



# empl-oi

European Mobility Placements  
for Open Innovation

**Policy recommendations:  
paving the way for stronger  
university-business cooperation.**



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## Executive summary

University-business cooperation has for many years been an increasingly important issue raised at European and national policy level, as well as at higher education institutions itself. The fact that the learning environment and the labour market needs are continuously changing makes it challenging for both sphere to be perfectly synchronised.

In fact, studies have shown that “employers have very little knowledge of what to expect from graduates and higher education institutions have a similar low level of knowledge concerning employers’ needs.”<sup>1</sup> This divide between the job market and the higher education sector can lead to asymmetries in the system, also called skills mismatches and opportunity costs in terms of the overall economic output of regional/national economies.

A majority of academics still consider curricula design to be a process in which the teacher and the student should be the rightful “co-constructors of knowledge”<sup>2</sup>, although this idea is challenged by the reduced responsiveness of the study programmes to the labour market’s needs. With a view to answering this issue the Erasmus+ project #empl-oi aims to create a structured, favorable and mutually beneficial environment for transnational cooperation between all the parties involved (students, academics and public and private organisations in Europe).

More specifically, the aim and missions of this three-year initiative were to improve student employability and boost entrepreneurial skills of future graduates in the context of social entrepreneurship. This has been done by developing innovative learning materials and by implementing a part-time placement scheme. We believe that higher education institutions, companies and European, national and local authorities have a shared responsibility when it comes to fostering smoother university-business cooperation and increasing the relevance of education in relation to the labour market.

Building upon the successful outcomes of the #europelhome project and based on the local hubs<sup>3</sup> results that have been established by that project since 2015, the #empl-oi policy recommendations aim to contribute for policy debates concerned with the establishment of a balanced university-business cooperation that serves the interests of the main higher education stakeholders, as well as society at large. This initiative anticipates the fact that social entrepreneurship is among the Erasmus+ 2018 call for priorities, underlining how important this topic is in today’s society.

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1 HEGESCO project’s results in University of Ljubljana (2013), Considering university-business cooperation from the perspective of graduates’ early careers, 10th International Workshop on Higher Education Reform (WHER), p. 2.

2 Sharon Fraser and Agnes Bosanquet (2006), The curriculum? That’s just a unit outline, isn’t it?, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(5), p. 269-284.

3 Each #empl-oi partner university has established a local hub. A collaborative structure that is based on cooperation between a higher education institution, students and representatives of the labour market. See the missions of the local hubs p. 5.

# 1. Co-designing study programmes to best ensure graduates' employability.

One of the obvious questions that arises when discussing the skills mismatch is: how do we best shape curricula to cope with the developing needs of society and the labour market. According to our research findings, 80%<sup>4</sup> of the academics are willing to enhance ties and cooperation with companies<sup>5</sup>, while in parallel, the labour market calls for a further development of the students' soft skills (notably: personal, interpersonal and communication skills) during their studies<sup>6</sup>.

To best tackle the two perspectives of the issue and to ensure that the student's viewpoint is considered, one solution could be to organise round tables between all the stakeholders (university, student and labour market representatives, as well as graduates) to discuss the possible adjustments that could be implemented in order to combine the entrepreneurial vision and the academic studies<sup>7</sup>. These round tables would be about engaging the labour market actors in the reflexion on how to include entrepreneurial skills in the curriculum. Thus, they would serve as an advisory body in the process of shaping the specific study programmes.

When creating new curricula, we believe that the best solution would be to build upon existing resources and methods, for example the empl-oi guidelines for educators<sup>8</sup> or the European Commission's guide on entrepreneurship education for educators<sup>9</sup>. By doing so, it should be easier for higher education institutions to implement the adjustments and innovative elements.



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4 Empl-oi project's survey (2017), The final sample of respondents was made as follows. Students were in total 1731 (of which 941 Italians, 96 French, 30 Lithuanian, 399 Polish, 265 Spanish); Academics were in total 273 (of which 41 Italian, 16 French, 16 Lithuanian, 157 Polish, 43 Spanish). Practitioners were in total 197 (of which 15 Italian, 4 French, 13 Lithuanian, 157 Polish, 8 Spanish).

5 Empl-oi consortium (2018), Guidelines for educators: Encouraging a University/Business proactive collaboration, p. 8.

6 Empl-oi consortium (2018), op. cit., p. 7.

7 As for an example of good collaboration between the stakeholders, we can look up to the Italian higher education system which brings together HEIs and students to monitor and assess the value created by curricula (law decree 240/2010). Although it is not required by law, representatives from the main labour market categories of the territory are invited to join the consultation and take part in the quality assurance process. This paves the way for stronger university-business collaboration, including students.

8 Available at: [http://empl-oi.eu/system/files/em-ploi\\_e-book\\_io2\\_guidelines.pdf](http://empl-oi.eu/system/files/em-ploi_e-book_io2_guidelines.pdf)

9 Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/7465>

## 2. Mainstreaming the use of a European guiding framework to develop and assess entrepreneurship in the field of education.

On the one hand, studies have shown that entrepreneurship education programmes can vary widely, notably when it comes to the objectives, formats and pedagogical approaches<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, researchers have pointed out that “Many studies, aimed at assessing the impact of educational content or method, tend to be centred on a specific course, with obvious problems of generalization.”<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, without clear objectives and measurement, support for education programmes that embed the entrepreneurship vision may be difficult to sustain. Therefore, we believe that a European guiding framework could be used as a reference point to favour the development of entrepreneurial learning and effectively assess the entrepreneurship competence in academic settings.

Such a tool already exists, under the name EntreComp: the entrepreneurship competence framework. From our point of view, this tool represents a great potential as it presents a “common definition of entrepreneurship as a competence” and “a number of learning outcomes to suggest what European citizens should know, understand and be able to do to demonstrate a certain level of proficiency in entrepreneurship competence.”<sup>12</sup> The main incentive of using a common tool would be that the entrepreneurship learning outcomes from one course to another would tend towards a European quality standard.

Additionally, the guiding framework could contain information on alternative teaching methods and provide guidelines/examples on how to successfully implement them. It could possibly contain testimonies of teachers that have successfully tested/implemented an alternative method or the best practices that are suitable for entrepreneurial education.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the academic staff should be encouraged to take part in staff mobility for training and/or teaching in order to enhance their knowledge and experience on entrepreneurship, learning from peers and applying the innovative entrepreneurial methods and approaches. We could imagine the creation of a specific strand of entrepreneurial staff mobility in the new Erasmus+ programme and encourage universities to provide trainings for their teaching staff.

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10 Alain Fayolle, Benoit Gailly and Narjisse Lassas-Clerc (2006), “Assessing the impact of entrepreneurship education programmes: a new methodology”, *Journal of European Industrial Training*, p. 702.

11 Joakim Falkang and Fernando Alberti (2000), “The assessment of entrepreneurship education”, *Industry & Higher Education*, p. 102.

12 JRC Science Hub, European Commission (2016), *EntreComp: The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework*, p. 7. <http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC101581/1fna27939enn.pdf>.

13 The university of Naples Federico II proposes a course on business creation. This learning unit consists in simulating the construction of a viable startup through the application of innovative teaching and learning methods such as group work, pitch presentation and funding speeddates.

### **3. Including sector-specific work placements as a part of degrees.**

According to a study conducted in 2013 by the European Commission, “Work-based learning enhances the employability of the learners by providing the right set of skills needed in the labour market and society at large.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it introduces the student to the specific characteristics of a sector and reduces the possible skill mismatch.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, member states and higher education institutions should ensure that all students have the opportunity to fulfil a relevant work experience as a part of their respective degree. We believe that sector-specific work placements, or traineeships, recognised with ECTS credits is a solution that should be offered to all students, together with the appropriate support from higher education institutions.

To facilitate the progressive transition from a traditional shaping of study programmes to a more entrepreneurial one, which goes hand in hand with a more practice-oriented education, additional bridges should be established between business actors and universities so that students can rely on their institution to act as a mediator. The parties should also create quality assurance guidelines to best ensure the quality of the student work experience.<sup>16</sup>

### **4. Creating or further developing bodies that manage business-university cooperation in the field of education at higher education institutions.**

Each higher education institution should consider creating a specific and dedicated body to strengthen the business-university cooperation in the field of education (e.g. Student’s career development office, etc.). Even if such bodies can already be found in some educational institutions, they are not always resourced in a fashion that corresponds to the magnitude of the challenges that are discussed in this document. In the latter case, we advocate for their further development.

The objectives and mission of these bodies would include managing and improving the current business partnerships of the institution, finding new labour market partners, facilitating the liaison with companies and students before, during and after their traineeship and/or graduation. They could also serve as an advisory body and support students and postgraduates who would like to improve their entrepreneurial skill set. Additionally, they could play a role in the co-design of the study programmes (see previous recommendation). In order to ensure a strong involvement of the civil society, co-funding could be sought from local/regional chambers of commerce, who in turn would have a formal vote in the planning of the bodies activities.

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14 European Commission (2013), Workbased learning in Europe: Practices and Policy pointers.

15 European Parliament (2017), Skills Development and Employment: Apprenticeships, Internships and Volunteering, p.44.

16 Within the framework of CAPQI project (Collaborative Awareness Platforms for Quality Internships, 2016-2018), quality assurance guidelines and recommendations have been drawn and could be used to build a new framework for any relevant parties. See: capqi-project.eu.

In a nutshell, the new or renewed body would ease the transition process of higher education students from the educational to the labour market environment. In parallel, it is important to highlight the fact that higher education institutions in general would need financial support in order to fulfil this task, especially those with less resources and capacity.

Up to now, many universities have offered various courses and personalised guidance to support students in choosing their professional paths and being prepared to work in a business environment. For example, at the IAE Nice, teaching units used to be part of every curriculum in order to support the personal and professional development of students.<sup>17</sup>

Although such a teaching unit is crucial for most student, it appeared that, from one student to another, the need for guidance might vary considerably and thus those teaching units might not be equally beneficial to all students. Considering this variable, in 2017 IAE Nice decided to open its Career Center, a one-stop-shop platform where students have access to job and internship offers, recruitment and information events and an orientation toolkit. According to the results obtained so far, this initiative has allowed to ensure that students receive face-to-face personalised guidance, but also a reduction of the overall costs linked to those activities. Additionally, the ties with the company and alumni networks have been reinforced.



In the framework of the #empl-oi project, local hubs at the partner universities have been developed to partially address such challenges. Their main activities fall under 3 categories:

1. organising work placements for incoming Erasmus+ students as well as for local students (tandems),
2. organising knowledge exchange meetups between companies' assets and academics in their respective environments,
3. organising several events a year to gather students, entrepreneurs and academics (e.g. job fairs).

The experience of the five number of hubs that have been setup under the aegis of the project shows that they do contribute for strong, continuous and win-win cooperation agreements between universities and society at large. They could thus prove a starting point for setting up results-oriented permanent structures that lead to a sustained decrease of skills mismatches and promote ever-closer cooperation with societal actors.

At the EU level such issues are currently addressed by the likes of the Erasmus+ Knowledge Alliances. These are well-resourced projects, but they may not go far enough with respects to embedding university-business cooperation in everyday curricular activities of higher education institutions. Such projects don't lend themselves, for structural reasons, for relationships to be nurtured from a long-term perspective and sustained accordingly, rendering the question of a stable and efficient resource allocation key.

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<sup>17</sup> For a master student at the IAE Nice, this unit represents 20 hours including plenary and hand-on sessions. ECTS are allocated. See for example: <http://unice.fr/iae/fr/formations/master-deuxieme-annee/metiers-du-management-marketing/m2-com>

## 5. Creating an effective feedback loop with the labour market actors.

As outlined in the conclusions of the guidelines<sup>18</sup>, we recommend universities to establish a continuous dialogue with labour market actors in order to create educational curricula that suits the entrepreneurial mindset. Ideally, the linkage should be made with labour market actors who are entrepreneurship-oriented and/or tend to apply innovative approaches to their activities, such as startups, incubators, etc.

According to a research published by the European Commission aimed at collecting the university-business cooperation (UBC) good practices in Europe based on thirty different case studies, “multiple UBC actors need to come together in order to truly deliver new and sustainable value to a region”<sup>19</sup>. One case study (Case 1 - SEA - Denmark) is particularly relevant as it tackles the issue of supporting entrepreneurship (SEA stands for Supporting Entrepreneurship at Aalborg University). The aim of the programme is to prepare students for the real world worklife as entrepreneurial employees, researchers or entrepreneurs.

The success of the project is well established through comprehensive activities, such as cooperation with entrepreneurs, training for teaching entrepreneurship or the development of incubators, and rely greatly on UBC. For example, the sustainability plan prescribes the following: “Incubators evaluate entrepreneurs’ needs in a mid-term evaluation discussion and a closing evaluation interview with a small group of entrepreneurs.”<sup>20</sup> and “The establishment of an entrepreneurship board to secure a continued focus on developing the problem-based learning model and the connection to entrepreneurship education.”<sup>21</sup>

As of today, a lot of information has been compiled by different civil society organisations and representative organisations from the business sector on what skills are necessary in today’s world of work and education<sup>22</sup> and this data could be a valuable resource for universities. Building on those sources, we believe that harvesting the employers’ opinion on what are the most commonly requested skills in their vacancies (hard and soft skills), what has changed in their needs or what are the forthcoming changes in their sector could be the next step in implementing an effective feedback loop between the stakeholders.

The challenges that universities will face are mostly linked to cost and time constraints when engaging with labour market actors. Indeed, employers and employees have very little time to allocate to questionnaires or interviews. Thus, it is the role of public authorities or specific bodies (see previous recommendation) to reconcile the obligations set by the businesses and the need of relevant feedback. Therefore, the question that would naturally emerge is how to best collect quality feedback, taking into consideration the limitations of the labour market and the limited resources of higher education institutions.

18 “As already stated, a constant dialogue between universities and companies should be established in order to create educational programmes.”, Empl-oi consortium (2018), *ibid.*, p. 17.

19 Munster University Science-to-Business Marketing Research Centre (2009), 30 good practice case studies in university-business cooperation, p.10.

20 Munster University Science-to-Business Marketing Research Centre (2009), *Op. Cit.*, p. 22.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

22 cf. HEGESCO report (2009), Development of Competencies in the World of Work and Education. World Economic Forum report (2016), The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth industrial Revolution. etc.

In order to do so, we believe that the method of investigation should be adapted to findings of previous surveys and adjusted over time by the scientific community so it remains up to date. Both quantitative and qualitative studies, depending on the sector, are recommended to conduct a comprehensive analysis as well as a broad and inclusive survey entrepreneur population<sup>23</sup>, including students and alumni.

Furthermore, it is important to disseminate the results of the studies and make sure that the right tools to encourage and facilitate the widespread dissemination are made available to universities. A digital tool could, for example, double as an open repository for higher education institutions and enable regional benchmarking activities that would help assess the extent to which key activities are being carried out.

## **6. Integrating real-life business project solving as a part of the curricula or non-formal learning activities.**

Vesa Taatila notes in his research results: “Entrepreneurial skills are learned via pragmatic real-life development projects.”<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, we believe that all students should have the opportunity to take part in business project solving as a part of their formal curricula or non-formal learning activities. This could be achieved by collaborating with public and private entrepreneurial actors so they can confront students with real-life problematics in the shape of consultancy projects or as a part of modules.

The integration of the entrepreneurial vision into the EHEA through real-life business project solving is a strategy adopting a win-win approach. In fact, there are several advantages to setting up such a practice:

- From the company’s perspective, collaborating with students is very beneficial as it empowers them to share the responsibility and the possibility to shape the future working generation’s mindset and skills. More practically, it gives them the opportunity to benefit from fresh ideas and possibly, develop projects in a more cost-efficient way.

- From the student’s perspective, being able to work individually or in groups as well as in cross-disciplinary groups with real world companies and being able to solve live business issues is a great opportunity to develop a set of skills that is highly valued by companies. Moreover, this would logically allow them to put into action their theoretical knowledge and facilitate the connection with the labour market.

- Finally, from the higher education institution’s point of view, enabling companies to reach the student group and propose their projects is a way of developing their pool of business partners and ensuring a continuous and evolutive cooperation. Besides the fact that integrating this practice could highly contribute to building a closer relationship with the professional world, this is also an easy solution to offer student-oriented learning that suits the labour and societal needs.

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<sup>23</sup> Public and private sector, SMEs and big companies, self-employed, etc.

<sup>24</sup> Vesa P. Taatila (2010), Learning entrepreneurship in higher education, Education + Training, p. 48.

## #empl-oi Consortium Members

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