

# Aalborg University: Entrepreneurship and Internationalisation

## The case in summary

Aalborg University (AAU), established in 1974, emphasises entrepreneurship as a core strategy, offering extensive support and resources to students. The institution is renowned for its problem-based learning approach, fostering independent, real-life problem-solving skills aligned with entrepreneurial competencies. Internationalisation is a priority at AAU as well, with active involvement in the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) and partnerships worldwide to enhance research, development, and innovation activities. AAU's successful integration of internationalisation with entrepreneurship activities provides a robust framework for advancing knowledge and skills in a global context.

## 1. Introduction to the University

Aalborg University (AAU) was founded in 1974 from a merger of several well-established higher education institutions with roots going back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. With just 3,000 students enrolled initially, AAU grew to approximately 20,000 students. Students can choose from more than 100 study programmes, at bachelor, master and doctorate levels, and can study at three campuses across Denmark. At all three campuses AAU combines various approaches on problem-based education, entrepreneurship and internationalisation.

## 2. Problem-based education

Teaching and learning at AAU are centred on problem-based and project-organised pedagogies. The so-called "Aalborg model" trains students in independent learning, which is often embedded in the local business community, and thus close to real-life problems. Students learn to identify and analyse problems, to work successfully in teams and in a results-oriented way. Most of these learning objectives are similar to the requirements for founding and developing one's own business.

Creative initiatives such as the example of the **Research Group for Unlimited Knowledge Application** show the innovative teaching and learning approaches present at Aalborg University. Between 2013 and 2019, the research group was active in preparing students for a career after their studies as entrepreneurial and creative employees, researchers or entrepreneurs. Rooted in the University's philosophy of problem-based inter-disciplinary learning, the Research Group for Unlimited Knowledge Application was part of the effort to stimulate entrepreneurial behaviour specifically focusing on creativity and making an impact rethinking their own field of study. The research group used four basic principles from the concept "The Creative Platform", an approach taken to teaching creativity and the creative process, to understand how creative behaviour and thinking actually occurs in people:

- Same focus at the same time - one focus at a time (parallel thinking)
- Focusing on the task and nothing else (task focus)
- No experience of judgment (no-experienced judgment)
- Use of all knowledge available (horizontal thinking)

The research has led to three accepted concepts, which can be and still are used in practice to stimulate the creative potential of individuals and teams. In addition to the first concept already mentioned, "the Creative Platform", the second, called "3D didactic", is used. It is an embodied approach to learning which aims to develop new entrepreneurial behaviour in individuals and teams by designing teaching to train specific creative and entrepreneurial competences. 3D didactic uses the four principles in a practical way to design and perform teaching in which students/pupils will become more creative and entrepreneurial. The third is called "Training Programme for New Thinking" which is a programme for developing personal thinking and behaviour as well as new organisational cultures through creativity exercises.

The Research Group for Unlimited Knowledge Application has designed and performed creativity courses across the University as well as a cross-disciplinary semester called "Creative Genius". It also offered shorter courses which were also available for external partners. The "Creative Genius" semester was taught in English with students from several countries and all faculties. The main focus of the semester was to foster new thinking, originality and making an impact in the student's own discipline. In the "Creative Genius" semester, students were expected to be both a student and a facilitator in creative processes. After an introductory

period where students familiarised themselves with the study environment, students took turns in facilitating creativity morning training sessions, teaching each other specific subjects on creativity that are related to their own discipline or portfolio as well as facilitating other students in creative exercises and process.

During the semester, students also worked on a specific problem in their field of study, either in collaboration with an organisation or related to an environmental or social problem or a company the student wishes to start. The course required the student to define what type of impact he/she wants to achieve and to initiate the impact.

## 2. Entrepreneurship

For Aalborg University, entrepreneurship is an integral part of its core strategy. Entrepreneurial education is elementary to its innovation approach as a knowledge-generating and culture-bearing institution that contributes to technological, economic, social, and cultural innovation. AAU's entrepreneurship, innovation, and knowledge exchange activities are coordinated by **AAU Innovation** across the three campuses. AAU Innovation is organised into four units: Student Entrepreneurship, Management Support, INNOVATE Event & Support, and Technology Transfer Office. A main goal of Aalborg University (AAU) is to expose all students to the possibilities of starting new ventures. This involves exposing students to commercial activities or for-profit ventures which help instil entrepreneurial qualities that create value in a broader and more altruistic sense. AAU's entrepreneurship activities are directed both at would-be-entrepreneurs, providing targeted support, and at AAU students in general, with the aim of promoting enterprising behaviour in a broader sense. An incentive for students to engage in such activities is that they gain the ability to use their professional knowledge in value-creating ways. The use of social media has been important for promoting this understanding and for raising students' interest.

Students who are curious about entrepreneurship have several opportunities to pursue their interest at Aalborg University. Every semester, the University offers four comprehensive workshop sessions in which students learn about the fundamental entrepreneurial skills such as creativity, communication, prototyping and effective pitching. On a more practical side, students can participate in the AAU Startup Programme where they receive specific resources and mentoring from business coaches and are part of a likeminded community. As an

alternative to external internships, students can test their entrepreneurial skills by interning in their own startup for one semester. Moreover, Aalborg hosts an active ecosystem of existing startups which students can join. To support this, the University offers initiatives such as “Startup Dating” in collaboration with the University College of Northern Denmark (UCN), where students get the opportunity to connect to student startups twice a year.

### 3. Internationalisation

Internationalisation plays an important role in university development and building international links is considered a priority at AAU. It is also a key component of entrepreneurship support at AAU. The understanding of being a network university with three campuses helps promoting the notion of having peers and colleagues elsewhere. Staff is encouraged to invest time and efforts into establishing relationships and connections worldwide. International partnerships exist both on an informal level, which is at the level of staff members, and on a formal level, through agreements.

#### ECIU membership

AAU is a very active member of the [European Consortium of Innovative Universities](#) (ECIU). This consortium of research universities is focused on collaboration in innovative teaching and learning, enhancement of university-society interaction, internationalisation of the student and staff experience, and active engagement in policy development and practice within the evolving European Higher Education Area. AAU's collaboration with the ECIU is centred around the following areas: Human Resource Development, Knowledge Triangle and EU Policy.

AAU's Grants and Contracts department is very active in sharing knowledge with other ECIU members. This, for example, helped to better understand the rules and prerequisites (or do's and don'ts) regarding companies co-locating on campus, since the University of Strathclyde in Scotland, faced similar issues. Hence, the ECIU is considered a valuable source of knowledge and know-how in areas which are still new to the University.

AAU also has a Fundraising & Project Management team which supports researchers in the identification of relevant international projects and with the project application process. This

service is also offered to business partners. Having a professional and dedicated team at AAU has been highly appreciated by the external stakeholders.

### Promoting student mobility

AAU has created a partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark's international Innovation Centres (which are located in Silicon Valley, Shanghai, and São Paulo amongst others). This partnership shall strengthen collaboration in the areas of research, development and innovation activities. This initiative targets both AAU's internal potential for commercialisation as well as AAU's current and new business, that is, to open up new markets for Danish companies working with AAU. Part of this is also an internship programme for AAU students (and students from other Danish universities) at these Innovation Centres as integral part of their education.

### **3. Challenges and Lessons Learned**

A challenge which has been mastered well at AAU is to link the internationalisation agenda with the entrepreneurship activities. AAU Innovation has been crucial for this, and the following practices have been particularly enhancing:

- Offering support services for researchers for international projects, and, in this way, embedding an emphasis on entrepreneurship
- Building opportunities for international staff and students to consider the option of retaining after their stay
- Making use of international networks, e.g. the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU), to increase knowledge and know-how in new areas of strategic importance, such as co-location of companies on campus

### **Sources**

<https://www.aau.dk>

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