



The ACCENT Project: Supporting International, Refugee and Women Entrepreneurs in Higher Education

University of Cologne (Germany), University of Granada (Spain) & University of Pavia (Italy)

ACCENT: Accessible Entrepreneurship – Empowerment for Global Futures is an Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership (2022–2025) that involved the University of Cologne, the University of Granada, and the University of Pavia. The project addressed the need for more inclusive entrepreneurship support in higher education, focusing on international and refugee students and women entrepreneurs. Based on qualitative research and cross-institutional collaboration, ACCENT identified barriers faced by these groups and developed coordinated institutional responses. The project produced practical outputs, including thematic handbooks, training materials, and train-the-trainer formats for higher education staff. The case study shows how collaboration between entrepreneurship centres, international offices, and academic units can strengthen support pathways and improve access to entrepreneurial opportunities, contributing to more inclusive and internationally connected entrepreneurship ecosystems.



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Year: 2026

HEInnovate dimensions



Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Background and Institutional Profiles | 3 |
| University of Cologne..... | 3 |
| University of Granada | 4 |
| University of Pavia | 4 |
| Rationale of the ACCENT Project..... | 4 |
| Initiative Description..... | 5 |
| Research Methods..... | 5 |
| Institutional Collaboration and Support Pathways | 6 |
| Partnership Roles and Responsibilities | 6 |
| Outcomes and Impact..... | 6 |
| Outputs and Tools Developed | 7 |
| Success Factors and Lessons Learned | 8 |
| Sustainability, Scalability and Transferability | 9 |
| Sustainability of the Project Outcomes | 9 |
| Transferability and Scalability of the Project Outcomes..... | 10 |
| Conclusion..... | 11 |
| Contacts and Sources..... | 12 |
| Contacts..... | 12 |
| Literature | 13 |
| Links..... | 13 |
| ACCENT Project..... | 13 |
| Universities, Organisations and other Initiatives | 13 |

Background and Institutional Profiles

ACCENT (**A**ccessible **E**ntrepreneurship – Empowerment for Global Futures) was developed as a joint project by the University of Cologne (Germany), the University of Granada (Spain) and the University of Pavia (Italy) to strengthen inclusive entrepreneurship support, with a focus on groups that are underrepresented in academic start-up activity. The project was funded through an ERASMUS+ funding programme by the European Commission and ran from March 2022 until the end of February 2025, when the funding period concluded.

Across the partnership, each university contributed through a different coordinating actor: the [International Office](#) at the University of Cologne, [the UGR Centre for Entrepreneurship](#) at the University of Granada, and the [Department of Economics and Management](#) at the University of Pavia. This distribution enabled the consortium to combine international, administrative, and academic perspectives.

Table 1 provides an overview of the institutional profiles of the three partner universities. The following sections briefly outline their strategic orientation regarding innovation, entrepreneurship, and internationalisation.

TABLE 1 UNIVERSITY PROFILES OF THE THREE ACCENT PROJECT PARTNERS

| Dimension | University of Cologne | University of Granada | University of Pavia |
|-----------------------------|--|--|---|
| Country | Germany | Spain | Italy |
| Founded | 1388 / re-established in 1919 | 1531 | 1361 |
| Profile | Comprehensive research university | Large public research university | Historic comprehensive university (city-campus) |
| Innovation Focus | Gateway Excellence Start-up Center | Knowledge exchange & societal engagement | Research, skills development and ecosystem links |
| Internationalisation | 10% international students; 500+ global partnerships; international liaison offices abroad | Strong Erasmus+ mobility; diverse international student body | English-taught programmes; Erasmus+ mobility; global partnerships |

University of Cologne

The [University of Cologne](#) (UoC) is a comprehensive research university located in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. It combines a strong research profile with an established international orientation and extensive global partnerships. Entrepreneurship is a central

component of the university's transfer mission and is supported through the Gateway Excellence Start-up Center, which provides structured support for start-up development, training, and networking. The International Office supports the Rectorate in the implementation of the university's internationalisation strategy: the Counselling Unit for International Students, the Academic Refugee Support and the Career Services International offer customised consultations as well as programmes and events for international and refugee students.

University of Granada

The [University of Granada](#) (UGR) is a public research university in southern Spain with a strong emphasis on knowledge exchange, societal engagement, and international cooperation. It is particularly recognised for its active participation in Erasmus+ mobility programmes and its diverse international student community. The university promotes innovation and entrepreneurship through dedicated institutional structures that connect academic activity with broader societal and economic development.

University of Pavia

The [University of Pavia](#) (UNIPV) is a historic comprehensive university in northern Italy with a strong academic tradition and an international outlook. Located near Milan, it is closely connected to a dynamic regional innovation ecosystem. The university combines research and skills development with a growing focus on innovation and entrepreneurship, supported by international programmes and partnerships that strengthen its global engagement.

Rationale of the ACCENT Project

European universities are increasingly expected to strengthen their third mission by translating academic knowledge into societal and economic impact. At the same time, institutions face growing pressure to attract, retain, and support international talent. These developments create new requirements for entrepreneurship support—particularly regarding inclusion and equal access to entrepreneurial opportunities.

ACCENT was developed to address a gap at the intersection of **entrepreneurship and internationalisation**. While entrepreneurship is increasingly understood as an instrument for societal transfer within the third mission, internationalisation has become a cross-cutting institutional priority across university governance, administration, and faculties. ACCENT connects these agendas by strengthening entrepreneurship support for groups that are less reached by standard support structures—especially **international and refugee students**, as well as **women entrepreneurs**.

The project responds to the observation that these **groups are less likely to found start-ups** (in case of women) or **face more barriers** (in the case of international and refugee

students) compared to local male students, despite often showing high motivation and potential. Although women constitute 51% of the total European population (Eurostat, 2024), recent data show that only 34.4% of the self-employed in Europe are women (Eurostat, 2020). Furthermore, the GUESSS study by the University of Granada shows that male students are more than twice as likely as female students to start a business during university, despite the higher number of female students (Fuentes-Fuentes et al., 2025). International and refugee students are not necessarily less entrepreneurial but often face stronger barriers such as the legal status constraints, limited support networks, restricted access to funding, and language barriers (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020).

ACCENT therefore aimed to better understand group-specific barriers and translate findings into practical institutional tools and support pathways.

Initiative Description

ACCENT was designed as a collaborative project with the objective **of improving institutional support for underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship**. The initiative focused primarily on two target categories:

- international and refugee students, and
- women entrepreneurs.

The project aimed to **identify group-specific barriers**, develop **tailored support tools**, and **strengthen cooperation** between university units involved in entrepreneurship support, internationalisation, and student services.

Research Methods

A core element of ACCENT was a **qualitative research phase** designed to better understand the needs of the target groups. Each partner university conducted **six interviews for each category**, covering:

- international and refugee students, who are entrepreneurs or interested in entrepreneurship,
- women entrepreneurs,
- start-ups born global or which became international, as well as counsellors/coaches of start-up centres who consult and support the three target groups

Interview topics addressed barriers and support needs, including administrative and legal aspects, funding eligibility conditions, networking opportunities, language and communication requirements, and the role of university support structures.

Institutional Collaboration and Support Pathways

A distinctive feature of the ACCENT project was its emphasis on cross-unit collaboration. **Workshops** brought together staff **from entrepreneurship centres, international offices, faculties, and administrative units** across the three partner universities. At the University of Cologne, relevant institutional structures include the counselling services for international and refugee students within the [International Office](#), the [Gateway Excellence Start-up Center](#) as well as professorships in entrepreneurship. At the University of Granada, the project engaged [UGR Emprendedora](#), a cross-university unit dedicated to fostering entrepreneurship, as well as the university's [Entrepreneurship Centre](#), together with researchers specialised in women's entrepreneurship.

Through joint workshops and exchange formats, the project developed a **conceptual support pathway** intended to guide international/refugee and women entrepreneurs through existing services more coherently, regardless of their initial point of contact within the university. Proposed elements included clearer referral mechanisms, enhanced coordination between units, and the concept of a bridging advisory role (referred to within the project as an "Accent Advisor").

Partnership Roles and Responsibilities

Within the ACCENT project, each university contributed through a different main coordinating actor and thematic focus, based on the expertise of the units involved. At the **University of Cologne**, the project brought a strong internationalisation perspective and particularly focused on entrepreneurship support for **international and refugee students**. The **University of Granada** took a leading role in the strand on **women's entrepreneurship**, including the development of a **self-assessment tool**. The **University of Pavia** contributed significantly to the project's work on **international entrepreneurship** including global born start-ups and internationalisation-oriented entrepreneurship formats.

Outcomes and Impact

The ACCENT initiative led to both tangible and immaterial outcomes. Institutionally, it **strengthened collaboration** between entrepreneurship centres and internationalisation units. The project also contributed to **increased visibility for start-ups** emerging from the university context.. Among the 49 start-ups interviewed, at least four were able to establish concrete collaborations with universities or external partners.

In terms of international entrepreneurship these cases include a start-up focusing on visa-related services for international students and another that entered cooperation with a major admissions platform for international students. Both examples illustrate how the project supported start-ups in gaining traction and accessing institutional networks.

In the case of women's entrepreneurship, the project has supported women's initiatives, including a venture aimed at creating meaningful connections between local artisans and visitors, and a digital platform led by a female entrepreneur that provides mentorship, guidance, and digital marketing support to other entrepreneurs. Through this support, both initiatives have gained access to resources, training, and visibility, enabling them to develop their projects, expand their impact, and contribute to fostering innovation and entrepreneurial growth.

Beyond individual cases, the project enhanced institutional awareness of the specific challenges faced by underrepresented groups and improved staff capacity to address these challenges in a structured way.

Outputs and Tools Developed

Based on the research phase and cross-institutional collaboration, the ACCENT project produced a set of **practical tools** designed to **strengthen inclusive entrepreneurship support** in higher education. The main outputs were developed as four project results, covering international acceleration formats, support for international and refugee entrepreneurship, women's entrepreneurship, and staff training resources:

1. [Handbook on Best Practices for „International Joint Acceleration Programmes“](#)

This handbook focuses on best practices for the internationalisation of incubators and accelerators and provides guidance for setting up International Joint Acceleration Programmes. It supports higher education institutions in **integrating internationalisation and entrepreneurship strategies** and highlights cooperation approaches between relevant university units and external partners.

2. [Handbook on Best Practices to Support International Students in Entrepreneurship](#)

This handbook addresses international students, including refugees and scholars, and examines the specific barriers they face when pursuing entrepreneurship in a host country. It provides practical guidance on how universities can strengthen support structures through improved counselling, intercultural competence, and access-oriented entrepreneurship services.

3. [Handbook on Entrepreneurial HEIs – Supporting Female Entrepreneurs](#)

This handbook focuses on women's entrepreneurship and outlines strategies for how higher education institutions, innovation centres, and incubators can better reach and support women founders. It considers country-specific and cultural factors influencing participation and provides recommendations to foster women's entrepreneurial empowerment in academic environments.

4. [Training Courses: International and Female Entrepreneurs](#)

These outputs consolidate findings from the three handbooks into structured training resources and self-assessment elements for higher education staff. The Train-the-Trainer approach was implemented through two intensive workshops in Cologne and Granada, focusing on supporting international entrepreneurship (including refugee entrepreneurship) and women's entrepreneurship.

For international entrepreneurship, the project developed an **online training course** for university staff. The course provides a general entrepreneurship toolkit and dedicated modules addressing the specific needs of international, refugee, and women entrepreneurs. The materials are designed to be transferable and usable beyond the ACCENT consortium.

For women's entrepreneurship, a complementary **self-assessment tool** was developed by the University of Granada. The tool enables institutions to reflect on their organisational openness and the effectiveness of their support structures for women entrepreneurs.

In addition, the project disseminated its outputs through multiplier events organised by all partners, bringing together university staff and external stakeholders to share results and promote wider uptake of the tools.

Success Factors and Lessons Learned

The ACCENT project generated a set of interrelated lessons that can be translated directly into key success factors for inclusive entrepreneurship support.

One of the most prominent findings is the central role of **networking**. Networking is a critical success factor in entrepreneurship, especially for international and women entrepreneurs. Access to professional networks facilitates knowledge exchange, mentorship, funding opportunities and market entry. Female students who have successfully opened a new venture **emphasise the importance of universities** improving their network of contacts and **acting as gate openers**, facilitating valuable connections and opportunities within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. In addition, establishing networks of women mentors and entrepreneurs can further empower female students, provide a support system and foster a sense of community.

International collaboration between universities also enables the creation of a **shared support network**, in which entrepreneurs can benefit from common resources and cultural exchange. Entrepreneurship and innovation centres with mentoring programmes can connect founders with experienced business leaders, promote equal access to funding opportunities and ensure a more balanced representation in start-up competitions, business meetings and networking activities.

Another important lesson concerns the organisation of support within higher education institutions. Effective support requires **coordination across university units**, rather than isolated services. The project has shown that fragmented structures can create barriers, particularly for target groups that already face administrative and informational challenges. Enhancing connections and exchanges between departments can promote a **stronger culture of entrepreneurship and interdisciplinary collaboration**. Aspiring entrepreneurs also highlight the need for improved spaces dedicated to innovation and collaboration, as well as stronger cooperation between departments.

Training programmes that equip students and researchers with the necessary skills and entrepreneurial mindset are essential in this context. In particular, **teaching entrepreneurship skills tailored for researchers** can help bridge the gap between academia and entrepreneurship. Participants also emphasised the importance of continued support beyond the initial stages to ensure sustained growth and success.

Furthermore, the importance of **intercultural competence** became evident throughout the project. Intercultural understanding and communication are essential for inclusive entrepreneurship support. This applies both to the interaction between advisors and participants and to the broader entrepreneurial environment in which international founders operate.

At the same time, the project highlighted the **strengths of the target groups** themselves. International students often demonstrate high levels of resilience and adaptability, which can be better leveraged through targeted institutional support. Recognising and building on these existing capacities allows universities to move beyond a deficit-oriented perspective and instead foster entrepreneurial potential in a more empowering way.

Overall, the ACCENT project underlines that successful entrepreneurship support depends not only on the availability of resources, but also on how these resources are structured, connected and adapted to the specific needs and strengths of the participants.

Sustainability, Scalability and Transferability

Sustainability of the Project Outcomes

The **consultation concept** developed within the ACCENT project demonstrates strong potential for long-term sustainability. Its design is deliberately anchored in existing university ecosystems and closely integrated into established institutional structures and services. Rather than creating stand-alone systems, the project builds on and connects existing resources, improving their visibility and accessibility while avoiding duplication of efforts. This approach enables the concept to be **maintained within institutional frameworks beyond the lifetime of the project**.

A key element supporting sustainability is the emphasis on reusability. The **handbooks** and [online training materials](#) developed within ACCENT can be **applied over the long term and updated** where necessary. This reduces organisational effort in future implementation cycles and allows the programme to evolve beyond its initial phase. In addition, the concept promotes internal capacity building through staff training and the development of advisory functions, embedding knowledge and expertise within the institution.

Although the ACCENT project has formally concluded, its concepts and tools are already being integrated into daily practice at the University of Cologne and partner institutions. While no additional funding is currently available for dedicated roles, the developed support pathways continue to be implemented through existing structures.

Transferability and Scalability of the Project Outcomes

In terms of transferability, the ACCENT consultation concept benefits from its clear structure and focus on widely shared challenges. The **consultation process**—from initial assessment to tailored support—**can be replicated in different contexts**, as it addresses common barriers faced by international and refugee students, including legal, linguistic, and cultural obstacles.

The **modular structure** of the consultation concept further **supports its transferability**. By offering flexible “building blocks” such as coaching, workshops, and language support, universities can adapt the programme to their specific institutional contexts and available resources. This modular approach allows for gradual implementation and scaling without requiring significant additional infrastructure, making the model **accessible to a wide range of higher education institutions**.

Beyond these structural aspects, the ACCENT project also demonstrates **transferability in the area of supporting women’s entrepreneurship**. While women entrepreneurs are receiving increasing attention at universities, gender disparities persist, partly due to traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and their lower representation in STEM fields. Within ACCENT, a structured approach was developed to support women in their entrepreneurial activities, which can be applied across different institutional contexts.

In this context, international collaboration between universities enables the creation of shared support networks in which women entrepreneurs can benefit from joint resources and cultural exchange. Entrepreneurship and innovation centres can implement mentoring programmes that **connect female founders with experienced business leaders**, promote equal access to funding opportunities, and ensure more balanced representation in start-up competitions, business meetings, and networking activities.

These examples illustrate that the ACCENT approach is not limited to specific target groups but can be adapted more broadly across institutional settings. At the same time, the **framework remains open enough to be adapted** to local conditions and institutional

priorities. The transnational collaboration between the partner universities demonstrates that the model is not limited to a single national setting but can function effectively across different higher education systems.

Its reliance on existing infrastructures and stakeholder networks lowers the threshold for adoption, making it particularly suitable for institutions seeking to strengthen inclusive entrepreneurship support without building entirely new systems. Overall, the ACCENT model offers a replicable framework for universities aiming to enhance inclusive entrepreneurship support across diverse higher education contexts.

Conclusion

The ACCENT project aimed to strengthen inclusive entrepreneurship support in higher education by addressing the needs of international and refugee students as well as women entrepreneurs. It responded to key challenges such as structural barriers, limited access to networks, and fragmented institutional support systems. Through cross-institutional collaboration and the development of practical tools and training formats, the initiative contributed to more coordinated, accessible, and inclusive support pathways. Overall, ACCENT demonstrates how universities can better align entrepreneurship and internationalisation strategies to unlock the potential of diverse student groups and foster more inclusive innovation ecosystems.

Contacts and Sources

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Links

ACCENT Project

- [ACCENT Project Results \(University of Cologne\)](#)
- [Handbook PR1: International Joint Acceleration Programmes](#)
- [Handbook PR2: International Students in Entrepreneurship](#)
- [Handbook PR3: Supporting Female Entrepreneurs](#)
- [Project website ACCENT](#)
- [Training materials and tools \(PR4\)](#)

Universities, Organisations and other Initiatives

- [University of Cologne](#)
- [International Office - University of Cologne](#)
- [University of Granada](#)
- [The UGR Centre for Entrepreneurship](#)
- [UGR Emprendedora](#)
- [University of Pavia](#)
- [Department of Economics and Management - University of Pavia](#)
- [GUESSS Survey](#)