

“CREATING A VISION: VET SCHOOLS AS ENTREPRENEURIAL HUBS”

Authors: Iván Diego (Valnalón) || Contributors: INCUVET Consortium

InnoOmnia in Numbers

- Started in 2011
- 200 new/would be entrepreneurs
- 1000 teachers and school leaders trained
- 700 Omnia staff exposed to new pedagogies
- 3000 visitors

“By bringing together entrepreneurs, students and teachers from all levels of education, InnoOmnia is breaking boundaries and is in itself a radical innovation combining the worlds of learning and work”

InnoOmnia is steering a multi-stakeholder process where local authorities, employers, start-ups, teachers and students come together to shape the way enterprise is embedded in the curriculum and learn from each other confronting challenges that touch upon a variety of aspects related with enterprise and entrepreneurship. We can hardly think of a better venue to host the first INCUVET project workshop aptly titled “Creating a vision: VET Schools as Entrepreneurial Hubs”. Bear with us for an informal account of the things we’ve seen and heard there.

The F word

Merely uttering the F word (Finland, we mean) in a teachers room brings to the fore a bucket-load of praise and positive connotations. Finland has become the ultimate educators Shangri-La and although we don’t have the figures at hand we’re confident this has attracted a steady stream of Educational Tourism on the lookout for factors explaining Finland’s success.

Shortly before landing in Vantaa Airport, Finnair in-flight magazine featured [“An Ode to Entrepreneurs”](#) penned by a smiling Alexander Stubb. For those not acquainted with Finnish politics, Mr. Stubb is the former Prime Minister of Finland. Searching for patterns is human nature and in a certain way it just felt as a sort of INCUVET welcome speech. Yet, high-level politics is definitely not our league.

Entrepreneurship Education, pretty much a local endeavor in Finland

What matters is not politics, but policy, as Kristina Erkkilä, Director of Development at City of Espoo, kindly reminded us in the opening presentation. Kristina provided a concise yet comprehensive overview of the main developments at national level pointing us to key events in policymaking that paved the way for the integration of entrepreneurship education in the lifelong learning path. She also warned us of the perils of the mindless replication of “what works”. Context matters and Espoo Local Authority, whom she represents, has had an immense influence in crafting a sound vision and

implementation of entrepreneurship education. In 2009, the Ministry of Education “[Guidelines for Entrepreneurship Education](#)” envisioned a projected state of affairs in 2015 where measures to develop entrepreneurship education would primarily originate in the regional and local levels. The Espoo metropolitan area strategic commitment to become a learning city has somehow proved the ministerial “fortune-tellers” right.

In 2009 “[Entrepreneurship in VET](#)” report identified prevalent gaps across Europe having to do with limited student participation, ineffective teaching methods, and limited involvement of entrepreneurs. Now, was this an accurate description of the situation in the VET system in Finland and more precisely in Espoo at the time? And more importantly, does it still hold water in 2015? In our quest for answers to these questions, teachers, students and entrepreneurs at InnoOmnia were given the floor.

“In Finland, local authorities and educational institutions draw up and adopt their own curricula based on the core curriculum.”

Not a bird, not a plane, it’s... InnoOmnia

Elina Oksanen took centre stage to pin down some basic ideas about InnoOmnia concept. It ain’t easy to come up with a clear-cut definition but let’s start with this one: InnoOmnia is a lifelong learning hub and a meeting point for entrepreneurs, teachers and students nested within a larger structure that is OMNIA, a VET School owned by the Local Authority of Espoo. The reasons for its set up had to do with the increasing rates of youth unemployment in Espoo area, low rate of entrepreneurs with VET background, the lack of an incubation unit serving the needs of VET students in Espoo area and last but not least the need to embed entrepreneurship education in VET courses. If you’re visiting InnoOmnia for the first time, you will suffer the Superman syndrome. Not an incubation unit, not a teacher resource centre, not a career guidance service for students, what the hell is it then?

“*InnoOmnia means different things to different people*”, Students can do their “on-the-job” training in InnoOmnia or cooperate with in-house entrepreneurs in projects. It is also a playground, a living lab for Omnia teachers willing to put to test new pedagogical approaches. Local entrepreneurs could start their operations here (more than 200 start-ups created here in 5 years) but above all, Elina said, the premises were carefully designed to increase the odds of informal collaboration between teachers, students and entrepreneurs and make that “slow magic” happen in the shape of new projects.

InnoEspoo project attempted at breaking edu-silos, increasing innovation capacity and entrepreneurship and developing new services for citizens in Espoo region.

The entrepreneurial path at OMNIA.

“Through entrepreneurship we learned about the skills we did not know we had”

OMNIA VET Students

Listening to Tuula Kurkisuo, Entrepreneurship coach at Omnia, it takes little time to realise entrepreneurship is firmly embedded in the curriculum of VET courses in Omnia. A raft of compulsory (Internal Entrepreneurship) and elective subjects (External Entrepreneurship) supported by a good offer of extracurricular learning activities such as a 24 hour Entrepreneurial Adventure Camp and the JA-YE Company Programme will give you a full picture of the entrepreneurial

path at OMNIA. A path that's firmly committed to the sequential development of a balanced mix of entrepreneurial skills. Working life skills and personal management skills. Communication, interaction, personal branding, flexibility and productivity do constitute the foundations of a successful transition into adult life. Tuula invited two VET students to present their project idea, FirstPump and to share some insights derived from their exposure to entrepreneurship: “Through entrepreneurship we learned about the skills we did not know we had!”

Yet while we all agree on the WHAT, Tuula is quick to add that much work remains to be done on the HOW. How to motivate and grab students' attention? How to tap into their interests? From a teacher perspective, any little step in this direction would be a very valuable outcome of INCUVET project. Quite shockingly Finnish VET teachers in the room felt they were not sufficiently trained to put into practice the so-called “entrepreneurial way of teaching”. In order to cope with this situation, InnoOmnia has a specific strand of work focused on teacher training.

Practical experiences of entrepreneurial teaching

Selina Nastase, Fashion Design Lecturer is not a die-hard advocate of entrepreneurship, but much to her credit she has concocted a very advanced approach to teaching by tapping into her professional experience as a designer and bringing together different resources and perspectives to answer a big question: How do I teach “Success”? Selina thinks the answer is to be found in supporting her students to set clear professional and personal goals and activate their sense of self-worth.

In order to build a sound understanding of the sector, the learning experience of students is enriched by providing access to external inputs, articles, participation in events/fairs and active involvement in project-based learning. Selina sets up study-projects with the collaboration of local companies. She contacts them, negotiates the standards of the work/design/product to be submitted by students while securing the company commitment to manufacturing the 3 winning ideas. Thus, students get to see the big picture and get acquainted with the demands and needs of a real client.

Cooperative pedagogical models

In her previous work at Jyväskylä University, Kirsi Niskala, Project Specialist at InnoOmnia, had the chance to get familiar with “Team Academy” methodology. The concept was developed in the 90ies as a lecture-free methodology based in the [labour cooperative model and principles](#). Initially conceived for Higher Education Business/Economics students with certainly impressive results (40% go on to start-up their own companies), the model has gained traction leading some VET schools in

“A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.”

Finland to start tinkering with the Team Academy concept. However, adaptation to VET level is not straightforward, Kirsi admits.

In May 2013, ESPOON KYKY COOP was formed in Omnia. It is currently staffed by 60 members, 3rd or 2nd year students, who join on a voluntary basis. In order to become a fully-fledged member of the coop, the membership fee is 20€. The cooperative has a fairly small annual turnover 50000€ mainly derived from a wide range of services provided to actual customers in

Espoo area. Espoon Kyky Coop is a great learning environment that provides real on-the-job learning opportunities for students, while they gain subject content knowledge. The cooperative is also used as a place to put to test a series of vocational skills.

“[...] a central role for government is also to ensure that cooperatives are included in school curricula at every level to enable to young people to look to the cooperative option for entrepreneurial activities.”

ILO, 2009

The coop faces manifold challenges. On the one hand, there's a high student turnover rate making it difficult to build ownership and team spirit. A good example of this is the fact that only the Board of Directors meet on a regular basis whereas the General Assembly is only called at the end of the year. Teachers need further knowledge of the labour cooperative model as well as support tools, materials and methods. And lastly, assessment is challenging.

One just wonders what would ever happen if this Cooperative model was given at least as much prominence as the JA-YE model bearing in mind the [resilience of cooperative business model in times of recession](#) and the fact that worker cooperatives do not only provide people with an income, but also are a way of gaining control over the conditions under which they labour, providing “decent work”.

The researcher perspective

EE needs Slow-Lazy-Stupid teachers
(or what's the same, teachers that step back, refuse to provide answers and let students act and learn)

Entrepreneurship Education developments in Finland have been followed with interest by the research community. In some cases the National Government has been pivotal in creating the conditions to build a sound evidence base. Elena Ruskovaara's work as a Project Manager at Laaperanta University of Technology is a good example of this. Elena was invited to present the

findings of her [research](#) looking at the networking skills and activities of a sample of 448 VET teachers in Finland. In line with our previous discussion on teacher training, a staggering 40% of VET teachers surveyed had no specific training in Entrepreneurship Education (EE).

In spite of all efforts, the teaching methods more frequently used to deal with entrepreneurship do largely qualify as traditional with “Discussions” topping the list. You will need to scroll down to the bottom to find student-centered methods with a clear outward-looking perspective and entailing some sort of risk. Bottom means most of the “entrepreneurial” teaching methods we tend to take for granted are seldom used in Finnish VET classrooms.

Teachers taking (or forced to undertake) EE courses are more willing to network while age or teaching experience does not have any influence. Data shows the more teachers are involved in curricular, school or policy development processes, the more they are inclined to network.

Elena was on the way back home from Brussels where she attended the launching event of the [EE-HUB](#), the European Entrepreneurship Education Network. She also pointed us in the direction of a couple of interesting resources: [Measurement Tool for Enterprise Education](#) and [The Entrepreneurial School](#) website.

Walking the talk

A number of research projects have shown the positive link between movement and learning. It may sound far-fetched but probably that’s what our hosts had in mind when they included this leg-stretching section in the programme. The walking tour took us to different physical spaces where we got a taste of what InnoOmnia means for different people.

Mimmi Heiniö, Omnia teacher, underlined the role played by InnoOmnia as a testbed for new pedagogical approaches including gamification, mobile learning and, of course, entrepreneurial teaching methods. Mimmi’s input was crucial to finally pin down the unique combination of services InnoOmnia provides to students, teachers, entrepreneurs and the local community. A perfect example to illustrate the purpose of development projects in InnoOmnia is Innomerkonomit. The project has successfully managed to curb the appalling drop-out rate in Business Administration VET courses. Teachers involved in the project devised new ways to increase the weight of on-the-job learning and project-based learning. As a result, the drop-out rate is little more than anecdotal in these days.

Vesa Robertson is doing his civil service at InnoOmnia. Still in his 20ies, Vesa has already developed some experience in business start-up in the music industry. He owns a recording studio and he’s currently designing a social media platform for musicians with the help of Omnia student with excellent programming skills yet struggling academically. In cooperation with teachers, this student is allowed to earn his VET qualification through on-the-job learning at Vesa’s project. Such a flexible arrangement is perfectly possible in the Finnish Education System. This is a good example of the sort of informal collaborations that are bound to happen there.

Timo Karjalainen was the first tenant at InnoOmnia incubation unit. This Human Resources specialist shows no hesitation in highlighting the advantages of being located here. To join InnoOmnia Community, Timo, just as the rest of the entrepreneurs that followed, had to write an application followed by an interview. Bear in mind InnoOmnia is not to be seen as a mere provider of office space. InnoOmnia maps the applicants’ expectations, needs and potential for co-operation with the students and other entrepreneurs in the community. Entrepreneurs are expected to be role models for the

youth, and provide real-life cases for them on a daily basis. In exchange, they are offered a tailored professional development plan.

His latest product is the a Job Search Game ([Työn-Haku-Peli©](#)). In Timo’s words, “the Job Search Game is a fun and easy way for young people to get to know the facts, skills and things you need when looking for a job”. Plans to launch an online version of the game had to be put on hold. Recurring to external developers represented a massive investment that he could not afford. Another tenant eavesdropped on the conversation Timo was having at the InnoOmnia Coffee Room and offered him a much better deal so that the online tool was finally released.

Kati Aulén, is the coach overseeing the operations at OmniaShop. Real-world and on-the-job learning opportunities for VET Students represent one of the key educational and social issues in the greater Helsinki Area and this is where OmniaShop comes into play. . “The shop enables VET students to improve key retail management skills (e.g. customer service) in a real environment”, she says. OmniaShop is a specialist store selling sustainable crafts and related products designed, amongst others, by students and teachers. Do you remember Selina Nastase? Her Fashion and Textile students have recently received an order to design and produce some aprons for the shop. Entrepreneurs are also offered shelf-space in exchange for a percentage of sales. The customer base is largely made up of local people and, obviously, Omnia staff.

Connecting the dots

Having reached this point, let us double-check if we are on the right track. The noble art of writing project proposals led us to make a bombastic promise: “IncuVET will focus on initiatives geared towards a broader and better-rounded support to entrepreneurship in VET schools structured around three different layers of intervention. Now, it’s up to you, our much beloved reader, to assess if InnoOmnia has met our selection criteria.

LAYERS OF INTERVENTION	Your thoughts on InnoOmnia
<p>CHANGING MINDS. It will provide an open space where all interested stakeholders (teachers, employers, students, community organizations, local authorities) will engage in a process of discovery and discussion in order to stretch the concept of the role entrepreneurship should play in society and education.</p>	
<p>UNLEASHING NEW IDEAS. It will be run under the principle “No Idea Left Behind” Creativity and sustainability will deserve special attention. In order to provide the right conditions for new ideas to come to the surface connections with the real world, interdisciplinary and cross-</p>	

sectorial cooperation stand out as crucial elements in the equation.

ADDING VALUE. They will secure the conditions for some of these new ideas to abandon Thoughtland and morph into viable businesses, innovative products, disruptive services, new teaching methods, inclusive social schemes, cultural events, making a contribution to the economic, social, cultural and environmental development of the local community schools are part of.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS?

Wanna share? Please drop us a line, copy/paste your comments and let us know who you are and what you do.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to all the friendly staff and users that make InnoOmnia possible.