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Cultivating Skills, Mindsets, and Innovation: The Student Project Incubator within the Una Europa Alliance

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Abstract

This case study examines the Student Project Incubator within the Una Europa Alliance — an interdisciplinary learning initiative supporting student-led innovation and collaboration. It highlights that entrepreneurship and innovation extend beyond business creation, encompassing diverse student-driven initiatives. It operates as an inclusive learning community that empowers students to develop skills and mindsets through experiential, iterative learning. It offers a safe environment to test ideas, take risks, and focus on growth and process rather than outcomes. A flexible budget of €10,000 per round enables the implementing team to adapt spending according to the evolving needs of each round and its participants. The initiative has strengthened collaboration, interdisciplinary teamwork, leadership, and the application of academic knowledge, while challenges in sustaining engagement across institutions underscore the importance of co-creation, adaptability, and process-oriented development.

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Year: 2026

HEInnovate dimensions

European Commission | OECD

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Una Europa Alliance

Una Europa is a European universities alliance, founded in 2019, that brings together 11 leading research-intensive universities with the goal of building a "university of the future." The alliance seeks to integrate education, research, and mobility across its member institutions, creating a virtual multi-campus environment where students, academics and professional services staff can move freely between universities. It also develops collaborative programs in the six focus areas Cultural Heritage, Data Science and AI, Europe and the World, Future Materials and Technologies, One Health, and Sustainability. Its mission is to foster a European inter-university ecosystem that combines education, research, and societal impact, shaping future graduates while contributing to both the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.

Introduction and Rationale

The development of structured mechanisms to support student-led initiatives has emerged as a recurrent challenge within higher education contexts. Early phases of the Una.Futura project within the Una Europa Alliance revealed an **absence of formal avenues** through which students could present ideas or cultivate the skills necessary for their realization. **Funding** for such initiatives is often **constrained** by pre-defined allocations, **limiting flexibility** in responding to evolving needs.

In response, a "Student Project Incubator" was conceptualised, designed to allow adaptive use of resources across multiple iterative cycles. Its vision was shaped collaboratively with students and staff through a series of *co-creative workshops*, which provided insights into *learners' interests*, *skill aspirations*, and *preferred modes of engagement*. Rather than imposing rigid structures, the incubator rests on guiding principles that emphasize **student agency**, the **practical application of knowledge**, **collaboration with diverse partners**, and **engagement in interdisciplinary and international teams**, reflecting a broader commitment to experiential and participatory learning.

The Student Project Incubator: Values and Focus

Co-funded by the European Union

The Student Project Incubator is a part of Una.Futura Project co-funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Programme's European Universities Initiative. It supports students in *translating academic and research-based learning into practical applications*. It aims to prepare students for a rapidly changing world by providing a collaborative learning space where they can translate skills from formal and informal learning into practical tools for work life and projects beyond the classroom.

Unlike traditional business incubators, the **initiative is not focusing on startups but instead provides a broad platform for student-led projects and initiatives, promoting skill development and real-world problem solving**.

The incubator serves as an inclusive learning environment designed to broaden access to professional experiences for all students. **Knowledge transfer** activities include engagement with internal and external stakeholders, fostering collaboration and practical impact. **Regional engagement** occurs through community-focused projects, and international orientation is embedded in the interdisciplinary collaboration across alliance institutions. Its primary goal is to develop transferable competencies and foster a mindset that enables students to apply these skills effectively.

The incubator nurtures an **entrepreneurial mindset** to:

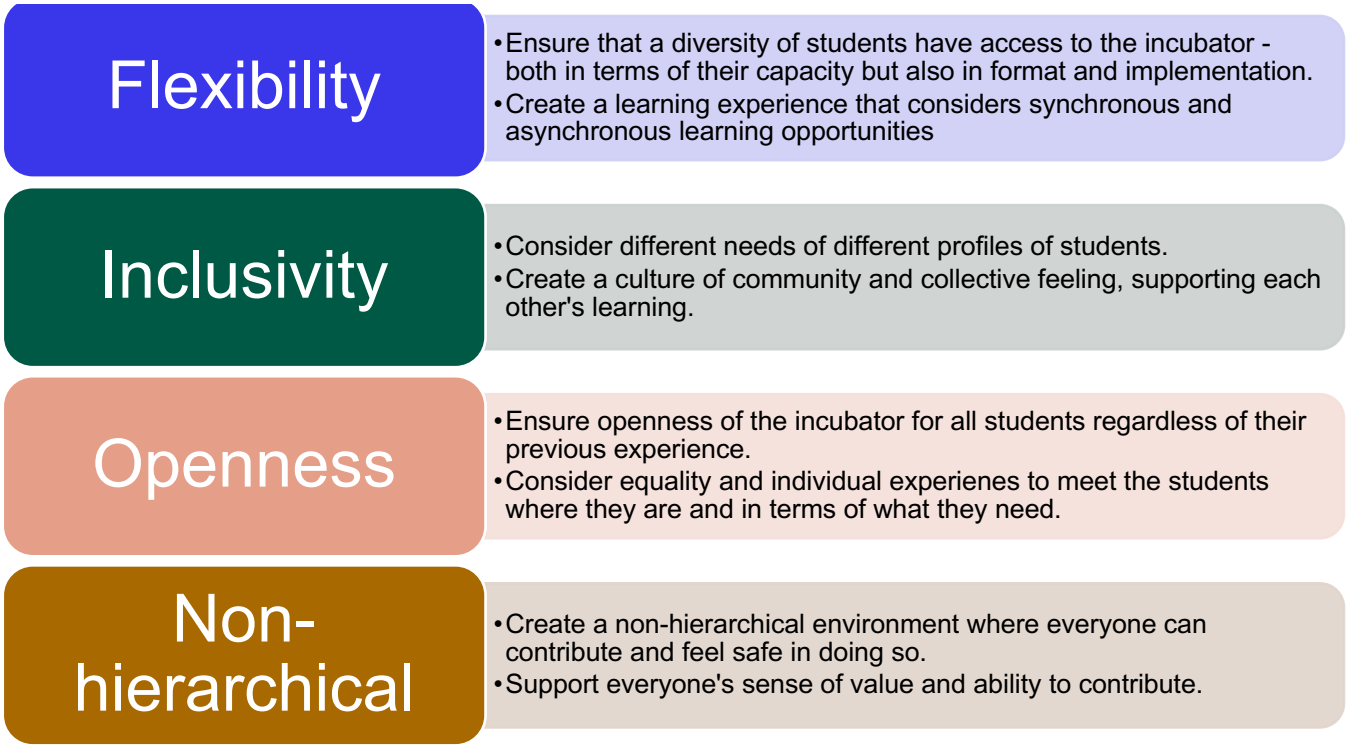
- Identify problems and opportunities
- Think creatively and strategically
- Demonstrate resilience and learn from failure
- Translate ideas into actionable outcomes

It also supports the development of **transferable skills**, including:

- Management of personal expertise
- Communication and collaboration
- Scholarly and ethical thinking
- Systemic and futures thinking
- Strategic thinking and agency

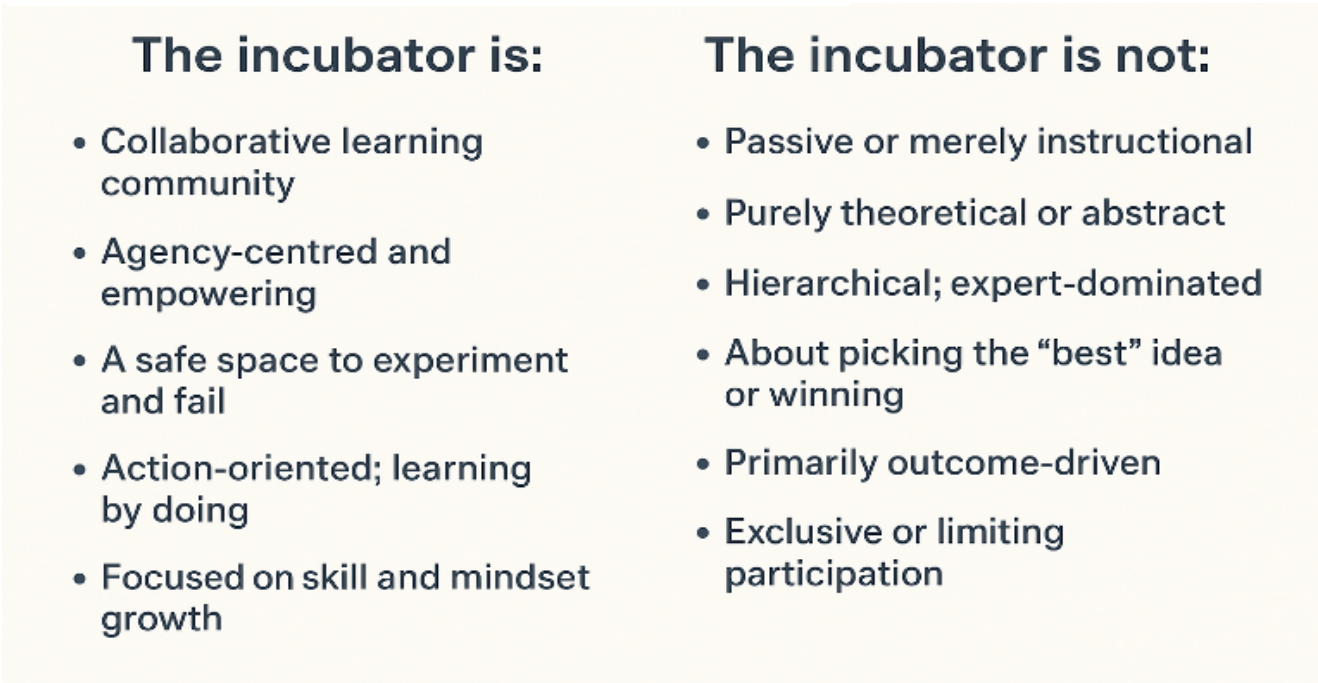
The initiative provides opportunities for students with limited access to internships or professional experiences, offering exposure, skills development, and networking. Designed to evolve continuously, the incubator adapts to student feedback and emerging needs, ensuring relevance and effectiveness in fostering the capacities and mindsets required for future challenges. This is well-depicted in the values of the Student Project Incubator and what it is, and it is not (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1. Values of the Student Project Incubator



Source: Student Project Incubator Concept Note (2024)

Figure 2. What Student Project Incubator is and what it is not



Source: Student Project Incubator Concept Note (2024)

Initiative Description

Format of the Student Project Incubator

The incubator is intentionally designed with flexibility, allowing the implementing partner to determine its specific format and delivery. Depending on the context, it may consist of **workshops**, **project development support**, **mentorship activities**, or a **combination** of these elements. The duration is equally adaptable, ranging from 6-8 weeks in a virtual setting programme to a **shorter**, more intensive format in person.

The key thing is that these **principles and values are followed and expanded upon in the continuous development and reimagining of the incubator**. It is also to be decided how the incubator will be developed in terms of utilising the Una Europa network in online spaces but also understanding and taking advantage of physical meetings and collaborators locally. Finding a good hybrid solution or taking advantage of both formats will be an important question to answer.

Rounds of the Student Project Incubator

The incubator operates through multiple rounds, each designed to offer a distinct learning and project experience while maintaining core principles of **empowerment**, **collaboration**, and **experiential learning**. Its structure has been co-created with students and staff through online workshops and is continuously adapted based on participant feedback. In total, the incubator consists of **six rounds**, with **round four having taken place in Autumn 2025, and three winning teams have been decided** (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. ROUNDS OF THE STUDENT PROJECT INCUBATOR

Although each round differs, most follow a **flexible six- to eight-week cycle** that typically includes:

- skills development sessions,
- interdisciplinary teamwork,
- and a final showcase.

The format, duration, and level of staff involvement vary in order to test what works best across multiple universities.

Across all rounds, the incubator has been characterised by several cross-cutting features that contribute to its coherence and continuity. **Participation is fully open**, allowing students to *join any round independently*, as the **rounds do not build on one another** and each offers a distinct but complementary learning experience.

Over time, some former participants have returned as **student mentors or facilitators**—a development that has strengthened community-building and supported the growing scale of later rounds.

Each round has also benefited from approximately **€10,000 in flexible funding**, enabling the organisers to adapt activities to the specific needs and dynamics of each cohort. Underpinning all rounds is a **pedagogical approach** inspired by models for developing fundamental academic skills, emphasising strategic thinking, collaboration, and student agency. This shared foundation ensures continuity across the incubator's evolving formats while keeping students at the centre of the learning experience. A jury is selected for each round that has specific knowledge and expertise in the theme being executed.

Overview of the Rounds

Round 1 – Thematic Innovation

Focus: project development in four areas — Europe's role in the world, sustainability, cultural heritage and linguistic diversity, and migration.

Key characteristics:

- Fully virtual pilot, approx. 7–8 weeks
- Weekly online meetings and masterclasses (communication, design thinking, project management, career skills)
- Open individual applications: all applicants accepted
- Teams formed through a facilitated online process using ideation tasks
- Selected projects received small-scale funding for implementation

Round 2 – The Research Simulator

Focus: introducing students to research processes through collaborative research proposal development.

Key characteristics:

- Fully online (6–8 weeks)
- Facilitated and hosted by the PhD researchers
- Students had to apply as teams, formed during facilitated networking sessions
- The incubator aimed to simulate PhD-style research teamwork
- Activities included drafting a five-page research proposal, peer review, and science communication tasks
- Winning team got a spot to participate in the next round

Round 3 – Corporate Immersion

Focus: real-life company challenges in an intensive setting.

Key characteristics:

- One-week on-site programme hosted by Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie
- Organised with the university's academic business incubator

- Students worked on business challenges provided by companies
- Participation was more selective, with a smaller cohort of approx. 20–21 students

Round 4 – Una in the Community

Focus: community-based challenges and social innovation using design thinking.

Key characteristics:

- Online format, returning to the original virtual model but at a larger scale
- Approx. 110 participants
- Teams were staff-assigned for the first time
- Introduction of student mentors, who supported teams, guided progress, and increased engagement
- Best ideas received funding for implementation in a community of the team's choice

Impact and Success Factors

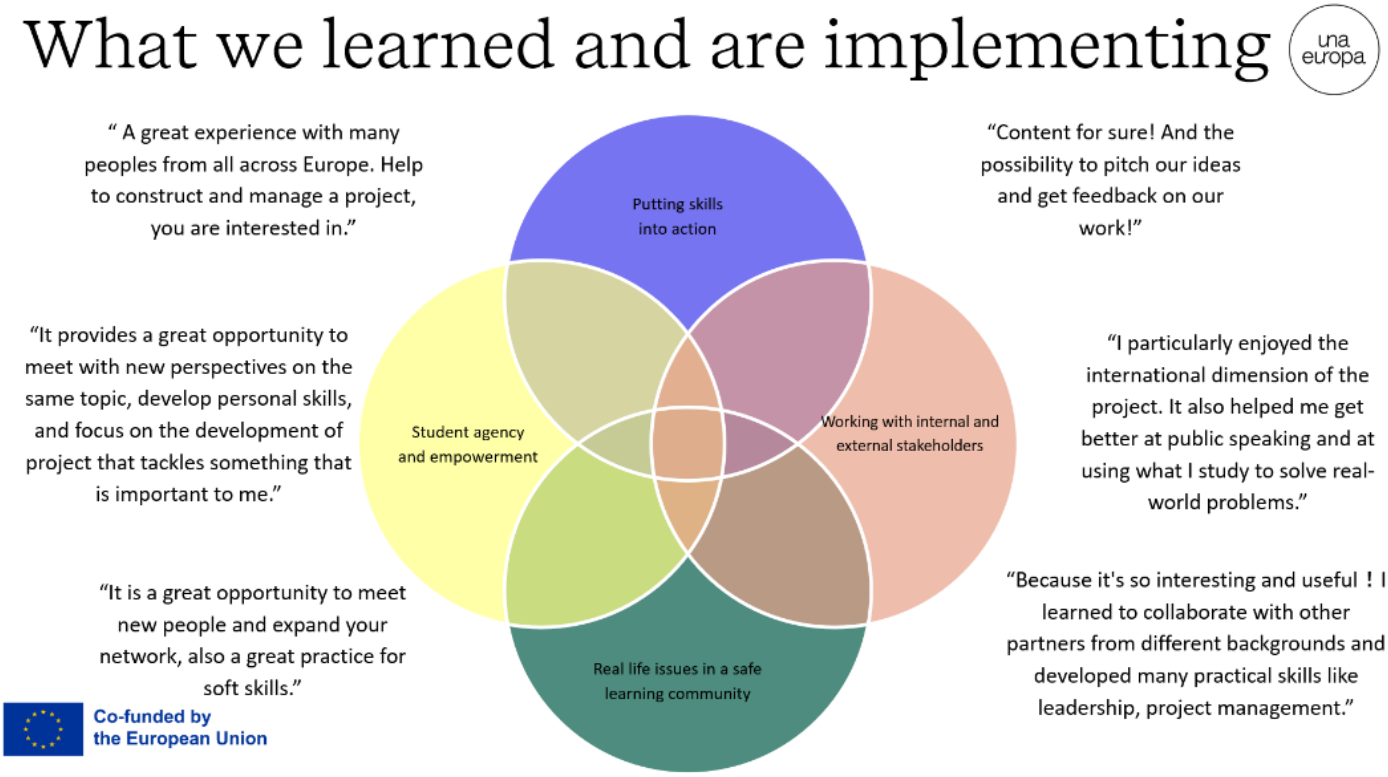
Internal and External Impact

The incubator has had a significant impact on participating students (see Figure 4) and partner universities.

It has improved **collaboration and communication skills**, interdisciplinary teamwork, **leadership**, and the **ability to apply academic learning to real-world challenges**. The incubator promotes networks across Una Europa institutions and fosters a sense of belonging and innovation culture among students.

The incubator's external impact is real but still developing. Several student projects have continued beyond the structured programme and have been implemented in real-world contexts. Some participants have travelled independently to meet their team members, demonstrating the strong bonds and networks formed. The **Final Showcase events** have also had a positive effect on staff and academics in the wider community, who have been impressed by the students' capabilities. This contributes to a broader cultural shift: **students** are increasingly seen **not only as learners but as capable partners in innovation**. Some participants have become involved in additional alliance activities, such as local task forces or the Student Board, indicating that the incubator can serve as an entry point into wider engagement.

FIGURE 4. STUDENTS' IMPRESSIONS ABOUT THE STUDENT PROJECT INCUBATOR



Source: Author's Presentation on the Student Project Incubator (2025)

Success Factors

Key success factors include its *flexible format*, *inclusive design*, *strong lead*—where feedback shapes each round – ensures relevance and student ownership.

A defining strength is its ability to **meet students where they are**. By framing rounds around diverse themes — *societal challenges*, *research*, and *community engagement* — it attracts students who might not normally join entrepreneurial or innovation programmes. This inclusiveness is especially valuable in universities with few programmes traditionally associated with entrepreneurship.

Another success factor is the **interdisciplinary and international team experience**, which helps students recognise the relevance of their academic backgrounds. Working with peers from other fields boosts their confidence and highlights how their subject expertise contributes to collaborative problem-solving.

The **skills development component** has consistently received excellent feedback. Students report strong gains in transversal skills such as communication, teamwork, project management, and creative problem-solving.

The **co-creative, iterative approach** has also been important. Because the incubator was never fully fixed from the beginning, the organisers could learn from each round and adjust

accordingly. Students are explicitly told that the programme is evolving, and they are invited to provide feedback. This transparency increases motivation and fosters a sense of ownership.

Finally, the introduction of **student mentors** has been a major innovation, especially in larger cohorts. Mentors provide guidance, keep teams on track, and strengthen engagement — which increases the incubator's overall capacity and impact.

Challenges and Lessons learned

Coordinating an incubator across many universities has produced several recurring challenges.

A major challenge is the **mismatch in academic calendars** and time zones across universities. Start dates vary widely, and time differences of up to two hours complicate scheduling. To address this, the team **reduced the number of mandatory live sessions**, made them more targeted, and shifted other activities to asynchronous formats.

Because the incubator is not credit-bearing, students participate alongside existing academic responsibilities, which affects **accessibility and retention**. **Flexibility** – such as requiring attendance at only half of the sessions—has been essential. **Online delivery** has brought practical issues such as poor internet connections, lack of quiet spaces, and virtual fatigue. This prompted changes in format: **shorter sessions**, adjusted weekly rhythms, and increased asynchronous work. **Team formation** has also provided key lessons. Student-led grouping empowers students but can exclude those less comfortable with networking; **staff-created teams** are more inclusive but offer less autonomy. Both models have been useful depending on the cohort.

Since the incubator is extracurricular, it must feel different from formal teaching. Assignments were redesigned to be more creative and enjoyable, for example, collages or short videos instead of long-written documents. Finally, **dropout** is unavoidable, as students often underestimate their workload. The team manages this by setting clear expectations, keeping tasks manageable, and encouraging teams to agree on shared expectations early on.

Sustainability and Scalability of the Student Project Incubator

The incubator has strong potential for sustainability and scalability, but certain conditions are essential. The most important requirement is **committed staff time**. The programme

can run with relatively modest financial resources, but it cannot run without staff who are open-minded, flexible, and willing to experiment.

The virtual format is highly scalable and cost-effective, making it possible for institutions with limited funding to participate. Future rounds may rely more on **student-led and student-supported models**, reducing the administrative burden and offering meaningful leadership opportunities. Institutions considering replication should ensure they understand the **added value** for their students and local context — for example, offering a low-threshold entry point into innovation activities that complements existing programmes. There is also interest in eventually connecting the incubator to **formal curricula** by mapping its activities to credit-bearing modules or electives, depending on each university's structure.

Finally, transparency about the programme's pilot nature and an openness to adaptation have proven essential. The incubator has succeeded because it invites *experimentation*, *co-creation*, and *continuous improvement* rather than imposing a fixed model.

Future Activities and Next Steps

The Student Project Incubator has two planned further Rounds – Round 5 and Round 6.

Round 5 is planned to build on themes emerging from a forthcoming Student Congress, where **students will identify barriers and enablers** to student engagement and participation. The incubator will then guide participants through understanding these challenges, developing "how might we" statements, generating ideas, prototyping, and presenting solutions in a virtual showcase. Collaboration with entrepreneurial units inside partner universities may strengthen this round.

Round 6 is expected to be an **on-site intensive**. The goal is to utilise a hackathon model develop by local colleagues in connection to a sustainability conference.

Both rounds 5 and 6 must be completed before the current Erasmus + Una.Futura Project funding cycle (2022-2026), but future funding phases are anticipated.

Contact Details and Resources

Contacts

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Resources

- European Higher Education Area
- European Research Area
- Introducing the Una Europa Student Project Incubator
- Una Europa Alliance
- Una.Futura Project
- Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie, Academic Business Incubator