



Support services for student entrepreneurship in higher education

Webinar summary

19/05/2025

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The webinar “Support services for student entrepreneurship in higher education” was held on 19 May 2025, under the Community for Educational Innovation (CEI) initiative supported by the European Commission.

The webinar explored how higher education institutions (HEIs) can provide effective support services that enable students to transform innovative ideas into viable entrepreneurial ventures. These services include mentoring, incubation, networking, funding access, and training that complement traditional academic programmes. Three distinct presentations provided complementary perspectives: Institutional strategies to foster entrepreneurship culture, the student viewpoint on innovation, and a hands-on case study of a university incubator. An interactive debate enriched the discussion, highlighting common challenges and opportunities.

This summary report synthesises the key insights shared during the event, providing an overview of the presentations, key takeaways, and an outline of the upcoming activities.

Presentation 1: From vision to action: Fostering entrepreneurship culture in academia

Prof. Sara Proença, Polytechnic University of Coimbra (PUC), Portugal.

Prof. Proença began by situating the Polytechnic University of Coimbra (PUC) within the Portuguese higher education system. Founded in 1979, PUC is among Portugal’s largest polytechnic HEIs, serving over 12,000 students across six diverse schools, including agriculture, health, education, business and engineering.

PUC’s mission emphasises applied sciences, professional development and regional innovation, providing a strong foundation for entrepreneurship initiatives grounded in real-world challenges. Central to this strategy is the **INOPOL Entrepreneurship Academy**, established in 2021 as an organic unit of PUC to promote innovation and entrepreneurship comprehensively across the institution. INOPOL operates spanning all schools, aiming to nurture an entrepreneurial culture and bridge academia with society and industry.

The Academy’s four strategic pillars are:

- Promoting a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship throughout the academic community.



- Fostering the creation and growth of knowledge-based startups and spin-offs.
- Stimulating knowledge transfer and valorisation through patents, licensing and technology transfer.
- Boosting employability by developing student skills relevant to job markets and self-employment.

INOPOL's support covers the entire innovation lifecycle—from early-stage business idea support, incubation with physical, virtual and co-working options, mentoring, networking, to training and career services. The multidisciplinary team combines expertise in entrepreneurship, innovation, knowledge transfer and employability, enabling tailored support.

Incubation services provide startups with workspace, business plan development assistance, legal and intellectual property support, access to research labs, funding networks, marketing support and visibility through events. The application process is continuous and selective, based on innovation degree, technological maturity, market potential, team quality and ecosystem fit.

Since mid-2021, **INOPOL has executed over 220 entrepreneurship actions, supported 143 entrepreneurial projects, trained more than 7,000 individuals, facilitated 62 intellectual property registrations, incubated 35 startups, formed 46 partnerships and raised €2.6 million in competitive funding.**

INOPOL coordinates flagship projects such as **POLIEMPRENDE**, a national network connecting 21 Portuguese polytechnics to deliver mentoring, capacity building, competitions and regional-national entrepreneurship events. **JOB SUMMIT IPC & SCIENCE2BUSINESS** fosters direct connections between students, researchers, companies and policymakers, bridging academia and industry. **INOVC (Innovation Ecosystem for Knowledge and Technology Transfer in PT Centre Region)** is a regional innovation ecosystem initiative involving 23 partners to enhance knowledge transfer and stimulate innovation via events, technology fairs, and matchmaking. The **LET'S TALK webinar series** promotes innovation topics monthly.

Prof. Proença stressed that fostering an entrepreneurship culture is a gradual and continuous process that demands sustained institutional leadership, interdisciplinary collaboration and diversification of funding. Institutional prioritisation is key to embedding entrepreneurship as a core mission rather than an add-on activity.

Presentation 2: International students' perspectives on innovation in higher education

Rita Dias, President of Erasmus Student Network (ESN).

Rita Dias presented the perspective of international students represented by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), the largest European student volunteer organisation supporting learning mobility in over 46 countries, with more than 350,000 students served annually.

ESN's core mission is to enhance student experiences and societal enrichment through international mobility, notably via Erasmus+. The organisation undertakes research, policy advocacy, project implementation and community-building to foster innovative educational practices.

Two key projects were discussed:

- ETI Labs (Erasmus Talent & Innovation Labs), launched in 2025, are designed to close the gap between academic learning and labour market demands by fostering university-business cooperation. The Labs enable challenge-based learning focusing on digital transformation, sustainability and social entrepreneurship to develop critical competencies.
- Erasmus Careers, recently completed, mapped competencies gained by students during mobility, assessed their recognition by employers and delivered policy recommendations and practical guides for universities and companies to enhance career support.

Rita Dias highlighted the necessity of shifting higher education towards student-centred, challenge-based learning models that more effectively prepare students for evolving labour markets and societal challenges. Traditional, lecture-based education often fails to engage students and develop entrepreneurial mindsets.

She also introduced the ESNsurvey, an extensive longitudinal research initiative running since 2005, collecting data on student mobility trends, attitudes and outcomes. The latest edition includes enhanced sections on European degrees and innovation-related skills, offering valuable insights to inform policy and practice.

Rita Dias called for sustained efforts to make mobility and innovation more accessible, inclusive, and aligned with students' and society's future needs.



Presentation 3: Experience of the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Lab & the StartLab.Brussels

Prof. Thomas Crispeels, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium.

Prof. Crispeels shared the practical experience of StartLab.Brussels, a pioneering university pre-incubator jointly operated by Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) universities since 2022. It supports first-time entrepreneurs, including students, alumni, researchers and community members in a multilingual and inclusive setting.

StartLab.Brussels offers co-working facilities in Brussels, along with workshops, masterclasses, networking events, individual coaching, advisory boards, and access to legal, financial and marketing experts. Lean startup methodologies and intensive weekend workshops facilitate practical learning.

The incubator's programme is structured into three phases: ideation (discovering entrepreneurial potential and defining projects), prototyping (validating ideas with potential clients), and launch (scaling, with emphasis on sales or fundraising).

A dedicated StartLab4Researchers track, initiated in October 2024, targets academic researchers seeking to translate scientific innovations into market-ready solutions, fostering collaboration between researchers and entrepreneurs.

Funding sources include regional government grants, university contributions and private sponsorships. **Since its inception, StartLab.Brussels has supported nearly 1,000 entrepreneurs, helped launch 185 businesses, created approximately 500 jobs, and achieved a high survival rate. Gender balance is actively pursued, with 45% of entrepreneurs supported being women.**

Prof. Crispeels highlighted diverse ventures spanning MedTech, ecological cosmetics, assistive technology for Alzheimer's patients, circular economy fashion and social reintegration projects. An emerging trend is entrepreneurial projects identifying societal problems that are later addressed through academic research, reversing typical technology transfer flows.

Challenges include limited in-house prototyping facilities; however, affiliated university and regional fab labs support critical infrastructure.

Discussion and Key Takeaways

The webinar highlighted several themes and actionable insights regarding integrating support services for student entrepreneurship into higher education.



These are the key takeaways that emerged from the presentations and discussions:

- **Strategic benefits for HEIs:** Supporting student entrepreneurship contributes to enhancing institutional reputation, fostering innovation, strengthening academia-industry ties, and contributing to regional economic development. It equips students with vital 21st-century skills such as creativity, adaptability, leadership and problem-solving.
- **Institutional culture shift:** Embedding entrepreneurship requires leadership commitment, strategic vision and the dismantling of academic silos. It is a gradual cultural transformation rather than a quick fix.
- **Addressing sustainability and scalability:** Fragmented services, short-term funding, and limited capacity hinder support services. Broader impact measurement frameworks beyond quantitative KPIs are needed.
- **Emphasising student-centred and challenge-based learning:** Experiential approaches better prepare students for entrepreneurial careers and innovation-driven labour markets.
- **Cross-border and networked cooperation:** Multinational projects such as ETI Labs demonstrate how transnational partnerships enrich entrepreneurial education and scale opportunities for students.
- **Inclusivity and diversity:** Opening support services to a broad audience, including researchers and community members, improves diversity and ecosystem vitality, as evidenced by StartLab.Brussels.
- **Holistic support systems:** Effective entrepreneurship support combines physical space, expert mentoring, access to funding, networking, and tailored training responsive to venture development stages.

Upcoming Activities

Several activities were announced to continue the work of integrating entrepreneurial skills and competences into higher education:

- **Collection of Good Practices:** CEI Members are invited to submit **good practices** on implementing support services for student entrepreneurship. These practices will be featured in the **CEI report on Thematic Strand 1**, providing valuable insights for future educational reforms. [Submit your good practices here.](#)

- **Upcoming Webinar on Entrepreneurial Skills and Competences throughout Life, on June 26, 2025:** This webinar will explore the critical role of entrepreneurial skills and competences throughout life and how they can be cultivated at diverse stages of life. [Register here.](#)
- **Study Visit on Entrepreneurial Skills and Mindsets:** The study visit will take place on 18–19 June 2025. Hosted by the Centre for Funding Innovation ([CFI-Barcelona](#)) at La Salle Campus Barcelona, the visit will focus on developing collaborative research and innovation projects that foster entrepreneurial mindsets and skills across education systems.