



Building a Pre-Incubation Ecosystem through City–University Collaboration: Helsinki’s Campus Incubators Programme

Aalto University, University of Helsinki, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences
(Finland)

Abstract

The Campus Incubators Programme in Helsinki brings together the City of Helsinki and higher education institutions to strengthen very early-stage entrepreneurship support. Aalto University, the University of Helsinki and Metropolia University of Applied Sciences deliver complementary pre-incubation activities that help students, researchers and other potential entrepreneurs develop ideas, build entrepreneurial skills and progress towards further incubation and acceleration. The case highlights the importance of public support, institutional embedding and cooperation across the local start-up ecosystem.



Authors: Hannes Jesar, Caroline Friedhoff

Year: 2026

HEInnovate dimensions:



Table of Contents

Background and Institutional Profiles.....	3
Aalto University.....	3
University of Helsinki.....	3
Metropolia University of Applied Sciences.....	4
Rationale for the Programme	4
Initiative Design and Delivery.....	5
Programme design and governance	5
Access and participation	5
The three pre-incubators.....	5
University of Helsinki – Pathways.....	6
Aalto University – Aalto Creatives	7
Metropolia UAS – Turbiini.....	7
Shared support and progression pathways.....	7
Impact.....	8
Institutional impact	8
Regional and economic impact.....	8
External recognition.....	8
Challenges, Success Factors and Lessons Learned	9
Participation and resourcing challenges	9
Success factors.....	9
Lessons learned	10
Sustainability, Scalability and Transferability	10
Sustainability	10
Scalability.....	10
Transferability.....	11
Conclusions and outlook	11
Contact Details and Sources	12
Contacts	12
Links.....	13
Literature.....	13

Background and Institutional Profiles

[The Campus Incubators Programme](#) is led and funded by the City of Helsinki and implemented in partnership with higher education institutions in the Helsinki region. It aims to increase the number and quality of **start-ups, strengthen research, development and innovation (RDI)-based entrepreneurship**, and improve the growth potential of **new companies**, and develop university campuses as hubs for innovation and new business creation.

In its current phase, covering 2025–2027, the programme is implemented with **three higher education partners**: [Aalto University](#), the [University of Helsinki](#) and [Metropolia University of Applied Sciences](#). Each institution has developed its own approach to pre-incubation, reflecting its disciplinary profile, mission and existing entrepreneurship activities, while contributing to the programme’s shared objectives.

Aalto University

Aalto University is a foundation-based research university with around 16,000 students and 5,200 staff across six schools spanning science, technology, business, and art and design. Established in 2010 through the merger of three universities, it was [designed to foster innovation](#) by bringing scientific, business and creative disciplines together.

Entrepreneurship is closely connected to multidisciplinary innovation and the commercialisation of research. The [Aalto start-up ecosystem](#) produces more than 100 new companies each year, while student-led initiatives such as [Slush](#) and [Junction](#) originated within its community. Within the Campus Incubators Programme, Aalto focuses particularly on the creative industries through [Aalto Creatives](#), supporting early-stage ideas in fields such as design, fashion, film and television, gaming, media, music and sound.

University of Helsinki

The University of Helsinki is Finland’s oldest and largest university, with more than 31,000 students and around 8,000 staff members across 11 faculties and four campuses. It is a multidisciplinary research university with a strong international research profile.

Innovation, entrepreneurship and the commercialisation of research have become important institutional priorities, with particular emphasis on developing the commercial potential of scientific discoveries, technologies and intellectual property. These activities are brought together under [Helsinki Incubators](#), the university’s wider incubation and entrepreneurship initiative, which includes [Pathways](#), a general pre-incubator for early-stage ideas. Within the Campus Incubators Programme, the university has a particular focus on research-based and deep-tech entrepreneurship.

Metropolia University of Applied Sciences

Metropolia University of Applied Sciences is Finland's largest university of applied sciences, with around 19,000 students and more than 1,100 staff. It provides education across business, culture, healthcare and social services, and technology, and operates on four campuses in the Helsinki metropolitan area.

Its approach to entrepreneurship reflects its practice-oriented and industry-facing mission, linking innovation activities with applied research, professional education and collaboration with companies and public-sector organisations. Through its [Turbiini incubator](#), Metropolia provides sector-based pre-incubation support across fields including business, healthcare and wellbeing, construction, creative industries, IT and engineering, and gaming.

Rationale for the Programme

The [Campus Incubators Programme](#) was initiated by the City of Helsinki to address a **gap in the local start-up ecosystem at the earliest stage of business development**. Helsinki already had a range of private and public-private incubators and accelerators, but comparatively little support was available before ventures were ready to enter these programmes. As this pre-incubation stage is difficult to sustain commercially, the city chose to intervene directly rather than rely on the private market to provide this support.

The programme therefore focuses on **pre-incubation**, helping participants develop the foundations needed to progress towards more advanced incubation and acceleration. Depending on the programme, participants learn to develop and validate a business idea, understand customer needs, build a team and address areas such as sales and marketing. They may also use approaches such as Lean Startup and service design to develop prototypes, proofs of concept or minimum viable products.

Higher education institutions are central to this approach because they reach students, researchers and other potential entrepreneurs before they would normally enter the start-up ecosystem. They integrate entrepreneurship into education, provide access to facilities, expertise and networks, and offer a relatively low-risk environment in which participants can test ideas. Some institutions also incorporate pre-incubation into formal courses, allowing students to receive ECTS for participation.

A further rationale is cultural. **Entrepreneurship is not regarded by all students as an obvious or credible career path** and, depending on the discipline, may carry negative associations. The programme therefore seeks not only to support new ventures, but also to strengthen entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial mindsets. While entrepreneurship refers to creating and developing new ventures, intrapreneurship involves applying entrepreneurial

thinking and initiative within an existing organisation. The programme thereby aims to make entrepreneurship a more visible and accessible career option.

Initiative Design and Delivery

Programme design and governance

The **City of Helsinki** initiated the Campus Incubators Programme and acts as both **funder and development partner**. The individual higher education institutions are responsible for designing and delivering their own pre-incubation programmes, allowing them to adapt the content and format to their institutional profiles and target groups. Some programmes are organised as courses and can therefore form part of students' studies.

The first phase ran from 2021 to 2024 and involved seven higher education institutions. Following a reduction in the City's available budget, the current phase, covering 2025–2027, was narrowed to three partners: Aalto University, the University of Helsinki and Metropolia University of Applied Sciences. Beyond funding, the **city coordinates cooperation between the universities, connects the incubators with the wider Helsinki innovation ecosystem and supports the development of clearer pathways** between different forms of entrepreneurship support. In the longer term, the aim is for the campus incubator network to operate increasingly independently of City coordination.

Access and participation

A defining characteristic of the pre-incubators is their **low threshold for participation**. Participants do not necessarily need an established company or a fully developed business idea. Depending on the programme, they may enter with an identified problem, an early idea, research with potential applications or an existing young business.

The programmes **mainly address students, researchers and alumni**, although access and admission differ between institutions. The University of Helsinki and Aalto Creatives also accept applicants from outside their own university communities. Turbiini operates mainly through course enrolment, while Aalto Creatives and Helsinki Incubators use application and selection processes.

The **relationship with formal education** also **varies**. At Metropolia, the main on-site pre-incubation programme is currently offered as a 10 ECTS elective course, alongside a shorter online option. At the University of Helsinki, participation in Pathways can be registered for 5 ECTS, although individual degree programmes determine whether the credits can be incorporated into a particular degree.

The three pre-incubators

Each partner runs a pre-incubator reflecting its institutional profile. Table 1 summarises the main differences.

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF THE THREE PARTNER PRE-INCUBATORS IN THE 2025–2027 PHASE

	Aalto University	University of Helsinki	Metropolia UAS
Pre-incubator	Aalto Creatives, for the creative industries	Pathways, a general pre-incubator within Helsinki Incubators	Turbiini
Main focus	Creative industries, including design, fashion, film and television, gaming, media, music and sound	General early-stage entrepreneurship, with wider Helsinki Incubators activities particularly linked to research-based and deep-tech entrepreneurship	Early-stage entrepreneurship across business, healthcare and wellbeing, construction, creative industries, IT and engineering, and gaming
Main target groups	People with a professional or educational background in the creative fields who live in the Helsinki capital region	Students, researchers, staff and alumni from all faculties, as well as other applicants from the Helsinki metropolitan area	Primarily Metropolia students and alumni across disciplines; open UAS students can also participate
Format	12-week programme combining workshops, individual coaching and mentoring	Two-month programme combining lectures, workshops, coaching and peer learning	Credit-bearing pre-incubation courses combining lectures, workshops, coaching, mentoring and practical development work
ECTS	Varies according to participation and institutional arrangements	5 ECTS can be registered for participation	Main on-site programme currently 10 ECTS, alongside a shorter online option
Progression	Access to Aalto's wider start-up ecosystem and continued alumni support	Participants can progress to later Helsinki Incubators programmes, including Journeys	Follow-up coaching and mentoring, small-scale financial support, and referrals to other incubators where appropriate

University of Helsinki – Pathways

Pathways is a two-month interdisciplinary pre-incubator within Helsinki Incubators. Participants can enter with an identified problem, an early business idea or research for which they want to explore a practical or commercial application. The programme combines lectures, workshops, coaching and peer learning on topics including business modelling, teamwork, communication, feedback and financial planning. Participants can

engage as either “Explorers”, who investigate entrepreneurship alongside other activities, or “Builders”, who commit more intensively to developing an idea towards a business. More advanced teams can subsequently progress to other Helsinki Incubators programmes (e.g. [Journeys](#) incubator).

Aalto University – Aalto Creatives

[Aalto Creatives](#) is a 12-week pre-incubator for the creative industries. It runs twice a year and combines weekly workshops with individual coaching and tailored mentoring. Topics range from entrepreneurial mindset and service design to go-to-market strategy, funding, intellectual property, team building, branding and pitching. The programme concludes with a Demo Day, and participants also gain access to Aalto's wider start-up ecosystem and relevant research infrastructure.

Metropolia UAS – Turbiini

[Turbiini](#) is Metropolia's pre-incubator and entrepreneurial community and has operated since 2015. Its programmes are organised around sectoral areas including business; healthcare, wellbeing and construction; creative industries; IT and engineering; and gaming. Metropolia also operates the [Living Game Intelligence Network](#), which provides a dedicated incubation environment for game developers. Participants work with tools such as service design, business modelling and Lean Startup and address topics including customer understanding, pricing, financial planning, sustainability, prototyping, marketing and pitching. Metropolia's applied profile also gives participants access to specialist environments where prototypes can be developed and tested.

Shared support and progression pathways

Although the three pre-incubators differ in profile, they share an emphasis on **coaching, mentoring, peer learning and access to wider university resources**. Their mentor networks are organised differently: Metropolia draws strongly on internal staff and lecturers, the University of Helsinki works substantially with external industry mentors, and Aalto Creatives combines internal and external expertise.

The partners also create pathways between programmes rather than operating as separate offers. Joint activities include networking between participants, while teams can be referred to another programme when it provides a better next step. Support may continue after the formal programme through mentoring, coaching and referrals to later-stage services. At Turbiini, participants can also apply for up to **EUR 1,000** through the [Nanobuusti support](#) scheme to cover specific needs such as prototype development or marketing services.

Impact

Institutional impact

The programme has contributed to **making entrepreneurship more visible** within the participating higher education institutions. At Metropolia UAS, for example, the expansion of entrepreneurship activities has increased interest among students as well as staff and lecturers. This is particularly relevant in fields such as heavy industry, construction and healthcare, where entrepreneurship has traditionally not been seen as an obvious career path. In the creative industries, entrepreneurship has more often taken the form of self-employment, while the potential for business growth has not always been fully recognised.

The pre-incubators also develop skills relevant beyond starting a company. Participants learn to **approach problems from different perspectives, identify opportunities** and **test assumptions** through research and validation. They also develop resilience and a greater tolerance for uncertainty and failure. At institutional level, pre-incubation has created more structured pathways connecting education, RDI activities and entrepreneurship services with later-stage incubation and acceleration.

Regional and economic impact

The first phase of the [Campus Incubators Programme](#) (2021–2024) produced measurable results across the participating institutions. In total, **18 incubator programmes** were delivered across 11 campuses and attracted **more than 1,400 participants**. More than **200 entrepreneurs started new businesses**, while participating teams raised more than **EUR 16 million in funding**, most of which came from private investment. These figures were based on monitoring by the seven participating higher education institutions and subsequently aggregated by the City of Helsinki, although the indicators used varied somewhat between institutions.

The wider university incubation ecosystem also shows the types of ventures that can develop as teams progress beyond early-stage support. Examples include [Bubbles with Benefits](#) at Aalto University, which is developing a wood-based biodegradable alternative to plastic bubble wrap and packaging foam, and [ReLIGHT](#) at the University of Helsinki, which is developing catalyst technology for renewable hydrogen production.

External recognition

In 2025, the Campus Incubators Programme [won the Finnish national stage of the European Enterprise Promotion Awards](#) in the category *Improving the business environment and promoting the entrepreneurial spirit*. It subsequently represented Finland at the European level and was selected as one of the [European finalists](#).

Challenges, Success Factors and Lessons Learned

Participation and resourcing challenges

One of the main challenges is the **limited time students and researchers can dedicate to pre-incubation** alongside their academic commitments. For students, participation may compete with elective courses or fixed degree requirements, while researchers often have little capacity beyond their research responsibilities.

Recruitment also requires **communication tailored to different audiences**. Messages that appeal to students already interested in start-ups may not resonate with those in healthcare, social sciences or other disciplines. Entrepreneurship therefore needs to be communicated in ways that connect with the interests and motivations of different target groups.

Some practical barriers have proved easier to address. Credits gained through a programme at another participating institution can, for example, be recognised by a student's home institution on the basis of documentation of participation. People who are not enrolled at a partner institution may in some cases participate through open university or open university of applied sciences routes.

Scaling participation creates a further **challenge**, as larger cohorts require more programme coordinators, coaches, mentors and teaching staff. Communication also needs dedicated resources rather than being added to the responsibilities of programme managers.

Success factors

A central success factor has been the extent to which pre-incubation is **embedded within the participating institutions**. The programmes are more likely to become sustainable when they have a clear organisational home, support from senior leadership, sufficient autonomy and stable resources. At Metropolia, for example, programme coordination is anchored in RDI activities, while faculties contribute staff and teaching resources.

Another success factor is the **flexibility to adapt the offer to each institution's strengths and communities**. Rather than imposing a single model, the programme allows universities to develop approaches that reflect their disciplinary profiles, student populations and innovation activities.

Commitment across organisational levels has also been important. The City of Helsinki has supported the initiative from senior leadership through to operational coordination, while the participating higher education institutions have involved rectors, directors and deans as well as implementation staff.

Lessons learned

The experience suggests that **strong organisational foundations should be established before launching entrepreneurship programmes**. Long-term sustainability depends on clear responsibilities, adequate financing, sufficient personnel and support from senior leadership.

Programme design should then respond to the **needs and characteristics of the target groups**. Metropolia's sector-based model, for example, reflects its fields of education, while Aalto University and the University of Helsinki build on their respective disciplinary and research strengths. A shared programme framework therefore does not require identical implementation across institutions.

Finally, **sufficient staffing and dedicated communication capacity are essential**. Pre-incubation relies heavily on personal interaction, coaching and relationship-building, making it difficult to expand without corresponding investment in people and resources.

Sustainability, Scalability and Transferability

Sustainability

Long-term sustainability has been considered from the outset, although the degree of institutionalisation differs between the participating universities. At Metropolia, for example, Turbiini was designed so that its **core activities could continue beyond the current City funding period in 2027**. External funding has enabled activities to be delivered at a larger scale, but faculties and schools have committed lecturer resources to support continuation afterwards.

Turbiini has also become an established part of Metropolia's entrepreneurship infrastructure, with responsibility for venture building, entrepreneurship education and the development of entrepreneurial culture. The longer-term model is therefore likely to involve some adjustment in scale, with resources concentrated on the most important core functions.

Scalability

The programme could be expanded through **joint pre-incubation activities between higher education institutions**, rather than only by increasing the size of individual programmes. Joint delivery would allow partners to pool staff, expertise and financial resources while reaching a larger and more diverse group of participants.

Scaling also creates practical challenges. Differences in IT systems, administrative procedures and enrolment processes can complicate cross-institutional delivery, while larger applicant pools increase the workload associated with selection and coordination.

Maintaining the quality of programme content, coaching and participant support also requires corresponding investment in staff and resources.

Transferability

Several elements of the programme can be transferred to other higher education institutions or regions, particularly **programme structures, learning content and practical pre-incubation tools**. Topics such as customer validation, business modelling, prototyping, team development and pitching are relevant across different contexts, although they need to be adapted to particular disciplines and participant groups.

The partners have also begun using shared approaches such as the [KTH Innovation Readiness Level](#), a framework for assessing the progress of ideas, teams and start-ups. Such tools can provide a more consistent basis for identifying strengths, gaps and appropriate next steps.

Transferability, however, depends on more than copying programme content. The Helsinki model also relies on **institutional commitment, partnerships and a collaborative ecosystem** in which organisations are willing to share successful practices as well as approaches that have not worked. These conditions are likely to be more difficult to replicate than the programme content itself.

Conclusions and outlook

The Campus Incubators Programme shows how a city and higher education institutions can work together to address a gap in **very early-stage entrepreneurship support**. Its distributed model allows each institution to build on its own strengths while contributing to a shared regional objective: creating stronger pathways from initial ideas to more advanced incubation and acceleration.

Looking ahead, one priority is to strengthen the **long-term financial basis for pre-incubation**. The participating higher education institutions consider it difficult to sustain this type of support at meaningful scale through their own resources alone. A future priority is therefore to develop a stronger advocacy approach towards ministries and other public authorities to secure continued public support.

A second priority is to **deepen cooperation between the participating institutions**. Joint task forces are expected to work on areas such as communications and marketing, events, joint programmes and the exchange of expertise. Staff exchanges, for example through guest workshops or facilitation across programmes, could also help make better use of expertise across the network.

At institutional level, the partners will continue to **refine** their **existing programmes**, strengthen their visibility and build a more stable financial base. For Turbiini, this also means

further consolidating its role within Metropolia and ensuring that its core activities remain sustainable beyond the current funding period.

Contact Details and Sources

Contacts

Hannes Jesar

Project Manager at Metropolia University of Applied Sciences for the Campus Incubators Programme and the Team Lead of Entrepreneurship Team in Emerging Technology and Entrepreneurship Innovation Hub. Contributor for the HEInnovate case study.



Hannes.Jesar@metropolia.fi



[Connect on LinkedIn](#)



[Metropolia University of Applied Sciences](#), Finland

Caroline Friedhoff

Senior Project Manager, responsible for conducting interviews, analysing data, and structuring content for the development of case studies and user stories for the HEInnovate Project.



caroline.friedhoff@che.de



[Connect on LinkedIn](#)



[CHE – Centre for Higher Education](#), Germany

Natalya Sharovatova

Project Manager, responsible for conducting interviews, analysing data, and structuring content for the development of case studies and user stories for the HEInnovate Project.



natalya.sharovatova@che.de



[Connect on LinkedIn](#)



[CHE – Centre for Higher Education](#), Germany

Ari Huczkowski

The Programme Manager & Deputy Team Leader for Helsinki Incubators.



Ari.huczkowski@helsinki.fi



[Connect on LinkedIn](#)



[Helsinki Incubators](#), Finland

Ari Kivimäki

Project manager at Aalto Studios.

 ari.kivimaki@aalto.fi

 [Aalto Creatives](#)

Links

1. [Aalto Creatives](#)
2. [Aalto start-up ecosystem](#)
3. [Aalto University](#)
4. [Bubbles with Benefits](#)
5. [Campus Incubators Programme – City of Helsinki](#)
6. [Helsinki Incubators](#)
7. [Junction](#)
8. [KTH Innovation Readiness Level](#)
9. [Living Game Intelligence Network \(LGIN\)](#)
10. [Metropolia University of Applied Sciences](#)
11. [Pathways – University of Helsinki](#)
12. [ReLIGHT](#)
13. [Slush](#)
14. [Turbiini](#)
15. [University of Helsinki](#)

Literature

City of Helsinki (2025). Campus Incubators Programme. Page updated 24 November 2025. Available at: hel.fi/en/business-and-work/campus-incubators-programme (accessed 17 June 2026).

City of Helsinki (2023). The Campus Incubators programme supports research-based entrepreneurship. News article, 19 December 2023. Available at: [hel.fi news article](#) (accessed 17 June 2026).

University of Helsinki (2026). Pathways – Pre-Incubator. Helsinki Incubators. Available at: helsinki.fi/.../pathways-pre-incubator (accessed 17 June 2026).

Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2025). Campus Incubators and Spark to represent Finland at the European Entrepreneurship Promotion Awards. 18 June 2025. Available at: [tem.fi announcement](#) (accessed 17 June 2026).

European Commission (2025). Announcing the national winners of the EEPA 2025. Futurium / Promoting Enterprise. Available at: futurium.ec.europa.eu (accessed 17 June 2026).