

ASKFOOD: CHANGING THE FOOD INDUSTRY FROM WITHIN

Being one of the EU's biggest industries, the food and drink industry is still facing a lack of efficient training methodologies and strategies that allow it to be contextualised with the real and actual needs of the current market. With this in mind, the partners of the ASKFOOD project started developing their idea, aimed at creating new approaches and training solutions able to cover the needs of the food-sector market, as well as fostering entrepreneurship among future HE graduates.

The partners, **12 organisations** from 8 countries among which we can count universities, research companies or food industry associations, came together between 2018 and 2020 to develop different activities focused on achieving the main objective of the project. Thus, this Knowledge Alliance successfully managed to create an online hub that connected stakeholders within the food sector.

THREE CORE LETTERS: A, S and K

6 universities, 2 research and consulting companies, 3 food industry associations and 1 non-profit organisation were the main actors of the KA, as they formed the partner- group of the project. However, they were supported by 15 associated partners, from both inside and outside the EU. This gave the project a more comprehensive approach, having a deeper pool of concepts and markets to analyse and experiment with.

The idea of the ASKFOOD project is based on different approaches that could be divided into three core groups:

- **A**
 - Anticipate: using scenarios to forecast trends and related skills
 - Analyse and activate: map consistency in training and start the alliance for innovative training design
- **S**
 - Share and stimulate: launch Joint Innovative and Blended Training Packages
 - Support: create a Virtual Incubator and Growth Hacking Programmes based on reverse incubation
- **K**
 - Know: creation of the Observatory and an Open Evaluation
 - Knot-up: establishment of the ITI, DBE, and ASKFOOD alliance

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 on all levels. These consortia bring their particular expertise together, amplifying innovation across their fields through collaboration by developing new and multidisciplinary 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.

Overall, 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.

“Thanks to the wide range of associated partners, the project has a more comprehensive approach, having a deeper pool of markets to analyse and experiment with.”

Due to the focus on these three groups of actions, the partnership was able to develop the project as expected and achieve important results to tackle the difficulties encountered in the actual food-sector. Thus, the partnership first

gathered and analysed emerging skills needs, trends and demands to guarantee training methodologies adapted to the real context of the market. This was also a way to foster employment and ensure that supply and demand are balanced. After this first step, they worked towards trying and testing out new forms of training strategies, which would end up leading to innovative approaches. Thus, they were able to improve the training and educational practices already in existence, as well as creating new ones in the sector, adapting them to the needs not only of the market but also those of the current students. This was done through the **Reversed Incubator**, which allowed them to create a learning environment that promoted innovation and entrepreneurial mind-sets among students.

OBSERVATORY OF RESOURCES

The **ASKFOOD Observatory**, one of the main results of the project, is available and open for any registered user that wants to make use of its resources or contribute to them. It is a multisector and independent space where professionals and experts have the opportunity to create new networks, with the main aim of favouring and promoting innovation in the field of training and education within the food-sector. The Observatory monitors and analyses the latest news in the field, and acts as a **Community of Practice**, offering users different resources such as relevant news and documents (e.g., journals, academic articles, etc.), links to e-learning tools, virtual tools, or materials for educators designed to help them improve their own skills.

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

ASKFOOD official website: <https://www.askfood.eu/>

The ASKFOOD Observatory: <https://www.askfood-observatory.net/>

Contact:

ppittia@unite.it (Project Coordinator)

askfood.secretariat@unite.it (ASKFOOD Secretariat)

Questions to the Project Coordinators

How (and in what moment of your lives) did you develop the idea for ASKFOOD?

The ASKFOOD project proposal was developed based on the main outcomes of a previous Erasmus+ project, the EU FoodSTA, coordinated by the BOKU University (Vienna, AT). Despite the important results, some partners identified the importance of the development of alternative new, innovative and modern tools. This had two different aims: to identify future skills needs and professional trends of the job market in the continuously changing food manufacturing sector, and to pilot disruptive training methodologies to enhance the entrepreneurial skills and capabilities of the future generation of food technologies in a closer academia-business interplay.

The project thus planned to include activities allowing us to go beyond the conventional approaches in addressing these needs. In parallel, these activities would promote, thanks to the

multisectoral partnership, innovative solutions that could also boost innovation and sustainability in the food sector. Eventually, the design and set academia-industry knowledge clusters were prioritised, in order to boost a close interaction in higher education and training.

Using this as a base, the consortium was made up of a mix of academia, training and professional businesses, and representatives of stakeholders of the food industries (in particular some food industry federations including the European federation of food industries, FoodDrinkEurope) and of a main, international non-profit organisation grouping higher education institutions in the food sector.

What was one of the most challenging moments of ASKFOOD?

The COVID pandemic arrived when the project was in its 2nd year. The lockdown, the change of the working priorities of the partners along with those of the end-users (students, enterprises, training providers, teachers, etc.) significantly affected the progress of the project. Many activities originally planned to be held in person (e.g. meetings, workshops, international events) needed to be revised, rescheduled, or even cancelled. Many dissemination and engaging events we planned to attend (e.g. conferences, sector-specific fairs, etc.) were cancelled or were shifted to online events.

We were rather scared of not being able to complete the project plans. So, a number of unexpected meetings were rescheduled, where we revised the project plans so as to achieve the expected results. However, the partners' consortium was active and the majority of them collaborated in an active way.

From your point of view, how is the project contributing to the beneficiaries' real life and activities? Could you provide examples?

The project designed and developed a series of completely new tools (e.g. the Forecast aggregator, Interactive training gap identifier, ASKFOOD Observatory) that are used now by several partners of the consortium for their working activities (e.g. teaching, development of study programs, etc.). The project also piloted the Reversed Incubator, an innovative training methodology meant to boost entrepreneurship and innovation. Now some universities are using it as curricular module, like the University of Teramo, which embedded it in the Master's Degree in Food science and Technology. Thus, they are taking into account the specific added-value of the close academia-industry collaborative framework that is well evaluated by both students and food companies.

Which moment made you laugh a lot?

During the dinners of the in-presence meetings we organised. Besides the fact that we were "colleagues" or, taking into account the institutional role, "partners", we were good friends and we laughed a lot. Dinners, but also coffee breaks and lunches, were a unique opportunity for an easy networking where we shared ideas, anecdotes and stories, enjoying also the traditional foods of the meeting location. All ASKFOOD attendees of the Cyprus meeting will remember the "never-ending" dinner made of typical Cyprus meze for the rest of their lives.

And what was the most rewarding moment?

The project was ambitious and challenging, but the results were of interest for many European main organisations. After the end of the project we have been in contact with some of them (e.g. FoodDrinkEurope, EFFoST, EITFood) to develop further projects as a continuation of the main products and activities of the ASKFOOD project. And, thus the project story continues.