



Cross-ecosystem internship programme Funding model

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About this deliverable

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1 Background: The Ecosys4you Cross-Ecosystem Internship Programme

The cross-ecosystem internship programme is a core activity of the Ecosys4you partnership, enabling young people eager to start a business to gain firsthand entrepreneurial experience. Interns are placed in start-ups and young companies abroad, where they develop both entrepreneurial and intercultural skills. To date, 8 interns have participated, completing internships in the Ruhr region or in Varna.

To maximise impact, the internship programme was designed in batches, allowing students to stay in the region at the same time and connect. An attractive side programme featuring cultural and entrepreneurial events was initially implemented to enhance the interns' experience. The benefits include:

- Developing essential entrepreneurial skills such as business planning, marketing strategies, financial management, and more.
- Learning from experienced founders who guide interns through the ins and outs of building a successful business.
- Connecting with like-minded individuals, industry professionals, and potential future collaborators.
- Applying knowledge in real-world settings by working on projects that challenge and inspire creative thinking.

Start-ups and young companies benefit from motivated interns, who often bring valuable international perspectives. Additionally, through the internship programme, start-ups can strengthen their integration within regional entrepreneurial ecosystems and build their reputation as philanthropists.

We sought to maximise outcomes for both start-ups and interns through a thorough application and matching process, a comprehensive internship procedure, accompanying activities, and a clearing service for interns and employers to resolve any mismatched expectations during the cross-country exchange. These benefits were intended to support a revolving funding model for the cross-country intern exchange.

2 Initial Concept of a Revolving Funding Model and Actual Implementation

To enable interns to participate regardless of financial background, the goal was to cover travel and accommodation costs and allocate some funds for living expenses. The idea was to develop a revolving funding scheme to ensure sustainable implementation. Key financing partners were to be the start-ups satisfied with their interns, who would donate to support the next year's attendees. Donations were planned to be made publicly, for example, at farewell events or via a dedicated platform, to increase philanthropists' recognition and create peer pressure to donate. Additional fundraising efforts were intended to cover any remaining funding gaps, especially relevant for the first batch, where no established start-ups could be asked for funding.

Batch 1 of the internship programme took place in the summer of 2024. Four interns (two from Varna and two from Slovenia) completed two-month internships at the following start-ups:

- AWARE 7 (Gelsenkirchen)
- XingSys (Gelsenkirchen)

- MeiCla Design and Shuhari (Bochum)
- Fairnica (Herne)

The initial fundraising campaign began in winter 2023 and enabled the direct fundraising through established companies in the WH team's professional network, raising €4,000. Of this, €3,000 was donated by the regional public bank (Sparkasse Gelsenkirchen), which has a public mission to sponsor social and scientific projects. A postal mailing campaign targeting all significant companies in Gelsenkirchen was unsuccessful.

Therefore, ERASMUS+ grants for internships were identified as an additional funding source and made mandatory for participation in the Ecosys4you internship programme. All students applied for an ERASMUS+ grant at their universities after the matchmaking process and ultimately received scholarships. The Ecosys4you team arranged free accommodation in Gelsenkirchen, free public transport, and allocated additional pocket money from the €4,000 raised.

Following the revolving funding approach, all start-ups that hosted an intern were asked to donate to support the second batch. One company donated €250, and one of the initial donors contributed another €250. The local public bank declined to sponsor again, citing reluctance to fund the same organisation continuously. Due to the limited budget for the second round, financial support had to be scaled down, and the organisational and ideal benefits of the Ecosys4you internship programme were emphasised.

In the second programme round, internships were arranged across the three ecosystems upon request for the remainder of the project. The time-restricted batch format was thus abandoned, leading to better suitability and the placement of three additional interns in Varna and Gelsenkirchen in 2025/2026. However, this complicated the batch-wise revolving fundraising model. Intern placements upon request will continue beyond the duration of the Ecosys4you project.

3 Challenge Identification and Funding Model Modification

Based on these experiences, the Ecosys4you team held an internal workshop to further develop the funding model for the internship programme. Strengths and weaknesses were discussed to inform modifications.

Identified weaknesses:

- The initial fundraising campaign was very time-consuming, with resources disproportionate to the funds raised.
- The revolving funding model generated some contributions from hosting start-ups, but was insufficient to meet demand. Reasons for the limited donations include:
 - Limited financial resources of start-ups, especially very young ones.
 - Variable utility gained by start-ups from internships, depending on company circumstances and intern skills/motivation. Internships abroad tend to reduce a company's utility, since they are often used for recruitment, which is less likely when candidates are abroad. Additionally, short internship durations (commonly requested by students) are less beneficial, as interns often leave shortly after integration.
 - The small scale of the Ecosys4you internship programme limits visibility and philanthropist recognition.

Identified strengths:

- Students face difficulties finding internship opportunities abroad, so the placement support offered by Ecosys4you meets a clear demand.
- The ERASMUS+ internship programme has proven to be a reliable and feasible co-funding source. Since the 2014-2020 cycle, it has increasingly funded traineeships lasting 2 to 12 months. Therefore, additional funding is not strictly necessary. ERASMUS+ coordinators report difficulties finding students for traineeship grants, as students struggle to find companies abroad.
- The regional embeddedness of Ecosys4you partners was crucial for identifying suitable companies. Established networks made arranging placements relatively straightforward and time-efficient.

Out of this assessment of the cross-ecosystem internship programme, a funding and sustainability model was identified. The downsized pragmatic cross-ecosystem funding model and the up-scaled large European funding model.

Downsized Pragmatic Cross-Ecosystem Funding Model

This model reduces unnecessary costs and barriers to continuing the internship programme, without large financial commitments or time-consuming procedures. The ERASMUS+ programme serves as the sole funding source. All extra fundraising efforts are abandoned. Interns benefit from placement services to secure internships abroad. Ecosys4you partners coordinate placements upon student requests by leveraging their networks. Partners and regional ERASMUS+ officers meet periodically online to refine the programme and communicate changes. The Ecosys4you website serves as a main information hub. HEI educators and ERASMUS+ coordinators encourage suitable students to apply.

The Ecosys4you partnership will further apply this model. It has significant potential to sustain the activity and is, in principle, open to other partners and regions. One drawback is that, beyond arranging internships abroad, there are limited additional benefits. ERASMUS+ funding does not fully cover living expenses, so students without other financial support (e.g., from parents or scholarships) may be unable to participate. Direct payments from hosting start-ups could mitigate this, but would complicate placement. Additionally, ERASMUS+ funding limits the target group to students and depends on the available budgets of the participating HEIs. For the Ecosys4you scope, however, the budgets of involved HEIs have been sufficient.

Up-Scaled Large European Funding Model

This model scales up the revolving funding approach to increase visibility and philanthropic recognition by substantially increasing the number of interns and companies involved. Upscaling is also needed to cover the operational costs of ongoing fundraising. Consequently, the regional and thematic focus (three ecosystems and entrepreneurship) must be abandoned.

Instead, the goal would be to develop an excellent, to some extent exclusive, internship programme for Europe with strong interlinkages to the established Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs programme. Admission would be competitive, placing only particularly capable candidates. This would increase companies' willingness to offer high-profile internships. Moving away from start-ups to more established companies would help secure larger donations, as these hosts tend to be more financially solvent. To enhance benefits for interns and motivate high-performing candidates, the cohort approach—with an attractive side programme for each batch—should be further developed, alongside the establishment of an alumni network. National scholarship programmes such as the Studienstiftung des deutschen

Volkes can serve as role models for such a European internship exchange. A combination with ERASMUS+ would still allow sponsorship amounts to remain manageable.

Advantages of this up-scaled European model include high visibility, benefits for established companies, and access to excellent European talent, potentially fuelling a truly European talent market. However, establishing such a large model would be demanding and risky, and may be better suited to existing European industry associations and/or university alliances. Exclusivity naturally comes at the expense of inclusivity. The Ecosys4you internship programme, by contrast, had very few rejections.

Since abandoning the entrepreneurial and start-up focus is not an option for Ecosys4you, this path will not be further pursued among the partners. However, there is potential to promote a European talent market independent of the founding topic.

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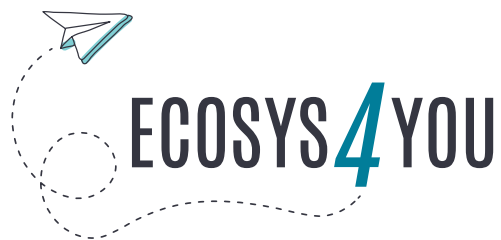
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Ecosys4you – Engaging Entrepreneurial Ecosystems for the Youth (2023-2026) strives to bridge the entrepreneurial ecosystems of the Ruhr in Germany, Varna in Bulgaria, and Slovenia by connecting young founders, start-ups, HEIs and other ecosystem actors.

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