

ENGAGING ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS FOR THE YOUTH

## A Shortlist of Education and Support Activities

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# 1 About this report

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## 2 About Ecosys4you

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Ecosys4you scales entrepreneurship education within and across three entrepreneurial ecosystems: the Ruhr (Germany), Varna (Bulgaria) and Slovenia. Establishing flows of innovation resources, joint expansion of competence, opening up new markets, and integrating private sector expertise into educational activities will create long-lasting interlinkages. The goal is to strengthen the entrepreneurial spirit to benefit all ecosystems, create new entrepreneurs, and support network relations between diverse ecosystem actors. Inspired by the slogan "It takes a region to raise a startup", underlining the collective endeavour to support the entrepreneurial spirit and startups, Ecosys4you develops a new and complementary understanding of entrepreneurship education by viewing ecosystems as collective educational actors and empowering students to be part of them.

The first cornerstone of the project is developing a two-year cross-ecosystem program for young people passionate about entrepreneurship, connecting formal education in high education institutions (HEIs) with the ecosystems. Young people interested in founding a company develop entrepreneurial expertise by learning from founders, startups, and real-world business development challenges. We establish and set up network-based exchange activities with the expertise of the three ecosystems, especially joint classes, mentoring, real-world challenges and internships at startups. The approach will improve the quality of entrepreneurship education through practical knowledge and experience. A key principle is the integration of private actors into the programme design and implementation to enable co-creation between private sector actors, higher education institutions, teachers, and other ecosystem actors (e.g. public). The programme is open to students and young alumni from HEIs, professional schools, graduates who wish to find a company, and other young people who wish to discover entrepreneurial spirit. Such a programme will enable synergies in entrepreneurship education, networking, and market expansion between the three ecosystems and beyond.

A second cornerstone of our concept of innovative entrepreneurship education is the empowerment of students to be an integral and active part of entrepreneurial ecosystems. The main mission is to dissolve the divide between entrepreneurship education in HEIs and ecosystems. While students are highly appreciated as a labour force within ecosystems during their studies and after graduation, their role as entrepreneurial knowledge providers is underplayed. Ecosys4you will strengthen the students' role by developing actions that allow them to provide knowledge and learn in a cooperative manner.

### 3 Background and Objectives

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This report delves into the entrepreneurial ecosystems in Slovenia, Varna and the Ruhr, aiming to explore and analyse the best practices that drive their dynamics. Through an in-depth examination of three best practice activities in each ecosystem, this report seeks to distil insights and lessons that can inform policymakers, entrepreneurs, investors, and ecosystem builders.

By leveraging insights from the entrepreneurial ecosystems, stakeholders can gain valuable perspectives on cultivating environments conducive to innovation and entrepreneurship. Effective ecosystem-building strategies encompass many interconnected factors, from fostering collaboration between academia and industry to facilitating access to capital and talent.

Through case studies and expert interviews, this report aims to provide insights into activities and frameworks for nurturing vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystems. Ultimately, by understanding and adopting best practices, stakeholders can contribute to the creation of thriving entrepreneurial landscapes that drive economic growth, job creation, and societal prosperity.

## 4 Learning from Slovenia's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

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Slovenia boasts a developing entrepreneurial ecosystem characterised by its rapid evolution and abundant opportunities for fledgling businesses. Distributed across its 12 statistical regions, the ecosystem features entrepreneurial incubators and technology parks, laying a fertile ground for innovation and growth. However, amidst its strengths lie notable challenges, including limited access to financing and a scarcity of skilled labour, hampering the full realisation of its potential.

Despite these hurdles, Slovenia excels in the pace of startup and scale-up development, alongside a desirable quality of life. Key to this success is the country's entrenched entrepreneurial culture, supported by a robust network of accelerators (3), incubators (13), technological parks (4) and regional development agencies. Institutions like the Ministry of Economy, Tourism and Sport, SEF, SPIRIT, and various chambers of commerce and crafts, Venture factory, Institute Young entrepreneur, Business angels, Venture capital fund, foster an environment conducive to entrepreneurial endeavours. Moreover, with numerous educational institutions offering entrepreneurship programs (8 universities – 3 public, 3 private, 2 international with 70,000+ students), the country nurtures a pool of talent ready to innovate.

Yet, Slovenia's international standing in the entrepreneurial arena remains modest, with comparatively fewer startups per capita (238 startups per million inhabitants) and significantly less venture capital investment than its counterparts like Estonia (and only €41 of venture capital invested per capita, Estonia €1,947) (<https://www.startup.si/sl-si/novica/slovenski-startup-ekosistem-za-preboj-slovenije-med-najbolj-privlacna-okolja-za-zagonska-podjetja>). Although efforts such as the establishment of a startup register (2020) and the emergence of unicorns (4) underscore progress, there's room for enhancement.

To bolster its ecosystem, Slovenia could explore innovative financing mechanisms, develop tailored support initiatives for companies in the growth phase, and strengthen ties between businesses and academia to spur technological advancements. Research and development institutions have already contributed significantly to this endeavour, fostering the emergence of startups and scale-ups that infuse the economy with innovation and vitality.

As Slovenia continues to leverage its strengths and address its weaknesses, the vision of becoming a dynamic startup hub steadily materialises, driven by the collaborative efforts of successful enterprises willing to share their knowledge and experiences with aspiring entrepreneurs.

We introduce three successful, outstanding activities of Slovenia's entrepreneurial ecosystem that actors in other ecosystems can take as role models: PODIM conference, Start.up Slovenia and SPIRIT Slovenia.

### Podim Conference

Podim, established in 1980, is an annual conference aimed at supporting the innovative potential within successful companies in Maribor and Slovenia. Originally conceived as an event celebrating Innovators' Day in Maribor, the conference quickly expanded to facilitate collaboration and the exchange of ideas among innovators across former Yugoslavia and eventually evolved into the leading startup and tech event in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It serves as a platform for innovation, business opportunities, capital infusion, knowledge exchange, and expertise. Podim brings together startups, scale-ups, investors, and business executives, fostering collaboration and showcasing the region's potential on a global scale.

([https://podim.org/about-podim/?gad\\_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAopuvBhBCEi-wAm8jaMdX7qsaLX0yVAXg61rROWNAAX9rLPiUr2C802OL0hAfsHVqww0XuQB0CvA0QAvD\\_BwE](https://podim.org/about-podim/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAopuvBhBCEi-wAm8jaMdX7qsaLX0yVAXg61rROWNAAX9rLPiUr2C802OL0hAfsHVqww0XuQB0CvA0QAvD_BwE))

"The core values of Podim drive us to take over the future we want to experience." (Matej Rus, Venture Factory and Podim, Slovenia)

With a 40-year legacy, Podim offers a platform for personal growth and generation of disruptive ideas. Podim is a place where curiosity meets innovation and offers exceptional in person experience. It provides attendees with opportunities to connect with innovation leaders, uncover success secrets, and fuel their entrepreneurial journeys. Podim is characterised by seamless learning, insights from serial entrepreneurs and top investors, and unparalleled networking opportunities. The conference boasts a limited attendance of 1,000+ (1,200 in 2023), ensuring meaningful interactions and engagement through discussions, for 100+ startups through 1:1 meetings, mentoring sessions, talks, panels, and a Pitching Competition. Podim also hosts the Startup of the Year Award Ceremony, acknowledging the best of the Slovenian startup ecosystem. Exclusive networking events such as Founders Night and the Podim Party further enhance the experience, facilitating valuable connections and support for startups.

Podim's success lies in its focus on early-stage startups with leading potential, facilitating connections with influential individuals, investors, and organisations. It excels in catalysing startup collaborations, providing fresh perspectives and ensuring ongoing success.

Podim is owned and organised by the non-profit institute Tovarna podjemov (Venture Factory) from Maribor. Partnerships have been integral to Podim from its inception, with cooperation from various stakeholders within the startup ecosystem. The Slovene Enterprise Fund and the Slovenian Ministry of Economy, Tourism, and Sport traditionally serve as conference co-organisers.

Podim is funded through sponsorship, partnerships, supporters, ticket sales, and co-organisers such as Tovarna podjemov and Startup:Slovenia. Various categories of partners, including Golden Unicorn partners, Unicorn partners, Outlier Partners, Start-upper partners, Strategic partners, Media partners, program partners, and Event App partners, contribute to the financial support of the event. (<https://podim.org/podim-2024-partners/>).

The next Podim conference titled "Unlock your innovation potential with Podim: the premier CEE startup & tech event" will take place from May 13 to 15, 2024.

A picture from the Podim conference:

**Picture 1.** Podium conference



Source: <https://podim.org/podim-dx-conference-lights-up-the-european-startup-scene-once-again/>

Further information: <https://podim.org/>

## Start:up Slovenia

Start:up Slovenia is an independent platform within the Slovenian startup ecosystem, facilitating innovative entrepreneurship. Founded in 2004, it operates as a facilitator, coordinator, and promoter, connecting various stakeholders including startups, investors, experts, and supportive environments. Its mission is to foster a positive mentality and integrate entrepreneurship into Slovenian society. (<https://www.startup.si/sl-si/o-nas>). One of the key purposes of the Start:up Slovenia initiative is its sacred function for public institutions to improve the conditions for startups and scale-ups in the Slovenian ecosystem. The role of Start:up Slovenia was also recognised by the Slovenian Government in the Action Plan - Country of Innovative Startups, adopted on March 21 2018. The initiatives of Start:up Slovenia include: through platforms like Startup.si and events like PODIM, Start:up Slovenia disseminates information, organises forums, and showcases success stories to inspire entrepreneurial action; promotes by highlighting stakeholders and programs within the ecosystem, recognising outstanding achievements through awards like the Slovenian Startup Award; inspires individuals to pursue entrepreneurial endeavours by sharing success stories and fostering a supportive environment; it facilitates connections between entrepreneurs, investors, and support networks, both nationally and internationally, to foster collaboration and growth; it actively engages with foreign ecosystems and participates in European projects to strengthen the startup ecosystem regionally and globally; as a Startup Europe Ambassador for Slovenia, Start:up Slovenia represents the interests of Slovenian startups within European networks, influencing policies and initiatives.

Start:up Slovenia distinguishes itself by its commitment to spreading positivity and fostering a supportive environment for startups. It actively promotes collaboration and information exchange within the ecosystem, both domestically and internationally. Additionally, it serves as a founding member of key European startup networks, further enhancing its influence and reach. The Start:up Slovenia program is being developed with the ambition to become the central platform of the Slovenian startup ecosystem and a window to the Slovenian startup ecosystem for all who would like to work within it or cooperate with it.

The success of Start:up Slovenia can be attributed to its passionate and focused approach. By engaging with public institutions, it advocates for policies that benefit startups and scale-ups, ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes. Its recognition by the Slovenian Government underscores its pivotal role in shaping the national startup ecosystem. Start:up Slovenia is a founding member of the European Startup Network (it brings together 24 national startups into a unified voice for European startups, so that more of them can start, grow and succeed in Europe) and the Startup Europe CEE Network, a Startup Europe Ambassador for Slovenia and an active partner in European projects.

Led by Tovarna podjemov (Venture Factory) in partnership with the Slovenian Enterprise Fund and the Ministry of Economy, Tourism, and Sport, Start:up Slovenia operates with active involvement from the startup community and public-private partnerships. Its initiatives, such as the Slovenian Start:Up of the Year Award, highlight and support promising startups while promoting their achievements domestically and internationally.

Start:up Slovenia receives funding from various sources, including the Slovenian Enterprise Fund, governmental support, and participation in European projects like MY-GATEWAY (the project aims to strengthen high-tech startups and SMEs in CEE so that they can better connect, gain greater market exposure and have improved and unhindered access to funding and talent. These funds enable the organisation to execute its programs and initiatives effectively.



Picture 2. Start:up Slovenia Forum



Source: <https://www.eitmanufacturing.eu/partner/startup-slovenia/>

Further information: <https://www.startup.si/>

## SPIRIT Slovenia

SPIRIT Slovenia serves as the executive agency of the Ministry of Economy, Tourism, and Sport, with a mission to be the primary support hub for Slovenian companies across all stages of their business journey and to foster continued competitiveness and contribute to improving the conditions for the country's prosperity. SPIRIT Slovenia was formed in 2013 through the merger of several predecessor agencies, including the Promotion Centre for Small Business Development (PCMG, 1993), the Agency for Economic Promotion and Foreign Investments (TIPO, 1995), and others (JAPTI – Public Agency for entrepreneurship and Foreign Investment, 2006; which merged with TIA – Technological Agency of Slovenia, and STO – Slovenian Tourist Organization, to SPIRIT, 2013); STO opted out in 2015) (<https://www.spiritslovenia.si/dogodek/385>). With nearly three decades of experience, SPIRIT Slovenia has evolved from the former initiatives, consolidating its efforts to enhance and support entrepreneurship, innovation, technological development, investment, and tourism in Slovenia. Its structure enables streamlined delivery of its services and programs, tailored to different business stages, such as (<https://www.spiritslovenia.si/podrocje-dela>):

- Early-stage support: through SPOT Advisory services ("SPOT svetovanje") and Innovation environment entities ("Subjekti inovativnega okolja"), SPIRIT Slovenia assists potential entrepreneurs, startups, and scale-ups, with a focus on women entrepreneurs and youth.
- Development and growth phase: SPIRIT Slovenia offers programs to strengthen operating companies' competencies, including support for sustainable transformation, business excellence, and ownership transfer processes (family businesses). The Slovenian Enterprise Fund (SEF) provides financial incentives and vouchers. Records of experts and outsourcers are available.
- Funding assistance: SPIRIT Slovenia, as the national contact point (NCP) for the third pillar of Horizon Europe (2021-2027), provides guidance on accessing financial incentives, including necessary information on calls and programmes within the European Innovation Council (EIC), the European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE) and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT).
- Enterprise Europe Network (EEN): SPIRIT Slovenia collaborates with the Enterprise Europe Network to support SMEs in expanding into foreign markets, marketing technological innovations, and participating in EU projects through various advisory services and networking opportunities.

What sets SPIRIT Slovenia apart is its comprehensive approach to supporting Slovenian entrepreneurs, exporters, investors, and other stakeholders. By offering a wide range of services and programs tailored to different business stages, SPIRIT Slovenia aims to foster continued competitiveness and prosperity in Slovenia's economy. SPIRIT keeps its stakeholders informed by publishing free events and the latest calls for tender on the "Enterprise Portal" (Podjetniški portal). They produce a weekly e-newsletter, "My Online Handbook" (Moj spletni priručnik), which publishes legislative news, free events, business opportunities and other relevant content on entrepreneurship and business operations.

SPIRIT Slovenia's success stems from its dedication to professionalism, responsiveness, and staying abreast of evolving economic needs. Through collaboration with diverse stakeholders, it promotes a business-friendly environment conducive to growth, innovation, and international competitiveness.

As a government agency, SPIRIT Slovenia receives funding from the Ministry of Economy, Tourism, and Sport and support from European programs and initiatives. These funds sustain its operations and enable it to offer various incentives, training, and advisory services to Slovenian businesses.

A picture of the Presentations of Slovenian companies in 2023

**Picture 3.** Presentations of Slovenian companies 2023



Source: [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/slovenia-business\\_spiritslovenia-activity-7019287983811903488-E6pm/?originalSubdomain=rs](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/slovenia-business_spiritslovenia-activity-7019287983811903488-E6pm/?originalSubdomain=rs)

Further information: [www.spiritslovenia.si](http://www.spiritslovenia.si)

## 5 Learning from Varna's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

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Varna is the second most innovative place in the country after the capital, Sofia, and the 51st most innovative city in Eastern Europe.

One of the main drivers of the innovation surge in Varna is its lively academic environment. Varna has a growing young population – more than 40,000 students in six universities. Among them are the Naval Academy, University of Medicine, Varna Free University, Technical University and University of Economics - Varna, as well as a high school with an IT profile - High School of Computer Modeling and Computer Systems, nurturing young talents in the field of technology and computer science. The favourable environment created for startups explains why, according to Seedblink, Varna is a suitable place for developing software, e-commerce, retail, marketing and sales startups.

Business Support Organisations (BSOs) and innovation actors implement different initiatives to promote entrepreneurship in the region: there are 4 accelerators offering training and mentoring programs. However, some of them rely on EU-funded projects and programmes.

Several startup and innovation events and initiatives are held in the city to showcase and inspire local tech talent and founders: annual Startup Weekend Varna, ABLE Weekend Activator Varna, Innovave Summit, Startup Ventures, Varnapreneurs. Many workshops, events and trainings organised by various business support organisations such as RAPIV, Smart Varna Foundation, Beehive, Varna Economic Development Agency, Business Agency, Bulgarian Business Forums, etc., also take place regularly.

Over 20 startups have been established in Varna in the last 2 years alone in various fields – fintech, blockchain, medicine, IoT, 3D printing, etc. Some of these startups are already expanding beyond borders with the support of some national and international venture capital funds and organisations.

In the following, we present three promising activities from the Varna entrepreneurial ecosystem that can serve as an inspiration for other ecosystems: the Women Entrepreneurship Centre (EWC, The Accelerator of the University of Economics Varna and the Innovave Summit.

### Women Entrepreneurship Centre (EWC)

Women Entrepreneurship Centre (EWC) at Varna Free University was established under project DTP2-048-1.2. WOMEN IN BUSINESS "Fostering the Young Women Entrepreneurship in the Danube Region" co-funded under the second call for proposals under the INTERREG Danube Transnational Programme 2014-2020. It has started its activity in 2020.

The primary purpose of the Centre is to foster entrepreneurship and motivate, educate and support women willing to start and develop their own businesses, which will lead to the creation of an entrepreneurial environment in the Danube region.

The Centre supports women by providing online training using the e-learning platform, mentoring programmes, networking opportunities, tailored matchmaking, consulting, and other services. It provides a creative and interactive atmosphere - monthly meetings, daily discussions - on issues, successes, challenges, problem-solving events, and first necessity business infrastructure and facilities. The Centre has also provided workshops on different topics.

Mentors and trainers are attracted from the academia and business sectors.

The Centre organised pilot trainings, that were evaluated positively. One of the participants shared: "During the training, I went through all the steps it takes to become an entrepreneur, and I feel more confident that I'll be able to start and run my own company. My biggest motivation was to become part

of this entrepreneurial community - it gave me the mindset, skills, knowledge and contact with experienced people. Now, I'm sure that I made the right choice. Even though the training is over, I'm still part of this community, which motivates me to go further."

The centre is located on the campus of Varna Free University. It is in close proximity to the University Library, 3D Modeling Laboratories and IM /UH. Visitors can also interact with campus-based laboratories, a forensic laboratory, a technology transfer centre for energy-efficient materials and technologies, a fashion design studio, and more.

Currently, the daily work of the Centre involves three staff members from VFU and 3 – from RAPIV. Both organisations put joint efforts into providing high-quality service to women entrepreneurs.

Sustainability is ensured by attracting more stakeholders, businesses and potential investors. Besides services provided during both pilot testing of the Centre, the RAPIV team attracted additional funding for the organisation of a training and mentoring programme for women in the agrifood sector – EWA Bulgaria 2021 and 2022 financed by EIT Food.

In 2024, the Center will continue operating, delivering training, and organising other activities under Interreg Danube Region project DRP0200020 – WE.Circular-Boosting digital and industrial capacity for sustainable circular transition of women entrepreneurs in the Danube Region.

**Picture 4.** An event of the Women Entrepreneurship Centre



Source: RAPIV

Further information: [www.vfu.bg](http://www.vfu.bg)

## **UEVA - University of Economics Varna Accelerator**

The beginning of UEVA - University of Economics Varna Accelerator was laid on 05.10.22 by the University of Economics - Varna.

UEVA's mission is to foster students' entrepreneurial spirit in higher education and support the development of their entrepreneurial ideas. For this purpose, UEVA offers support for student startup businesses and supports the implementation of the entrepreneurial approach in student education.

Initiatives in the UEVA calendar include a series of events introducing students to successful entrepreneurs, discussions, and various training sessions to develop entrepreneurial skills, as well as a special startup program and a talent academy.

In the startup program, upon application, teams may participate in which at least one of the representatives is a student of IU - Varna. It is open to students from other universities, with no restrictions on sector focus.

UEVA had a positive impact on the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. It had its first round in 2023 and supported 8 startups that have created solutions covering sectors like health and quality of life, AI, food and fintech.

All participants also had the opportunity to participate in a training business simulation in the city of Kassel, Germany. One of the startups has participated in the second phase of the Start for Future "MATCH & START" program, an 8-week virtual pre-accelerator program.

The startup program of UEVA is developed according to the successful model of the international entrepreneurial network Start for Future, supported by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology. The University of Varna is building this new initiative based on the existing experience, especially on the University of Economics – Varna Business Network (UEBN).

The University of Varna provides financing for UEVA. It receives financial support from the businesses and its partners. The accelerator also participates in initiatives at the international level supported by European programs.

Picture 5. UEVA



Source: University of Economics -Varna

Further information: <https://ue-varna.bg/en>

## Innowave Summit

The first large-scale technological Innowave event started in October 2017.

For seven consecutive years, within two days, the Innowave Summit attracts more than 5,000 participants with over 150 inspiring international speakers and topics, including leading managers from companies such as Google, Facebook/Meta, Twitter, H2O, Kotler Impact, the Bulgarian Xplora, ZapoMedia, DigitalPro, SoftUni and dozens of others.

The Innowave Summit event is aimed at startups, entrepreneurs, venture capital funds, business angels, investors, etc.

"The vision of the Innowave Summit is to unite Europe's digital leaders and strengthen the innovative ecosystems!" – shared the event organisers.

The event focuses on the latest innovation and digital technology trends globally and regionally. It includes presentations of successful business practices and strategies, discussion panels on innovation and technology, marketing, business development, e-commerce, artificial intelligence, and many others. An important aspect is networking events, round tables and b2b conversations. For the participants, these events are extremely valuable; they allow them to network, build relationships, establish new partnerships, and find clients and investors. More than 100 companies participate as exhibitors with their innovations and business solutions.

The Innowave Summit allows attendees to join 5,000+ digital leaders and world-renowned experts from the business world. It also allows for building valuable relationships with like-minded professionals, potential partners, and future collaborators.

The idea came from a few young people responding to the need for a platform in Varna that would connect innovators, entrepreneurs and technology leaders in one space to share ideas and experiences. It was supported by the state, local authorities and the European Commission.

The organiser of the InnoWave Summit event is the Bulgarian Business Forum.

Innowave Summit is funded through tickets, project funding and sponsorship.

The partners of the Innowave Summit are the European Commission, Transilvania IT Cluster, France Digital, Cluster Catalonia, Pro Malaga, Valencia Digital Summit, the Bulgarian-British Chamber of Commerce, AI Bulgaria, BAIT, the Bulgarian Association of Software Companies, the Bulgarian Center for Entrepreneurship, SoftUni Digital and many other.

**Picture 6.** InnoWave Summit



Source: Bulgarian Business Forums

Further information: <https://innowavesummit.com/>



## 6 Learning from the Ruhr's Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

The Ruhr region in Germany has a long coal and steel industrial history. The last decades marked a restructuring era for the Ruhr from heavy industry to knowledge-based sectors and innovation development. The Ruhr region's entrepreneurial ecosystem evolved in the early 2000s and has, according to dealroom data, generated more than 500 startups until now. A notable milestone of the entrepreneurial ecosystem was the foundation of the ruhrHUB in 2016, promoting startups and collaboration among supporting ecosystem infrastructures and municipalities. Some of the entrepreneurial ecosystem's key sectors are green technology, health-tech, cybersecurity, urban transformation, new industries, IT services and intelligent logistics.

According to interviews with ecosystem intermediaries conducted in Ecosys4you, a big strength of the Ruhr ecosystem is a diverse and complementary support infrastructure for entrepreneurs and startups. It includes the municipal level, for example, through business idea competitions; the university level, for example, specialised incubators like CUBE5 for cybersecurity at the Ruhr University Bochum; and region-wide events such as the ruhrSUMMIT or the ruhrSTARTUPWEEK. However, a weakness is the lack of available funding for later startup phases compared to the strong concentration on funding for early startup phases. While opportunities lie in shifting the regional mindset and enhancing cooperation among cities in the Ruhr with role models emerging among early-stage startups, concerns were raised regarding the project-based funding of the supporting infrastructures. This is considered a threat to the ecosystem's development since many supporting infrastructures, especially some of the major incubator programs, are only funded until the end of 2024. Furthermore, uncertain employment effects, challenges posed by double structures across municipalities, and competition with more established regions like Cologne and Düsseldorf are viewed with concern.

In what follows, we introduce successful activities of the Ruhr's entrepreneurial ecosystem that actors in other ecosystems can take as an inspiration for the further development of their local tools and ecosystem actions: ruhrStartupweek, Start2grow and CUBE 5.

### ruhrSTARTUPWEEK

During the ruhrSTARTUPWEEK, many different events take place in the Ruhr region's different cities to raise awareness for startups and pass on knowledge, experience, and vision. It usually takes place in September each year and allows startups to present themselves, and get in touch with other startups and supporting organisations. The week is organised by the ruhrHUB, an important organisation in the Ruhr's ecosystem that specialises in supporting digital startups and organises large regional startup events.

Picture 7. ruhrSTARTUPWEEK



Source: <https://ruhrstartupweek.de/> (02.02.2024)

The ruhrSTARTUPWEEK's distinction is that its manifold events happen across the entire region. Different pitches, parties, challenges or workshops are taking place in the many cities of the Ruhr during this week, making visible the distributed and complementary startup expertise. The individual events are planned and implemented by organisations such as chambers of industry and commerce, business development agencies, university startup centres and privately organised coworking or makerspaces. This draws attention to the large number of players in the Ruhr region who support the ecosystem. Moreover, it strengthens the networking between the organisations because they can represent their specific expertise, be it sectoral, mentoring, consultancy, funding, etc. This ultimately enables the ecosystem supporters to recommend startup teams to get the support of other organisations if their expertise is better suited to the startup's needs. The ruhrSTARTUPWEEK's website counts 12,900 participants in 340 events and 18 cities, connecting 160 partners until now.

The events during the week begin with a common regional kick-off breakfast at the ruhrHUB, that includes a keynote and a startup fair. The week continues with workshops, self-coaching, prompt design for ChatCPT, customer loyalty, finances in startups, pitches, founding as a mother, logistics, sector events (e.g. cybersecurity), city meet-ups of the startup scene, fundraising, live-hacking, community management, legal forms, project management, rapid prototyping, patent and brand consulting, sales and marketing, internationalisation and events with the overreaching startup scene in the Netherlands "Get in Touch with the Dutch", kick-off info events for further offers and funding programmes such as ruhrMASTERS or start2grow startup competition, Fuckup nights, excursions to Makerspaces, and a big final event.

Further information: <https://ruhrstartupweek.de/>

## **Start2grow - Senkrechtstarter: Businessplan competition**

Senkrechtstarter (City of Bochum) and Start2grow (City of Dortmund) are business plan competitions for teams from all over Germany organised by the municipalities' local economic development agencies. Start2grow was initiated in 2000, and the Senkrechtstarter in 2007/08. Since their start, the competitions have attracted more than 100 teams. The Senkrechtstarter programme usually starts in November and ends in May. In between, events are organised on financing, legal forms, patents, marketing and other relevant topics. These events usually take place on Thursday evenings, creating a community among the teams. There are also mentors for the individual teams who provide support in writing the business plan. The business plans are submitted and assessed by a jury. The best teams are invited to the final event and are allowed to pitch. The best three receive a prize. Winners of the start2grow competition receive a prize which is doubled in case they found the company in the city of Dortmund. In so doing, the start2grow competition became an important instrument for the economic development of Dortmund over time.



**Picture 8.** Senkrechtstarter



Source: Kerstin Meyer (04.11.2021)

The distinct characteristic of both competitions is their launch on a continuous annual basis over a long period, making them established (role model) instruments in Ruhr's entrepreneurial ecosystem. A second characteristic is the organisation of the two local economic development agencies, underpinning the municipalities' strong role in supporting startups and the whole ecosystem. The competitions complement university-based startup activities, as they are open to ideas from different sectors and non-university teams.

Meanwhile, the competitions also attract sponsors who frequently award special prizes that are connected to the business plan development. These are, for example, a sustainable bank offering a prize for a sustainable startup or a project group supporting a manufacturing startup.

Both competitions were launched in the very early days of Ruhr's emerging entrepreneurial ecosystem, resulting in long-term established routines and expertise connected to the competitions' organisational and consultation structure. Still, there is a certain "first mover advantage" related to the competitions, as they are well-known in the entire region as being professional and prestigious. Today, numerous successful startups participate in the competitions. Another success factor is the yearly basis, which allows teams to plan for the next year in case their business idea is only roughly developed or due to time restrictions.

The combination of knowledge transfer in lectures and workshops, as well as a mentoring programme and community building, is highly appreciated by the participants of both competitions. In Bochum, for example, the events take place at different locations, such as public institutions such as the art museum, universities, or larger companies such as GDATA. This makes the ecosystem in Bochum more visible and marketable.

Further information: <https://www.senkrechtstarter.de/>; <https://www.wirtschaftsfoerderung-dortmund.de/gruendung/start2grow>

## CUBE 5

Cube 5 supports startups and founding teams in the areas of cybersecurity and next-level communication in all development phases. The organisation belongs to the Ruhr University of Bochum and is hosted by the Horst-Görtz Institute for Cybersecurity, the computer sciences faculty and the Worldfactory Startup Centre. Besides general consulting and network events, Cube 5 runs an easy-to-access preCUBE support schema for entrepreneurial-oriented ICT students and an incubator programme for

teams willing to set up cybersecurity businesses. The five-month incubator programme is organised in batches, has a competitive application process, and is open to teams from all across Germany.

Picture 9. CUBE 5



Source: <https://cube-five.de/>

Cube 5 was initially developed by leading researchers in cybersecurity at the Horst-Görtz Institute for Cybersecurity in 2017. It is connected to three other cybersecurity support organisations at other German universities that received the same initial funding from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Cube 5 has a very strong connection to the deep-tech research and deep-tech scale-ups of the Ruhr cybersecurity ecosystems. As of today, it is financed by different support programmes from the BMBF and other ministries. Cube 5 can recommend founding teams to two reputational and well-financed BMBF research transfer grants for new ventures (startup secure and startup connect). The grants consist of two phases. In the first phase, the university receives the funding, and the founding team is hired and can employ other people to develop the technology further for commercialisation. If successful, the venture will formally be founded and receive the first project funding from the grant.

Established in 2018, more than 20 startups and scale-ups have been supported by Cube 5. Among them is a range of very successful companies. Now, the founders of these companies act as mentors, role models and jury members in the Cube 5 network. Until today, the organisation has recommended 18 teams for the Startup Secure and Startup Connect support grant. All recommended teams eventually received the grant (success rate 100%).

One success factor is the sectoral focus on cybersecurity and the strong connection with the leading research organisation in cybersecurity of the Ruhr region and beyond. Teams move to cube 5 and the Ruhr to become part of the cybersecurity ecosystem.

#### Components and elements of CUBE 5

- Consulting and networking events (e.g. "MATCH MAKING find your startup match!" that includes a kind of speed dating with the intention that potential founding teams could find each other)
- preCUBE consulting for ICT students interested in founding a venture
- inCUBE incubator
- Support for and access to StartUpSecure and StartUpConnect research transfer grants

Further information: <https://cube-five.de/>

# Imprint

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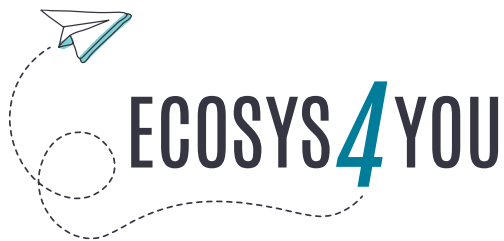
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Ecosys4you – Engaging Entrepreneurial Ecosystems for the Youth (2023-2026) strives to bridge the entrepreneurial ecosystems of the Ruhr, Germany, Varna, Bulgaria and Slovenia by connecting young founders, start-ups, HEIs and other ecosystem actors.

## Consortium



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