

NORDPLUS HORIZONTAL PROJECT
“PLATFORM FOR CO-OPERATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND ENTERPRISES”

FINAL REPORT

Introduction

There has been a substantial shift in the expectations placed upon higher education institutions in recent years. These institutions are increasingly expected to adopt a more entrepreneurial approach to their operations to address the demands of their respective contexts and contribute to economic progress at regional, national, and international levels. As a result, HEIs are rethinking their missions, particularly focusing on strengthening partnerships with the business sector. This evolving relationship is structured around collaborative educational initiatives, joint research endeavors, and the commercialization of research outcomes, benefiting both academia and industry. The partnership between education and industry ensures that education aligns with labor market demands and fosters innovation. HEIs gain exposure to new technologies, while industries benefit from a skilled and practically trained workforce. The key challenge is to establish meaningful, mutually beneficial cooperation that prioritizes quality over quantity. This project focuses on strengthening partnerships between companies and vocational and higher education institutions through the creation of a digital platform, <https://talendiportaal.ee>. The platform facilitates access to educational services, connects companies with experts, and helps find interns and talent. It also provides businesses with opportunities for course access, research collaborations, student projects, and tools for tracking employee competencies. By fostering these connections, this project aimed to enhance the quality of skilled personnel, support lifelong learning, and create stronger ties between education and industry.

Partner institutions

The participating partner institutions of the project are from four Nordic/Baltic countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland. The partner were Mainor AS, Estonian University of Life Sciences, Tallinn University, The Tallinn School of Economics, University of Tartu (EE), Riseba University of Applied Sciences (LV), Vilniaus kolegija/Higher Education Institution (LT), South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences (FI).



The activities

As the project aim, six new services were created in the digital Talentportal platform (talentportal.ee):

- mediation of education;
- finding an expert for the university or vocational school;
- finding an intern or talent in the company;
- courses and research offers for the company;
- mediation of student research topics and study assignments;
- overview of employees' competence.

To achieve the project's objectives, a series of activities were undertaken.

These include: an analysis of existing platforms to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and user feedback; surveys to understand the needs of companies and interviews to determine the expectations of educational institutions (spring 2023). Roadmapping outlined the key aspects such as platform design, language options, search functions, and user feedback mechanisms. Furthermore, each new service on the platform was carefully developed with a focus on functionality, user interface (UI) and user experience (UX) design, and clear terms of use.



Findings of the Reaserches within the Project

According to the survey the collaboration between companies and education institutions creates numerous benefits, enhancing both education and industry practices while fostering growth, innovation, and competitiveness. Educational institutions have got the remarkable role in reskilling and upskilling the workforce, directly contributing to lifelong learning initiatives that help businesses address their training needs. Various forms of collaboration exist, ranging from competence development through training programs, internships, and scholarships, to innovation and commercialization of products and services, the integration of labor market expertise into academic studies, sharing of facilities, and engaging in joint research. However, challenges arise due to conflicting values and objectives between education and industry. Barriers such as difficulties in establishing contacts, financial limitations, cultural differences, and concerns over confidentiality can impede collaboration. Communication gaps and lack of trust between the partners may enhance these challenges. Success depends on trust, mutual interest, strong leadership support, and clear, consistent communication. Proactive engagement from both sides and a focus on practical, business-oriented tasks can help overcome obstacles like bureaucracy and differing organizational cultures.

As stated in the project findings, companies, particularly larger ones or international businesses, show a high willingness to train employees, while smaller companies face greater difficulties in implementing training programs. Flexibility is crucial for smaller firms, as they

often prefer training outside working hours. Companies prefer face-to-face training in their national language, particularly within their country or nearby the educational institutions, with little interest in multicultural programs abroad. To attract participants, especially from smaller firms, online training should be priced below €25 per hour. Companies express significant interest in collaboration services like training mediation and registration platforms, as well as internship and job mediation e-services. Estonian companies prefer practical, business-focused collaboration, while Finnish companies emphasize innovation and efficiency. Lithuanian and Latvian businesses prioritize trust-building and mutual benefits. Collaboration between companies and educational institutions is valuable, but it requires addressing obstacles such as communication barriers, mismatched values, and resource limitations. Building trust, aligning goals, and ensuring effective communication are essential to realizing the full potential of these partnerships.

Although the policymakers emphasize the importance of strong connections between academia and industry to stimulate economic activity and ensure sustainable growth, there are several barriers to hinder effective cooperation. In particular, poor communication between educational institutions and businesses has been identified as a significant obstacle, highlighting the need for more transparent, credible, and responsive communication strategies to promote collaboration.

For example the digital platforms currently play a role in improving visibility and connections between educational institutions and businesses, with examples such as ResearchGate and LinkedIn. However, these platforms tend to be limited in scope, often targeting specific segments without providing comprehensive solutions for collaboration, research, and knowledge exchange. There is a noticeable lack of platforms offering high-quality, practical learning opportunities and spaces for networking between students and companies. Additionally, current platforms face limitations such as outdated information, lack of multilingual support, and inadequate integration with other services, making it challenging to meet the diverse needs of stakeholders. Companies have expressed a desire for better access to academic expertise and better tools for collaboration, including applied research partnerships and student engagement opportunities.

The researches highlighted the need for a new, comprehensive cooperation platform that integrates services for internships, research collaborations, and curriculum development. Such a platform should prioritize user-friendliness, clear communication, and a strong value proposition to attract HEIs and other educational institutions, businesses, and students. Networking features, communication tools, and a scalable, flexible technical infrastructure are also essential to accommodate evolving user needs. In addition, the platform should support multilingual access, offer intuitive navigation, and incorporate testimonials and success stories to foster trust and engagement among users. Technological innovations like AI-driven communication tools and chatbots could further enhance the platform's responsiveness and functionality.

The development of new platform should adopt an ecosystem approach, promoting continuous interaction between stakeholders to encourage innovation, real-life practice, and community involvement. By addressing the shortcomings of existing platforms and aligning with stakeholder expectations, such a platform has the potential to drive meaningful collaboration, stimulate knowledge exchange, and support sustainable growth within the education and labor market ecosystem. The creation of this comprehensive platform is expected to play a pivotal role in regional development and the advancement of innovation,

ensuring that HEIs and businesses can work together effectively to meet the evolving demands of the global economy.

The study, which focused on HEIs in the Nordic-Baltic region, identified that these institutions offer a diverse range of training programs tailored to industry needs, including open registration courses, custom trainings, and micro-degree programs. Businesses seek practical training programs that address specific skills, with a growing demand for flexible, digital learning formats.

However, challenges persist in sustaining industry-university partnerships, such as resource constraints, marketing, and internal organizational issues. Effective planning, resource allocation, and stronger collaboration strategies are needed to enhance the relevance of training programs and strengthen partnerships between academia and industry. Overall, the study underscores the importance of improving communication and aligning expectations to foster more effective and beneficial collaborations between businesses and HEIs.



Recommendations

To maximize the benefits of collaboration between education and industry, it is essential to strengthen communication and build trust by establishing dedicated contact points and

fostering transparency. Addressing financial and organizational constraints through flexible training programs and reducing bureaucratic hurdles can enhance partnership effectiveness. Leveraging enablers such as perceived necessity and proactive engagement from all parties can drive successful collaborations. Tailoring training programs to meet specific company needs, including flexibility in scheduling, will better serve diverse organizational contexts. Enhancing the use of digital platforms for training mediation and registration, along with aligning goals and expectations, can further optimize the outcomes of these partnerships. Promoting mutual benefits and practical solutions, as well as encouraging joint research and innovation activities, will contribute to advancing both educational and industry advancements.

A well-structured partnership benefits both education and businesses, as it provides students with practical skills and exposure, while companies gain access to a pool of talented individuals with the competencies they need. Despite the clear advantages, several obstacles, particularly communication issues and fragmented collaboration frameworks, hinder effective cooperation. Inadequate communication between HEIs and businesses, along with outdated or segmented digital platforms, presents a barrier to efficient knowledge exchange and collaboration.

A critical impact of the project was the identification of gaps in existing cooperation platforms, which often cater to specific segments or services but lack the integration necessary for comprehensive, multifaceted collaboration. The absence of seamless connectivity and spaces for networking further impedes the establishment of strong relationships between academic and corporate entities. These issues limit the capacity for meaningful cooperation and fail to meet the expectations of stakeholders seeking a unified, easy-to-use platform that accommodates their diverse needs.

To enhance the effectiveness of industry-university partnerships, HEIs should focus on strengthening collaboration channels by employing multi-channel communication strategies such as websites, social media, and direct outreach to improve engagement with industry. Additionally, better resource allocation is critical to address personnel overload and ensure the availability of specialized skills, especially for offering training programs in multiple languages. HEIs should also focus on developing tailored training programs that are practical and relevant to the specific needs of businesses, particularly in high-demand areas such as management development, mental health, and digital skills. Fostering an entrepreneurial culture within both HEIs and businesses is essential to support the growing demand for innovation and entrepreneurship, enabling stronger and more successful industry-university partnerships.

Feedback from the partners of the project

Effective cooperation between educational institutions, businesses, and external partners is essential for fostering innovation, offering real-world experiences to students, and ensuring alignment between academic and industry needs. This chapter highlights the feedback by partners throughout the project, focusing on their best practices, challenges, benefits and new development ideas.

- **best practices**

One of the key components of this project involved exploring how various cooperative services—such as training, internships, and expert matchmaking—could be offered on a unified platform. The development of these services opened up new approaches.

By offering the training courses on the platform, the universities expanded their reach to potential learners, both locally and internationally as the digital platform allows users to browse and enroll in courses that align with their professional development needs.

The portal has proved beneficial in matching students with the right opportunities, both domestically and abroad. The digital platform ensured wider accessibility, improved efficiency, and reduced administrative burdens, students from Baltic universities were able to find internships, connect with businesses, and access training in a more streamlined manner.

The cooperation model established between Baltic and Finish universities and schools emphasized strong collaboration through shared platforms and joint initiatives. A significant achievement was the ability to evaluate various platforms from different countries, which facilitated a better understanding of global best practices. This evaluation process was crucial in identifying the most effective methods of fostering cooperation between universities and businesses, especially in the realm of student internships, research opportunities, and job placements. Partners also engaged in making tailored suggestions to improve the services, aligning it more closely with the needs of universities. This feedback-driven approach led to the development of more relevant and user-friendly solutions for both students and academic institutions.

At VIKO, the Faculty of Business Management took advantage of the project's opportunities by promoting cross-border internships for students. Using the platform, students were able to explore international internships, particularly with Estonian enterprises, providing them with valuable real-world experience. Furthermore, the project allowed partners to gain a deeper understanding of how different countries in the Baltic and Nordic regions approach higher education institution (HEI)-business cooperation. By comparing these trends, VIKO was able to better appreciate the significance of collaboration through various means, including visits, internships, and partnerships that bring students, universities, and businesses closer together. The project's collaborative framework offered partners the chance to learn from each other's experiences, which proved to be one of the most valuable outcomes. The process of evaluating different platforms and practices provided important insights, allowing partners to adopt and adapt successful strategies to meet local needs. This was particularly evident through the use of questionnaires, which were conducted in partnership between universities and businesses. These surveys yielded valuable data, helping to identify specific needs and opportunities that could be addressed through the digital platforms. As a result, partners were able to make informed improvements that aligned with the requirements of students, faculty, and companies.

International cooperation played a crucial role in this process. By engaging with partners from different countries, universities gained a broader perspective on best practices and trends in HEI-business collaboration. This comparative analysis helped refine strategies and ensured that the digital platforms and collaborative models being developed were both innovative and practical for a wide range of stakeholders.

In addition to creating opportunities for internships and expert connections, the project focused on fostering the development of essential competencies in students. Skills such as time management, teamwork, and problem-solving were highlighted as critical components for preparing students for the demands of the workforce. The integration of these competencies into the training programs offered on the platforms ensured that students

gained not only technical knowledge but also the soft skills necessary for career success. This holistic approach to education enriched the students' overall learning experience and provided them with tools to excel in their professional lives.

From RISEBA's perspective, the project opened up new possibilities for cooperation with companies and other partners. By exploring different forms of collaboration and examining existing models, the project introduced fresh strategies aimed at deepening the relationship between educational institutions and businesses. These strategies encouraged more dynamic interactions, such as joint research projects, closer ties between universities and companies, and more structured internship programs. This strengthened cooperation benefitted not only students and businesses but also enhanced the overall quality of education by ensuring that it was aligned with industry needs.

- **challenges the partners faced during the project**

One of the key difficulties was ensuring that teachers received the necessary support to effectively use digital platforms. Although digital tools were recognized as beneficial and capable of simplifying tasks, the transition to new practices proved to be slow, with existing habits being difficult to change.

Human resources emerged as a significant challenge, particularly with the turnover of personnel. As people left and new members joined, vital information was sometimes lost, and newcomers found it difficult to acclimate. However, support from EUAS helped facilitate a smoother integration of new team members. Identifying process facilitators for newly developed platforms and functions was also challenging, particularly in universities where these processes were still evolving. In some cases, there were no designated units or individuals to handle certain tasks, such as organizing internships, which varied across different institutes and lacked a centralized system. As a result, partners had to take an innovative approach to manage the collaboration between companies, scientists, and students, organizing activities at the required levels for the project.

Engaging students was another area where partners faced obstacles. It became apparent that reaching out to both students and enterprises 6 to 12 months before any activity was crucial for effective involvement. The variety of national alternatives available made it difficult to attract students to specific platforms. Moreover, short-term tasks like company visits were more appealing to students compared to long-term commitments like internships, as both national and international opportunities were abundant. Higher education institutions were therefore tasked with offering flexible services that catered to the varying needs of students and enterprises. Ensuring the quality of training and collaboration initiatives was also challenging, particularly as HEIs required clear mechanisms to identify the needs of businesses, given the resource constraints on both sides. Other logistical challenges included difficulties in scheduling interviews with enterprises and the need for translations to ensure better understanding during discussions.

In the early stages of the project, the lack of a clear division of tasks and responsibilities resulted in delayed activities. Imprecise communication further complicated progress, and it became evident that a well-defined task structure and clearer agreements from the outset would have saved time and resources. As the project advanced, roles became more defined, and processes improved. However, some tasks were not set up effectively due to either a lack of necessary expertise or inefficient working methods, such as attempting to brainstorm advertising slogans in large groups.

Despite these challenges, the partners observed that the project development process was smooth, with activities being well-coordinated and targets consistently met.

- **benefits the partners gained**

The project provided partners with a wide range of valuable benefits, significantly enhancing their collaborative capabilities and expanding their knowledge. One of the key outcomes was the formation of new partnerships, offering opportunities for deeper cooperation between universities and companies across the Baltic and Nordic regions. Partners gained important insights into the operational environments of their counterparts, acquiring new knowledge on portals and how collaboration between universities and companies is structured in Baltic countries and Finland. This knowledge extended to understanding what companies expect from universities in terms of collaboration and education, as well as recognizing the variations in educational preferences across the region.

The project also provided valuable information on entrepreneurial ecosystems, helping partners understand how to enhance cooperation between academic institutions and businesses. The introduction of new concepts such as Smart Cities added further depth to the partners' understanding of emerging trends and collaborative opportunities.

On a practical level, the introduction of platform such as the talent portal had a tangible impact. These tools enabled institutions to reach a broader audience of potential learners and connect students with suitable internships. The talent portal, in particular, proved to be an invaluable resource for showcasing educational services, both locally and internationally. Partners reported that students were able to find relevant opportunities, and this system will continue to be used to search for training courses and introduce internship possibilities to students in the future. The project also highlighted further potential, including the possibility of exchanges between practitioners and researchers, signaling ongoing opportunities for growth.

Moreover, the project fostered a new environment for researcher-company-student collaboration, making such interactions easier and more comprehensive. This development prompted universities to review and analyze their internal processes, including resource planning, to align with the new collaboration opportunities. For institutions like VIKO, the project led to joint analyses of educational and training platforms, along with surveys of business enterprises and higher education institutions (HEIs). The results of these collaborations were shared through international articles and conference presentations, contributing to an enhanced reputation and attractiveness for future partnerships.

Additionally, the exchange of experiences and discussions with companies and institutions was immensely valuable. Partners like the University of Tartu benefited from the Talent Portal, which allowed them to offer training programs to companies like those in Ülemiste City and provide students with internship opportunities. Faculty members could also explore collaborative projects with companies, enriching the educational experience.

Partners highlighted the productive and positive experiences gained from visits, such as a rewarding visit to Finland, and their participation in events like Edufest, where they had the chance to showcase their research and scientific work. The creation of new platforms and tools, which are now being actively promoted among students and faculty, also strengthened inter-institutional and inter-ethnic cooperation.



- **examples of the further collaboration**

The project fostered a strong foundation for continued collaboration among partners, leading to various initiatives that will extend beyond its completion. Collaboration on the platform development was particularly productive, with each partner contributing input to refine the talent portals according to their specific needs. This smooth cooperation set the stage for further joint efforts across multiple areas.

One of the key outcomes was the initiation of new project collaborations. For instance, VIKO, RISEBA, and EUAS, along with other partners, have submitted the Erasmus+ project "INTELLIGENT: INnovative TEaching and Learning of GENerations Z and Alfa in Higher Education" (project code 2024-1-LT01-KA220-HED-000256404). This project will continue to strengthen international collaboration, incorporating a range of business-oriented elements to meet the needs of enterprises. It aims to bridge the gap between higher education institutions (HEIs) and the business world, providing students with high-quality education that equips them for the future job market. In addition to this, several partners are also applying for support through other projects within the Nordplus program, signaling ongoing efforts to secure future collaboration opportunities.

A notable achievement during the project was the development of a questionnaire designed to determine the type of training that companies need. All partners actively participated by distributing the questionnaire to their respective networks, and the results were summarized and presented by EUAS team at a project meeting. This feedback has already been instrumental and will serve as a blueprint for future enhancements. Sharing best practices for

engaging with companies and offering university services remains a cornerstone of future collaboration.

The project also laid the groundwork for more targeted partnerships. For instance, a formal cooperation agreement with VIKO has been established, and two new project ideas with EUAS have been developed. Further collaboration through the BIP program and participation in various activities, including events like Edufest, demonstrates a strong commitment to maintaining and expanding these collaborative efforts. Co-writing articles and participating in joint events are other avenues through which partners will continue to work together, ensuring that the insights and knowledge gained through the project will have a lasting impact.

- **suggestion for the other schools/companies**

The international dimension of university-company collaboration is crucial and opens new possibilities for both sectors. Schools and companies should recognize the value of such partnerships, which bring broader perspectives and opportunities for innovation. When implementing new practices, it is important to provide support to users, ensuring they can effectively adopt the changes. In this regard, service design could be a valuable tool to help guide the transition.

For institutions looking to enhance collaboration with businesses, it is recommended to actively use platforms like the Training Credit and Talent Portal. These platforms offer great potential for connecting students with internships and training opportunities, and it is essential to encourage students to utilize them. Engaging companies early in the project helps align expectations and ensures that platforms are tailored to meet the needs of all stakeholders. Moreover, the internationalization of these platforms can expand their impact, allowing schools to start locally and then scale to other partner institutions, as has been successfully done with the Talent Portal in the Baltic states and Finland.

To further enhance the Talent Portal, it would be beneficial to automate the transfer of available training program data, which is currently handled manually. Additionally, HR managers could be given the ability to submit training requests and order customized programs directly through the portal, making the platform more user-friendly and responsive to enterprise needs.

Finally, schools and universities should strive to promote closer cooperation with businesses, not just on career education but through new and innovative forms of collaboration. Activities such as open lectures and enterprise visits benefit all parties involved—higher education institutions (HEIs), students, and businesses—and foster a stronger, more integrated approach to education and career development.

Summary

The shift toward more entrepreneurial approaches in higher education institutions (HEIs) has significantly impacted their roles and collaborations with the business sector. HEIs are now expected to actively contribute to both regional and international economic progress, which requires a reevaluation of their academic and research missions. In the Nordic-Baltic region, HEIs have responded by expanding and diversifying their training programs to better align with industry needs. These collaborations offer practical training, including face-to-face, online, and blended formats, to address specific skill gaps in areas such as digital competencies and change management. However, challenges persist, including resource limitations, process

management issues, and internal organizational dynamics, all of which require careful attention to strengthen university-industry partnerships.

Feedback from project partners emphasized the importance of a unified platform to offer training, internships, and expert matchmaking. The Talent Portal expanded the reach of universities and facilitated student engagement with businesses across borders. Partners also noted the importance of early collaboration with companies and students, highlighting international cooperation as a key element in improving best practices and strategies for collaboration between HEIs and businesses. Additionally, the project fostered a stronger integration of essential skills for students, helping to prepare them for real-world challenges.

Further collaborations are already underway, including new project submissions and the development of joint initiatives. Partners have also suggested expanding the Talent Portal to streamline processes, such as automating data transfers and enabling HR managers to request specific training programs. The project has laid the groundwork for continued partnerships, signaling ongoing opportunities for growth and enhanced cooperation between schools, universities, and businesses.

Funding

This project is generously funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers through the Nordplus Horizontal programme.

