Green HExagon: An International Pre-Incubation Programme for Green & Social Entrepreneurship

University of Latvia (Latvia), University of Tartu (Estonia), Riga Stradiņš University (Latvia), Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (Czech Republic), University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt (Austria), Flensburg University of Applied Sciences (Germany)

Abstract

Green HExagon is an international, primarily online pre-incubation programme for sustainable business ideas, run by university incubators in five European countries. Created within an Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership, it works at the pre-incubation stage, where ideas are still too early for an incubator or accelerator. Over four months, teams move from concept to pitch through weekly workshops, an in-person bootcamp and a closing competition, each idea tied to a Sustainable Development Goal. The programme has continued since 2023, outlasting its grant, growing from four partners to six and financing itself. Its main published output, the Green HExagon Handbook, documents how the programme is designed and run so that other institutions can also adapt it. The case shows what makes cross-border entrepreneurship support work: committed university leadership with staff and resources behind it, the ability to reach students, graduates and researchers, and a place in a wider start-up ecosystem.

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Table of Contents

Introduction and Rationale 3

Initiative Description 3

- Green HExagon Consortium 4
- Programme Design 5
- Delivery and Coordination 6
- Project Results 7

Programme Reach, Venture Outcomes, and Success Factors 8

- Participation and Reach 8
- Impact on Participating Ventures 9
- Success Factors 9

Challenges and Lessons Learned 10

- Challenges and how they were addressed 10
- Lessons learned 11

Sustainability, Transferability, and Scalability 11

- Sustainability 11
- Transferability 11
- Scalability 12

Conclusion and Future Outlook 12

Contact Details and Sources 13

- Contacts 13
- Sources 14

Introduction and Rationale

Green HExagon is an **international, primarily online pre-incubation programme for sustainable business ideas**, delivered jointly by university business incubators in five European countries. It was created within the Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership "Entrepreneurial teaching partnerships for fostering innovation and green startup development in higher education", co-funded by the European Union and coordinated by the University of Latvia. The Erasmus+ funding ran from November 2022 to November 2024, but the programme continues as an **annual, self-funded programme.**

The initiative responds to two developments in European higher education. Universities are increasingly expected to translate teaching and research into societal and economic value, and to do so in ways that address the climate and sustainability agenda set by the European Green Deal. At the same time, **internationalisation has become a cross-cutting institutional priority,** shaping how universities design and deliver support for student and graduate entrepreneurship.

Green HExagon connects these agendas at a **specific point in the start-up support chain**: the **pre-incubation stage**, which precedes an idea being ready for a formal incubator or accelerator. Support at this stage is usually organised within a single institution; Green HExagon delivers it **jointly**, so that participants work alongside teams, trainers and mentors from partner universities in other countries.

The programme grew out of a **needs analysis** carried out by the four founding incubators — the University of Latvia, the University of Tartu, the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, and University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt — while preparing the project application. All four identified the same requirement: more participant-centred training and support for the students, graduates, and staff they serve.

It also built on an existing collaboration. Three of the four founding incubators had previously worked together in HEI Innovation for Knowledge Intensive Entrepreneurship, (HIVE), a project funded under the EIT Higher Education Initiative (Call for Proposals - November 2021); the fourth was recruited through existing contacts. Each partner-Higher Education Institution (HEI) already operated start-up support at institutional level, but **none had delivered it internationally**. A joint, cross-border pre-incubation programme therefore represented the main new step.

Initiative Description

Green HExagon is a four-month, primarily online programme, delivered in English – addressed to students, graduates, researchers and staff of the partner universities. Applicants may join **individually or in teams of up to five members**. Teams may be cross-border and may include members from outside the partner universities, provided that at least half of the team is drawn from a partner institution.

The initiative pursues two connected objectives: to **identify and support sustainable start-up ideas**, and to do so through **international cooperation between university incubators**. Every application must demonstrate a link to at least one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with worked challenges in areas such as food-waste reduction, lower-impact agriculture, renewable energy, and inclusive education.

Its stated priorities are to stimulate innovative learning and teaching, to reward skills development with a strong focus on environment and climate, and to build transnational capacity by exchanging experience and best practice between university incubators. The design is organised around **six aspects of growth** — development, skills, collaboration, business, innovation, and the environment and climate — from which the programme takes its name.

Green HExagon Consortium

The programme is delivered by a **transnational consortium of university business incubators**. It began as a four-university partnership and has since grown to six partner universities across five countries. Rather than establishing new structures, the programme draws on units that already provide start-up support at each institution (see Table 1).

Roles are distributed according to institutional strengths. The University of Latvia coordinated the funded project, while the University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt has taken an **informal lead role** since the funding ended. Two further institutions joined after the funded period.

TABLE 1: UNIVERSITY INCUBATORS DELIVERING THE GREEN HEXAGON PROGRAMME (2026)

University	Country	Incubation unit contributing to the programme	Status in the programme
University of Latvia	Latvia	Student Business Incubator (the largest university business incubator in Latvia)	Project lead and administrative coordinator; founding partner; host of the 2024 bootcamp
University of Tartu	Estonia	Startup Lab (School of Economics and Business Administration)	Founding partner (2022–2024 project); continuing partner
Czech University of Life Sciences Prague	Czech Republic	Point One Business Incubator (Career Centre)	Founding partner (2022–2024 project); continuing partner

University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt	Austria	FHWN StartUp Center	Founding partner (2022–2024 project); continuing partner; host of the 2023 bootcamp, and host of the 2026 bootcamp
Riga Stradiņš University	Latvia	RSU Business Incubator	Joined in December 2024, after the funded project
Flensburg University of Applied Sciences	Germany	Interdisciplinary Institute for Entrepreneurship	Joined for the 2026 edition

During the funded period (2022–2024), the consortium worked through **four defined work packages** — project management, mutual learning and networking, building skills and competences, and international training and development — with clear responsibilities for each partner. When the funding ended, this formal structure gave way to a looser arrangement based on a set of shared principles.

Programme Design

The programme moves from idea to pitch over approximately **17 weeks**. It opens with a kick-off and team-formation event, followed by weekly online workshops, an in-person bootcamp, and a final start-up pitch competition (Demo Day). The 2026 edition illustrates this sequence: applications closed in early February, weekly online workshops ran from mid-February, the bootcamp took place in May, and the programme concluded with the Demo Day in June.

Team formation is treated as a competence in its own right rather than an administrative step. The kick-off opens with an introduction to value propositions, so that participants know what to emphasise when presenting an idea. Teams then pitch to each other in online breakout rooms and exchange feedback, while participants without a team or idea move between rooms until they identify a project to join.

The curriculum follows the venture-development sequence. Teams begin by defining who their idea is for and what problem it solves, test it with potential users, and shape it into a simple business plan. They then build and test an early working version of their product or service — **a minimum viable product (MVP)** — examine how the venture could generate and manage revenue, and develop practical skills – e.g., in marketing, the use of AI-tools, and pitching or story-telling.

Weekly sessions are scheduled in the late afternoon or evening, enabling participants to combine the programme with their studies and employment. **Group workshops** carry the core content, while **individual coaching** addresses the specific problems of each venture rather than general start-up topics.

Although delivery is primarily online, which makes international exchange straightforward, teams also meet in person for a **start-up bootcamp**. Two three-day bootcamps were held during the funded project: in 2023 at the University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt, and in 2024 in Riga. In 2026, the format was extended to a five-day week at the University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt (18–22 May), funded under an Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), a format combining short-term physical mobility abroad with a compulsory virtual component.

The 2026 bootcamp combined hands-on workshops with exposure to the local start-up ecosystem. Sessions covered team-building and leadership, online marketing and e-commerce, first steps in fundraising, customer acquisition and sales, and pitch training, alongside an excursion to the ViennaUP start-up festival and the SDG-aligned World Summit Award, a mentoring evening, and social activities.

The programme concludes with a virtual **Demo Day,** an international pitch competition. To participate, a project must have formed a team of at least two members and met a minimum attendance requirement of at least 60% of the programme activities.

Teams pitch to an **international jury,** with each partner nominating one jury member from the start-up ecosystem or industry network. The jury scores each presentation against **six criteria** — the venture's impact, its business model, the innovation level of the idea, market size and growth potential, the quality of the pitch, and the feasibility of realising it — while each partner separately rates the teamwork and in-programme progress of its own teams. Because the jury is drawn from outside the programme and has no prior contact with the projects, its evaluation stays independent; the partners' own scores are then weighed alongside it when the winners are decided.

Winners receive **recognition prizes** rather than venture funding. During the funded project a single joint prize was awarded (€5,000 at the 2024 Demo Day). Since 2025, each partner university funds its own recognition prize of €1,500, so that the total grows with the partnership, reaching €9,000 across the six universities in 2026.

Delivery and Coordination

Delivery is **distributed across the partner incubators** rather than managed from a single office. Under the programme regulations, a **Programme Management Group**, composed of appointed representatives from each partner-HEI, oversees the programme and takes the decisions that apply across the consortium — from admitting applicants to confirming the Demo Day results.

Recruitment and selection are handled locally but to shared standards. Each partner promotes an open call through its own and the programme's channels, and applicants submit a standard electronic form. Eligibility is fixed centrally: applicants must be **students, graduates, researchers or staff of a partner university.** At least half of each team must consist of such eligible participants, while the remaining members may come from outside the partner universities. The Programme Management Group then scores applications against a common rubric — the **clarity and innovativeness of the business idea**, the **mix of competencies in the team**, and its **motivation to see the idea through** — and admission requires each idea to address at least one United Nations Sustainable Development Goal, so the programme's sustainability focus is applied from the point of entry.

Day-to-day coordination follows the same distributed logic. Each institution assigns at least two local contact points, one main and one back-up, from its incubator staff to run the programme on the ground. The working group meets virtually every second week between November and June, and as required outside that period. Responsibility for the weekly sessions is allocated before each cohort begins, and **hosting of the annual bootcamp rotates between partners**, so no single institution carries the delivery load.

Mentoring and coaching are organised institution by institution, each partner-HEI operates through the incubator. At UAS Wiener Neustadt, this is the FHWN StartUp Center, whose staff coaches every participant and maintains a pool of mentors drawn from the university's alumni network, teaching staff, and industry and thematic experts. The two forms of support are sequenced deliberately: coaching runs from the outset, whereas mentoring is reserved for projects that complete the programme, since it adds little before an idea has taken shape. Mentors remain a local resource — the partners do not yet pool them across universities.

Progress is tracked locally and at a measured pace. At UAS Wiener Neustadt, the FHWN StartUp Center-team meets each project every three to four weeks alongside the weekly workshops, setting concrete tasks in between — e.g., defining customer segments, interviewing prospective clients, and building and testing early prototypes. Contact is deliberately spaced, since most participants are studying or working in parallel.

This distributed model **rests on shared resources.** Partners draw on jointly developed marketing materials — e.g., flyers, posters, social-media assets, videos and testimonials — and on standard video-conferencing, collaboration and messaging tools, with common online workspaces for internal coordination. During the funded project they also divided the content work, each organising part of the workshops and drawing trainers from its own network — an arrangement that has held as the partnership has grown.

Project Results

The main tangible output of the funded project is the **Green HExagon Handbook**, published by the four founding partners at the end of the project. It documents the programme model so that other institutions can also adapt and apply it. The Handbook covers the pre-incubation programme and the skills and leadership training, the organisation of bootcamps and other extra-curricular activities, collaboration with ecosystem partners, and common difficulties in pre-incubation teams.

Two of the approaches, as the Handbook describes, can be particularly applicable to other institutional contexts:

The first is **skills mapping**. Before designing the training, the partners surveyed their incubators' target groups to establish which skills aspiring entrepreneurs need most. The survey was built on two EU competence frameworks — EntreComp (the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework) and GreenComp (the European Sustainability Competence Framework) — and asked respondents to rate both the importance of each skill and their confidence in it. The resulting ranking shaped the skills and leadership training, and the Handbook recommends repeating the mapping before, during and after a programme to evidence participants' progress.

The second is the **link to degree teaching and formal recognition**. Participation is primarily extra-curricular, and earning ECTS is not the main motivation for participants, but each partner decides for itself whether and how to connect the programme to credits. At the University of Tartu, students on a taught entrepreneurship course took part in the programme alongside their coursework, developing their projects in class and in the programme at the same time. The international bootcamp-week currently carries 3 ECTS — as required of any Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), the scheme under which the bootcamp is funded. The Handbook also examines the EU approach to **micro-credentials** as a possible way to certify what participants learn in future editions.

Programme Reach, Venture Outcomes, and Success Factors

Participation and Reach

Green HExagon has run annually since 2023, with four editions delivered to date. Across all editions and partner universities, it has reached **close to 400 individual participants**, with between 60 and 120 entering each year, drawn from a comparable number of applications.

Participation narrows over each cycle in a pattern that recurs year on year. Roughly half of those who start the programme withdraw partway through, and **between 10 and 20 projects reach the final Demo Day**. This is regarded as normal, since most participants are also studying or working, and the programme allows people to test an idea and step away if it does not suit them. At UAS Wiener Neustadt, **approximately one third of the teams that reach the Demo Day go on to register a company**, and several secure follow-on funding or a place in an incubator or accelerator. The consistency of this progression across editions, rather than in a single strong cohort, indicates that the outcomes reflect the programme's design.

Individual editions illustrate these figures. The 2024 cycle drew a record of **106 applications**; its bootcamp in Riga brought together **58 participants** from four countries, and **15 projects** competed at the Demo Day for a prize of up to €5,000. The 2026 edition followed the same pattern at a larger scale, with six partner universities, **16 projects** at the Demo Day, and a total prize fund of €9,000.

Impact on Participating Ventures

The programme's impact is most visible through the **ventures** themselves.

MossHub, winner of the 2024 Demo Day and the €5,000 top prize, addresses urban air pollution by cultivating moss tiles in a controlled greenhouse environment and mounting them on freestanding outdoor displays, so that the moss functions as a natural air filter. During the programme the team developed a five-year business plan, refined its investor and sales pitches, and opened negotiations with a first pilot customer, identifying the sessions on the EU Green Deal, the pitch preparation, and the meetings with business angels as most useful.

Earlier teams demonstrate a comparable pattern of **small grants applied to concrete development.** Gutopia, which produces plant-based kefir from cashews, hazelnuts and soy, invested its €3,000 grant in production premises, marketing materials, and ingredients for a scale-up batch.

Impact is not confined to prize winners. One Austrian participant founded the company BeResilient during the programme, developing its brand BeanSaver®, which converts used coffee grounds into products such as fertiliser pellets. The venture secured the energy company OMV as its first client, was later funded by Austria Wirtschaftsservice (aws), the Austrian federal promotional bank, and continued in a regional accelerator.

Lentea - 'Pflege am Hof' followed a comparable path. The Austrian venture creates care places for people with dementia on working farms, and took shape at UAS Wiener Neustadt, where two of its founders met through the programme. Supported by the FHWN StartUp Center since early 2024, it went on to win the 2024 Social Impact Award, and continued its journey and development in a subsequent Austria Wirtschaftsservice (aws) funded incubator. Ventures such as these also feed back into the programme: former participants are regularly invited to later cohorts as speakers and mentors.

Success Factors

Three factors emerge as decisive for the programme's effectiveness. A central one is **commitment from university leadership**, backed by dedicated staff and clearly assigned responsibilities. A local contact point functions in practice only where the university operates an incubator with resources of its own; without such a function, participation becomes difficult to sustain.

The **ability to reach the target group** also contributes to success. Recruiting students, graduates, staff and researchers is essentially a marketing task within the university, and beyond it, where graduates are concerned, and depends on the same dedicated staff.

Finally, **embeddedness in a wider start-up ecosystem** supports the programme at both ends. Within the university, this means recognition and support from colleagues acting as experts or speakers. Outside the university, this means e.g., follow-on programmes, incubators and accelerators, mentors, and access to public funding, larger than the programme's own recognition prizes.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Challenges and how they were addressed

The programme's **most significant challenge came with the end of the Erasmus+ funding** in November 2024. During the funded period, responsibilities had been fixed by the project's work packages. Once these lapsed, the roles of the partner universities became less clearly defined, and the structure that had held the consortium together no longer applied.

The response was to place the collaboration on a durable foundation rather than to let it dissolve. The partners agreed to continue on the understanding that the programme achieves more when delivered jointly than any single university could achieve alone, and governance passed to a **standing cooperation agreement** between the universities. This step followed from a practical need: with no grant contract to bind six autonomous institutions to shared commitments, the agreement supplied what the funding had previously guaranteed, namely a common set of principles, equal contributions, minimum participation targets, and an agreed procedure for cases where a partner falls short. The programme's regular coordination then operated within this framework, rather than under the grant's framework.

The durability of the arrangement is evident in what followed. Rather than breaking-up the partnership between the HEIs once the funding ended, the consortium grew, with two further institutions joining on the same terms.

A second, **lower-level challenge is attrition within each cohort**. This is treated as a characteristic of the model rather than a fault in it. Participation is voluntary and paced so that participants can step away when studies or work intervene, and the integrity of the Demo Day is preserved by the minimum-attendance requirement alone.

Lessons learned

The first lesson concerns the **sequencing of support.** Coaching is valuable from the outset and is offered to every participant, whereas mentoring is held back until a project has a defined concept, since it tends to confuse rather than assist at the raw-idea stage. Distinguishing the two, and timing them differently, proved more effective than offering both at once.

The second concerns **consortium size**. Each additional partner increases the coordination the group must absorb and adds an obligation to help host the shared bootcamp. A deliberately manageable consortium is therefore preferable to rapid enlargement, even where further partners could readily be found.

The third concerns the conditions under which the model can take root. **The programme relies on each partner-HEI having a functioning incubator with staff of its own,** since a local contact point cannot be sustained without one and participation falters where it is absent. Green HExagon works, in other words, as a layer that reinforces existing institutional structures rather than as a free-standing initiative, and this dependence is a condition of adoption as much as an explanation of its resilience.

Sustainability, Transferability, and Scalability

Sustainability

The programme's continuation after 2024 indicates that its financial basis is sound. Because each partner funds its own participation from the budget of a unit it already operates, sustaining the programme requires **staff time rather than a dedicated budget line**, and no partner depends on another's contribution to keep taking part. The recognition prize scales with membership rather than with any external grant, so the programme's core costs do not rise faster than the consortium that carries them.

Governance provides a second foundation. Because the collaboration rests on a **standing agreement** rather than a time-limited grant, it can absorb changes in membership without renegotiation, which is what has allowed the consortium to add partners rather than lose them. Sustainability is therefore **structural** rather than dependent on continued funding.

Transferability

The **pre-incubation gap** the programme addresses is not specific to its founding partners, which makes the model **broadly applicable** across institutions. Its design supports this in two ways. Because delivery is primarily **online**, a prospective adopter needs little more than staff and access to its own students to take part. And because the model accommodates **local variations** without fragmenting, partners can recognise participation differently, from a credit-bearing course at one university to ECTS for bootcamp-participation at another, while delivering still a single shared programme.

The clearest indication of transferability is that the model has **already been taken up**. Two universities adopted it after the funded project and integrated it into their existing incubators without altering the programme's design.

Scalability

The programme's **scalability varies by component**. Its online elements accommodate additional participants and additional partners at **little marginal cost**, which is why growth has so far come from **widening the consortium** rather than enlarging cohorts at individual universities. The **in-person bootcamp** represents the main constraint, as it must be hosted and resourced by a partner-HEI each year, and every new member adds to this shared responsibility. The programme can therefore scale in line with the consortium's **collective capacity to host an annual in-person event**, which the partners manage through a rotating host arrangement.

Conclusion and Future Outlook

Green HExagon shows how a group of university incubators can turn a short funding period into a **lasting international programme.** Its defining features have remained stable while the funding model, the partnership and the prize structure changed around them: an SDG-linked focus, an international pre-incubation stage, and delivery shared across equal partners.

The case also shows that **internationalisation and entrepreneurship support can reinforce one another**. Cross-border cooperation gives participants experience and networks that no single institution could offer, while the shared model distributes both the cost and the learning across the group.

Looking to the future, **mentoring** is the clearest area for development. The partners intend to professionalise and organise it more systematically, building on the finding that mentoring works best once a project has taken shape. Combining the separate institutional mentor pools into a shared international pool is seen as a natural next step, with scope for synergies across the group.

A second direction is **measured expansion**. The partners are actively looking for further universities, while keeping the consortium manageable in size — a limit set by the coordination each addition requires. Both priorities keep the programme's focus where it has been since 2023: on moving early ideas towards viable ventures, and on doing so across borders rather than within a single institution.

Contact Details and Sources

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