

Nordic World-Changer Ecosystem

Building a Human-Centered Innovation Ecosystem
for the Next Generation in the Northern Nordics

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Summary

Can we make Northern Nordics a place where the **next generation** of startup founders, NGO leaders and other world-changers make an impact?

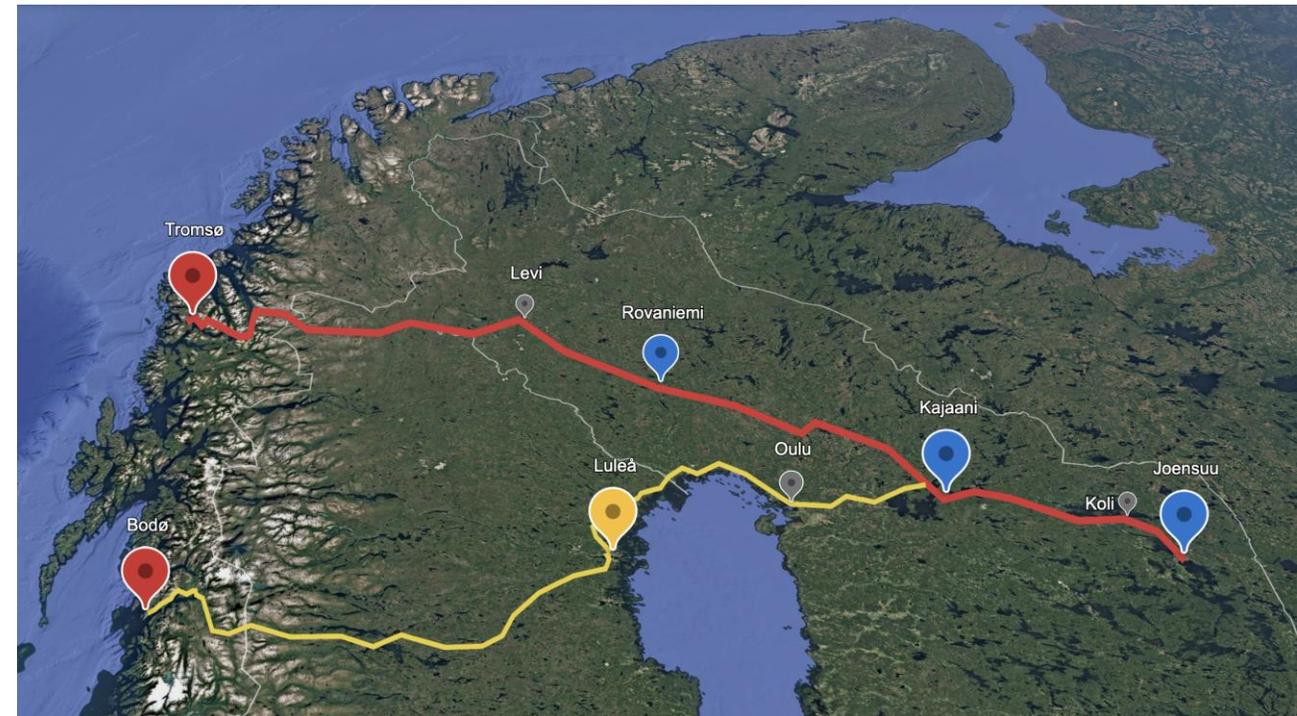
We want to build a **cross-border ecosystem** that focuses on supporting young people and students with ambitious ideas and entrepreneurial mindset.

The project will concentrate on student-led initiatives and establishing support structures that serve them. Grass-roots **communities** in every university city, shared training **program** for the best individuals, lowering barriers to existing support **structures**, integrating startup-building activities into **academic** curriculums and turning the **cities** itself into agile platforms for innovation. Project activities highlight and share the best practises from mid-size student cities like Joensuu,, Tromsø, Luleå, Bodø and Kajaani for the benefit of all.

The goal is to build long-lasting partnerships between cities and organisations that believe that **investing in the next generation** is the best way to make sure our beautiful North has a bright future.

PROJECT DETAILS

Interreg Aurora Call 9 REG (9th Feb – 9th March 2026)
Specific Objective 3.1 – Education and lifelong learning
5-8 partners from Finland, Sweden and Norway
Project duration 08/2026-01/2029
Total budget approx. 1,5-1,8M€



Context

There are 10 university cities in the Interreg Aurora area with roughly 1 million total population.

In most of these cities, many students move out after graduating so **talent retention** is a big challenge for the local ecosystems. Mostly this is due to lack of exiting career opportunities for highly educated and motivated students in the region.

Most people who live in the region appreciate our beautiful nature, friendly people and safe cities. It's mostly the lack of opportunities that make many talented individuals choose to the bigger cities.

We need to empower our best students to create **new opportunities for themselves** and their peers with the support of the local ecosystems.

Each mid-size city by itself lacks the bigger scale to compete with metropolitan areas. However, with cross-border collaboration in a geographically wide but culturally similar area, we can create an exiting **network of possibilities** for the next generation.



The Plan

We'll build a **World-Changer Accelerator** and a **Human-Centered Innovation Ecosystem** around the next generation of people who challenge the status quo and break the rules for the benefit of *everyone*.

Someone needs to change things for the better.
They might as well live in the Northern Nordics.

The Elements

**Grass-Roots
Community**

Finding the people and building a culture that inspires bold ideas

**World-Changer
Accelerator**

Give best individuals the skills they don't learn in schools

Mentors, Support,
Accelerators,
Micro-Funding

Making sure teams have what they need to succeed & scale

Academic
Backbone,
R2B Cases

Integration to studies and turning research into scalable action

Cities as Testbeds
& Cross-Border
Ecosystem

Real-world problems to real-world use cases, tested in the region

Community

We need to create local grass-roots communities where **like-minded people** can meet each other, share life together, learn from one another and invite more people along the journey.

This is the start of the funnel where we can source the **right people** who are willing to go beyond what's expected. Community activities are also an essential learning ground for individuals.



Grass-Roots
Community

STEP 1
Establish active student communities in each city in the region, based on the Entrepreneurship Society model from AaltoES (with a Joensuu humanist twist).

Accelerator

This is the weird, controversial one that defies traditional logic in some ways.

Most startup accelerators are focused on investing in the idea and maybe the team behind it. But what if we would really invest in the **people** first?

Academia gives students the domain expertise, but we need to create an environment for deep & raw character development, skills for teambuilding, networking and leadership etc.

And most of all throwing people into situations where they probably need to **break a few rules to create epic s******.



**World-
Changer
Accelerator**



STEP 2

Create a program for selected students who have shown enough motivation and passion and really invest into them as persons and build into them the skills that they just don't learn in school.

Support

Great ideas fail because awesome people run out of energy, money or confidence at exactly the wrong moment.

We need to make our world-changers are **not doing it alone**. They need mentors who have been there before, some money at the right time, structures to keep their focus on the right things and someone opening the doors for them. Support is what turns chaos into progress.

Great accelerators, funds and structures already exist, but we need to readjust and develop those to **fit the new paradigm**.



Mentors,
Support,
Accelerators,
Micro-Funding



STEP 3

Build a world-changer -friendly, shared support layer across cities: mentors, incubators & accelerators, agile micro-funding and practical help that teams can tap into when they're ready to take the next step.

Academia

Innovation needs to be founded on **proofed knowledge** and **domain expertise**. This is where the established educational institutes shine – guiding the learning process for students and **exploring new horizons** with research.

However, many of the curriculums don't acknowledge entrepreneurial ventures and all the hustle and grind it takes to build something. We need to make sure students can **integrate** their efforts into the studies – you don't *need* to be a dropout to be a founder.

Also, all of this might turn out into a very interesting **research topic** in itself.



Academic
Backbone,
R2B Cases

STEP 4

Create multidisciplinary course portfolios that can be flexibly integrated into current portfolios in different fields across multiple institutions. Connect researchers with future world-changers to implement ideas.

Cities

Cities are the real key here. They are potential **platforms** for change.

Our mid-size cities in the North are the perfect testbed for bold, new ideas. If we can think of cities as laboratories for fresh perspectives and if we're agile to implement new concepts into our services, we can be **thought leaders** in the world that desperately needs new **solutions to global challenges**.

And if the ideas tested first by one city can be scaled cross-border to other cities in our region, we can enable a superfast go-to-market and **prove international scalability** of the World-Changer's ideas.



Cities as Testbeds
& Cross-Border
Ecosystem

STEP 5

Position cities as active partners and testbeds, connecting world-changers with real societal challenges solved in hackathons. Enable cross-border piloting and learning.

The Project



Lead Partner EU: City of Joensuu

Lead Partner Norway: Nord University (Bodø)

Project Partners: Montmartre AS / EMAX Norway (Tromsø), EMAX Sweden (Luleå), Kajaani AMK, Business Joensuu

Associate Partners from 5-7 cities (e.g. student associations, universities, incubators, NGOs)

Timeline 2026-2028

2026

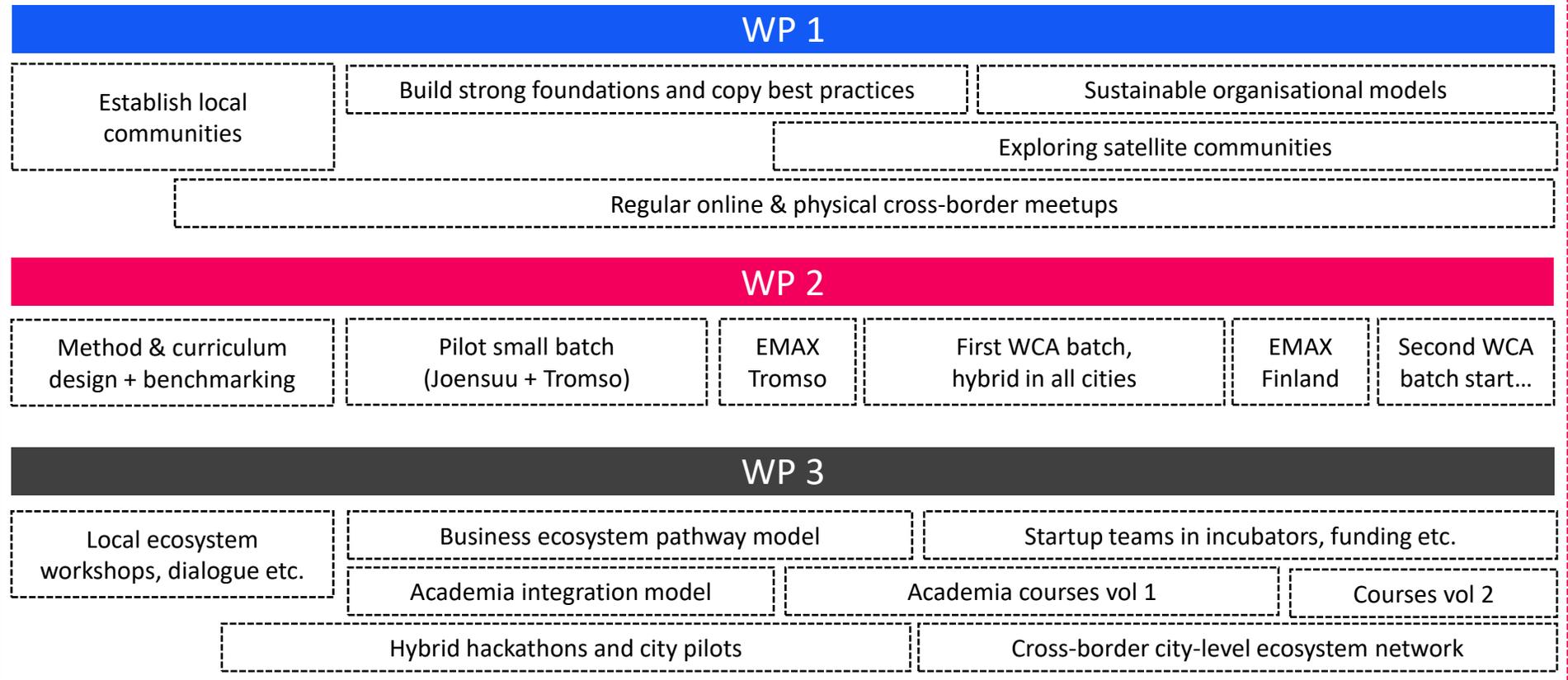
August

2027

2028

2029

WS
Application



Exit plan

WP1



LEAD: City of Joensuu / Joensuu Entrepreneurship Society
PARTNERS: Kajaani AMK, Montmartre AS, EMAX Sweden
ASSOCIATES: StartUiT, OuluES, EMAX Norway, upcoming communities (Luleå, Bodø, Rovaniemi, Kajaani)

This work package consists of

- Host local **meetups and gatherings** that reach a wide range of students from all different fields and different educational institutions locally, to inspire local students and to find the innovators and early-adopters locally
- Building a **local community** of students with a world-changer mindset in each city, based on the Joensuu (JoES) model established in previous projects
- **Northern network** of the local ES-type communities, with regular cross-border online meetups and physical meetups during key events in the region
- Establish locally implemented, sustainable organisational models by benchmarking across borders the best practices for leadership, governance and funding to ensure the **continuation of the communities**. During the project, this will be supported by established organisations in each region (EMAX Sweden in Luleå), but exit plan is to have student-led NGOs.

WPA2



LEAD: City of Joensuu / Joensuu Entrepreneurship Society
PARTNERS: Montmartre AS, EMAX Sweden, Business Joensuu
ASSOCIATES: StartUiT, OuluES (benchmarking), upcoming communities (Luleå, Bodø, Rovaniemi, Kajaani), Nord University, Kajaani AMK

This work package consists of

- Designing the methodology and curriculum for a hybrid “founder school” -type program that runs adjacent to education curriculum → **World Changer Accelerator**
- **Best practices** implemented from EMAX and the best incubators and accelerators
- **Pilot groups** early 2027 in Joensuu + Tromsø (~6 months, 5-10 participants each)
- **EMAX Challenge Weeks** in Norway (2027) and Finland (2028) as a kick-off for the first World-Changer Accelerator batches; the challenge weeks will screen 100 young participants (18-25yo) from the Aurora region. This project will co-fund and co-create the EMAX weeks, but these will be led separately
- **First WCA batch** in 2026-2027 semester, 10 participants in each city + 20 selected from the EMAX Challenge week. Iteration based on the 1st batch, 2nd batch starting in fall 2028

WP3

Mentors,
Support,
Accelerators,
Micro-Funding

Academic
Backbone,
R2B Cases

Cities as
Testbeds
& Cross-Border
Ecosystem

LEAD: Nord University
PARTNERS: Business Joensuu, KAMK,
City of Joensuu, Montmartre AS
ASSOCIATES: Bodø Municipality?,
Arctic Business?, UEF, Karelia UAS,
ProTromsø?, Luleå Science Park?
LTU? Chamber of Commerces?

This work package consists of

- Mapping and clarifying the in each city and making these pathways more visible and accessible for students **local startup and business ecosystems**
- Creating a practical “student-to-ecosystem pathway model” that **lowers the barrier** for young founders to enter incubators, funding schemes and mentoring networks
- Establishing regular **ecosystem dialogue workshops** in each city between students, business developers, researchers, municipalities and SMEs to improve understanding and remove structural bottlenecks
- Developing an **academia-integration model** that enables students in WP1 and WP2 activities to receive ECTS credits and connect students with **research-based innovation** (R2B) & research teams
- Organising **hybrid cross-border hackathons** and **city pilot challenges** where students can test ideas in real environments and municipalities can implement the most promising solutions
- Documenting and analysing the new models developed in WP1–WP3 to create a **transferable framework** for student-driven entrepreneurship ecosystems in mid-size northern cities

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