

# Developing cooperative entrepreneurship in international cooperation - An example of an international project case and its results

*Martti Ainonen, Master of social sciences, Senior Lecturer, Participation and Functional Capacity, Lapland University of Applied Sciences*

*Marjo Jussila, M.A., project manager, Digital Solutions, Lapland University of Applied Sciences*

*Timo Marttala, Master of social sciences, Senior Lecturer, Participation and Functional Capacity, Lapland University of Applied Sciences*

*Katja Kankaanpää, Master of Business Administration, Senior Lecturer, Digital Solutions, Lapland University of Applied Sciences*

Key words: cooperatives, entrepreneurship, education, regional development

## Background and justification of the Cooperative Campus Project

Lapland UAS participated in the recently ended Cooperative Campus development project funded by Horizon Europe (Cooperative Campus website 2021). The aim of the project was to develop a shared coaching model to reduce youth unemployment in the EU by boosting entrepreneurship in the form of cooperatives (EU 2019). The project involved regions in four different European countries: Lapland in Finland, Örebro in Sweden, Navarra in Spain, and Goriška in Slovenia. In this article, we will describe how the project progressed and what lessons we learned.

For carrying out the project and receiving Horizon funding, it was important that the project was linked to the activities of the Regional Council of Lapland in the international Social Economy network (Social Economy 2020), the partnerships established in the network and cooperation between Lapland UAS and the Regional Council of Lapland. The project also supported the Lapland UAS strategy in promoting entrepreneurship. The engagement of local

partners – the Kemi Experts' Cooperative and the Tekevä Lappia Cooperative – in cooperation was important, similarly to the participation of international project specialists from Lapland UAS in the preparation of the project application.

## Implementation and results of the project

At the beginning of the project, the range of cooperative studies available in different countries was investigated. In Lapland, the current availability of cooperative studies is low. However, the University of Lapland was a member of the national network, which offered co-op network studies as coordinated by Ruralia (Ruralia 2021), until August 2020. Cooperative entrepreneurship is covered more or less as part of economics studies at the UAS and in conjunction with the Tekevä Lappia Cooperative of Lappia Vocational College. The situations and backgrounds varied in different regions in terms of the popularity and visibility of cooperatives, for example. Here, the Navarra region in Spain stood out clearly from the other regions, and it was surprising to see that degree programmes provided in different countries lacked the opportunity to try and train cooperative entrepreneurship during studies. This was seen as an important area of development in this shared project. The Tekevä Lappia Cooperative and the Kemi Experts' Cooperative were proven as excellent development partners.

In addition to gaining experience as an entrepreneur, the key content of studies was agreed between the project parties. The studies consisted of five modules focused on the societal perspectives of cooperatives, cooperative competence as a business model, business and entrepreneurship skills, the preparation of a business plan, and working in a cooperative. The local partners gave their support for these practical activities.

Because business environments and students have different backgrounds in different countries, it was negotiated that the studies will have flexible country-specific applications with regard to the size of different modules and pedagogical solutions, for example. At Lapland UAS, the solution online studies of five credits. Due to the coronavirus situation, the studies were carried out remotely, apart from the practical trial.

The cooperative studies created in the project were piloted during the 2021–2021 academic year by providing them as elective studies for all students. In total, ten students of economics and business information technology participated in the studies, not all of whom however completed all studies. The majority of the participants developed their own business idea,

assisted and mentored by teachers and members of cooperatives. Three students completed the project and joined a cooperative. They tested their business idea in practice, and built networks and gained experience for the future.

Project cooperation also enabled international networks for the project parties and, according to another key goal, the young students who participated in the project were able to work with other young students from different countries. Although the cooperative studies were piloted under separate programmes in different countries, all participants were also provided with joint international meetings and workshops regarding key themes (digital marketing and social media, the development of business ideas, storytelling).

International cooperation with project partners was a significant part of development. Building the shared Cooperative Campus programme called for an extensive dialogue and a shared understanding. As the ways of working and the practices of cooperatives are different in different countries, building a shared programme and applying it regionally also presented challenges from time to time. We need openness and the will to understand other perspectives to successfully build shared international practices.

## The project's links to regional development

In recent years, the Regional Council of Lapland has promoted the internationalisation and international cooperation of regional organisations through the Arctic Smartness approach. It brings together the priorities that promote internationalisation and steer Lapland's smart specialisation and sustainable regional development. While six business clusters have been at the core of the approach, the document that steers Lapland's smart specialisation and sustainable regional development has raised a socially sustainable economy and its opportunities in the region as a new rising sector. Lapland participated in the European Commission's European Social Economy Regions 2018 pilot, in which 30 European regions sought the best practices for developing a socially sustainable economy. Lapland has been at the EU's forefront in developing a new kind of social and societal entrepreneurship (Lapland 2018, 28), and it has built networks with the other Social Economy Regions on the platform of smart specialisation (Smart 2021).

As a result of the Horizon Europe funding call, there was a need to prepare a joint project application to develop regional economies, and four regions decided to participate. The end result was this Cooperative Campus project. The experiences have been so encouraging that

there is a demand for the further development and provision of cooperative studies in the European frame of reference (European Business School on Social Economy). The fulfilment of related plans will be decided towards the end of 2021.

## Evaluation and conclusions of the project

After the pilot phase carried out in four countries, it is safe to say that the programme provided a productive framework. The content based on five modules provided outlines for the studies, while each participant was able to apply the practical implementation by focusing on specific themes and select the pedagogical practices that were the most ideal for their country's operating environment. As a rule, the modular structure and the virtual implementation worked well and as intended, for both teachers and students.

Through practical training, students gained genuine experiences in cooperative entrepreneurship, which surprised by its ease. Although not many business ideas were continued, cooperatives were seen as a potential employment opportunity in the future. While students enjoyed developing their business idea, their feedback revealed that most students (7 out of 10) were unable to carry out the practical trial because they lacked the courage, they did not have the time or they decided to do it later. Based on feedback, students learned more about entrepreneurship, cooperatives, the social economy, and cooperation. There was also room for improvement in the studies, and the students wished, for example, that: "Personally, I would have wanted a partner, with whom I could have developed and carried out business activities."

From the teachers' perspective, the project provided students with diverse opportunities to study cooperative activities in theory and practice. Based on experiences, the project's activities should be further developed at Lapland UAS.

Student feedback and the key idea of the development project are broadly connected to the research topics and results of entrepreneurship education and related dialogue. Riitta-Liisa Arpiainen (2019, 74), who has studied experiential action learning in entrepreneurial studies and entrepreneurship education in university contexts, emphasises peer learning that enables learning in a team, the sharing of different experiences, and a safe learning atmosphere. Furthermore, she highlights that the significance of practical activities and experiential learning is emphasised in recent studies on entrepreneurial learning. The key areas of entrepreneurial activities, such as taking risks, tolerating uncertainty and being innovative, develop and

strengthen in real-life experiences. Successes, failures and learning from mistakes strengthen the student's self-capabilities (ibid., 77). She summarises the results of her study in the following figure:

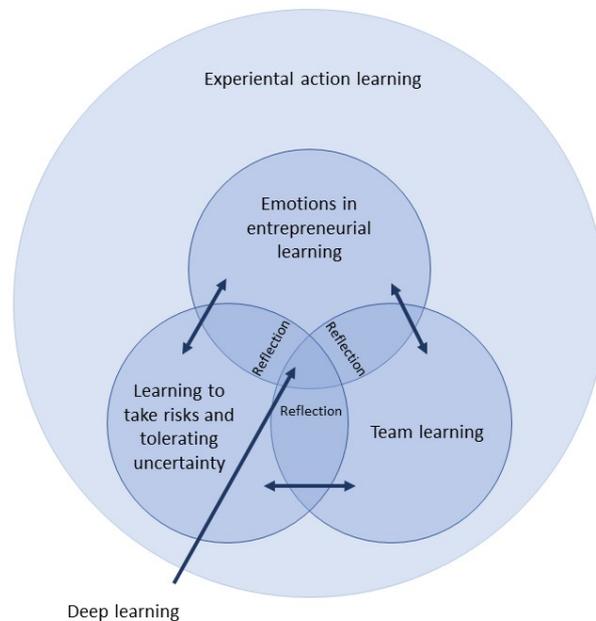


Figure 1. Entrepreneurial learning in the context of experiential action learning (Adapted Arpiainen 2019, 74)

Experiential action learning in a team, learning to take risks and tolerating uncertainty with team members, and various positive and negative emotions created by the learning process were bound together into a solid whole, which supported and helped students to move towards an entrepreneurial way of acting and thinking. The longer duration of the learning process (2–2.5 years) enabled, through various phases, the students to learn how to take risks and tolerate uncertainty, learn in and through a team, as well as to understand positive and negative emotions and use them in learning. The students' attitudes and deep beliefs related to learning changed, and their learning became deeper, evolving towards deep learning (ibid. 84).

Through the Cooperative Campus project, the project parties from Lapland UAS raised the idea of establishing a student cooperative at Lapland UAS. Development funding was applied for this project from Lapland UAS, and it was also received for a preliminary investigation. The investigation will be completed by the end of 2021. The student cooperative will provide opportunities for a broad range of studies in a cooperative environment and allow students to test their business ideas. As a result, students from different fields can already familiarise

themselves with cooperative entrepreneurship during their studies, and the threshold to start a business after graduating will be lower.

Cooperation with the Regional Council of Lapland to promote a socially sustainable economy in the region and building international networks will provide further opportunities to develop studies and RDI activities related to this theme at Lapland UAS.

### Sources:

Cooperative Campus project's website (2021, <http://www.cooperativecampus.com/>), accessed on 26 May 2021.

Riitta-Liisa Arpiainen (2019). Teamwork, action and emotions – insights on entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial learning in the context of experiential action learning. Helsinki: Aalto University. Doctoral dissertation. Accessed on 7 June 2021.

Cooperative Campus project's website (2021, <http://www.cooperativecampus.com/>), accessed on 26 May 2021.

Lapland an arctic and international highflier the strategic priorities for international and smart specialisation 2018–2022. 2018. [https://arcticsmartness.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/KV-julkaisu\\_englanti\\_4.12.2018.pdf](https://arcticsmartness.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/KV-julkaisu_englanti_4.12.2018.pdf). Accessed on 7 June 2021.

Smart specialisation platform. Social Economy. Accessed on 26 May 2021. <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-economy>