for ECOSTAR?**

Like any good market solution, the idea for ECOSTAR grew out of the need to solve a problem. The problem was my dissatisfaction with the current state of entrepreneurship education in our sectors; the forestry and environmental sectors. I was 30, completing my PhD and having just started my own business in this sector, it frustrated me how little support, education and training there was for young entrepreneurs seeking to develop their business ideas. Then I took part in the Erasmus for Entrepreneurship program where I spent 6 months shadowing an experienced entrepreneur, Kieran Conlan at CASCADE, in the UK. The experience was so enriching that I thought I could promote something similar to many other people, make this a business opportunity for my start-up ([Etifor](#)) and find a way to keep alive the established relationships with companies and institutions I knew in Europe. That said, I started building the ECOSTAR program, with the idea of promoting entrepreneurial spirit within environmental and forestry sectors, both in the EU and globally.

### **What was one of the most challenging moments of ECOSTAR?**

ECOSTAR was an experience, and it was full of challenges. Our approach in ECOSTAR was not to view challenges as problems, but more as opportunities for improvement. One of the most challenging moments, was not a specific moment as such, more of a period. This challenging period was when we started to grow the project into an impact investment platform: [The Nature-Accelerator](#). This was challenging because rather than sitting back and strictly following the proposal work plan to achieve our stated impact, we wanted to increase that impact with the same budget, and to do that, we had to change our course of action and look for additional funding. Given that we were not alone, all partners had to be on board. Luckily, we had an amazing consortium who were with us all the way. Also, the Erasmus agency has been very supportive as it has understood the potential for growth and impact.

### **Which moment made you laugh a lot?**

Again, it's difficult to pinpoint one specific moment that made me laugh, I would say that there were a number of instances. From the beginning, ECOSTAR the project was proposed as a culturally diverse impact and entrepreneurship hub. With 9 partners from 5 countries from different corners of the EU and the USA and a wider alliance spanning most of the other continents, when there were physical project meetings and events, there were many moments for laughter. Cultural diversity, traditions, ambiguity and nuances were always brought to the forefront of these meetings. And were always a reason to laugh and learn. Plus, when we implemented the Nature-Accelerator (two months on-site program) with young entrepreneurs and start-uppers from all over the world, it was an amazingly rewarding experience.

### **What was the most rewarding moment?**

One of the most rewarding moments was seeing the selected and trained start-ups of the Nature-Accelerator present to over 150 scientists, professionals, politicians, established entrepreneurs and industry representatives, and investors in the culmination of the hard work carried out during the entrepreneurship training programme during the [demo day](#). Cultural diversity was a key factor of our happiness during the whole period.

**Did you use of HEInnovate?**

We constantly used HEInnovate throughout the project. The most important context was the resources that are made available. We reviewed the resources published on the HEInnovate online platform and integrated the methods and solutions where possible. However, we really enjoyed the on-site workshops and university-business-cooperation forums in Brussels. They were very good networking opportunities.