

**PLEASE NOTE! THIS IS PARALLEL PUBLISHED VERSION / SELF-ARCHIVED VERSION OF THE OF THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This version *may* differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

**Author(s):** Puhakka-Tarvainen, Helena; Mustonen, Satu; Immonen, Heikki; Vartiainen, Heidi

**Title:** Innovation platform For new female-founded businesses applied from a student entrepreneurship programme

**Version:** final draft

**Please cite the original version:**

Puhakka-Tarvainen, H., Mustonen, S., Immonen, H., Vartiainen, H. (2022). Innovation platform For new female-founded businesses applied from a student entrepreneurship programme. In: UIIN Good Practice Series 2022, University Industry Innovation Network (UIIN).

**HUOM! TÄMÄ ON RINNAKKAISTALLENNE**

Rinnakkaistallennettu versio *voi* erota alkuperäisestä julkaistusta sivunumeroiltaan ja ilmeeltään.

**Tekijä(t):** Puhakka-Tarvainen, Helena; Mustonen, Satu; Immonen, Heikki; Vartiainen, Heidi

**Otsikko:** Innovation platform For new female-founded businesses applied from a student entrepreneurship programme

**Versio:** final draft

**Käytä viittauksessa alkuperäistä lähdettä:**

Puhakka-Tarvainen, H., Mustonen, S., Immonen, H., Vartiainen, H. (2022). Innovation platform For new female-founded businesses applied from a student entrepreneurship programme. In: UIIN Good Practice Series 2022, University Industry Innovation Network (UIIN).

2022 UIIN Conference 13 – 15 June, Amsterdam, NL

**GOOD PRACTICE SERIES 2022: Fostering university-industry engagement, entrepreneurial & innovative universities and collaborative innovation**

Published by University Industry Innovation Network

**Innovation platform for new female-founded businesses applied from a student entrepreneurship programme**

*Helena Puhakka-Tarvainen, M.Sc. (Biol.), Senior Project Manager, Karelia University of Applied Sciences*

*Satu Mustonen, BBA, Project Coordinator, Karelia University of Applied Sciences*

*Heikki Immonen, D.Sc. (Tech.), Principal Lecturer of Entrepreneurship, Karelia University of Applied Sciences*

*Heidi Vartiainen, MA, Lecturer, Karelia University of Applied Sciences*

Innovation platform for women lowered the threshold to pitch new business ideas and get support.

**Background and objectives**

Especially in the European north and sparsely populated areas, women are a vast minority among entrepreneurs, although the innovation potential is not gender-related. Rather it is all about the lack of entrepreneurial mindset, self-confidence, role models and proper support. The transnational W-Power project (Empowering women entrepreneurs in sparsely populated communities) had a goal to encourage women to innovate new business ideas and set up enterprises. The model is called an innovation platform for new start-ups and it is based on the Draft program, a model created a decade ago at Karelia University of Applied Sciences to boost university student and staff entrepreneurship. The hypothesis for the innovation platform pilot was that women would more actively take part in a business idea competition targeted directly and only for them. The aim was also to lower the threshold to participate as low as possible by providing a full-online approach. That also dispersed the barriers related to the rural location and long distances, which was another key feature of the target group of this initiative. The participants of the initiative came from Eastern and Northern Finland, Northern

Sweden, Northern and Western parts of Scotland, Shetland, Western Ireland, Iceland, and New Brunswick (Canada).

### **Activities undertaken**

The W-Power innovation platform for women was piloted twice during the years 2019-2021. The first pilot was transnational and covered all the regions mentioned above. The call of proposals was open in three categories: (1) new business ideas, (2) expanding business globally, and (3) ideas to support existing women-run businesses. Totally 24 applications were received, of which 15 were pre-selected for the actual pitching contest. Applicants received support and guidance to create proper pitches. Five-minute pitches took place online and a transnational professional jury evaluated the business ideas in terms of demand, doability and profitability. In addition to the pitch, the jury had a possibility to ask further questions for 10 minutes for each applicant. Based on the scores, five winners from 4 different regions were awarded a 1000 euros voucher to pilot their business ideas in practice. As a substitute, each winner completed a report of their experiments. The second, improved pilot for the innovation platform followed the same protocol and took place regionally in North Karelia (Finland), Lapland (Finland), Norrbotten (Sweden) and New Brunswick (Canada). The approach was similar, but the regions were smaller and each trial was implemented by a local language. Over 20 applications were received in each of the regions scoring 102 new business ideas in total! Regional pitching contests took place with regional professional juries, having members e.g. from business advisory and financing institutes. Best business ideas were rewarded in each region and practical pilots of the business ideas were conducted. In addition to the financial support, the winners were offered business coaching in a gender-sensitive and tailored manner.

### **Outcomes and impact**

Karelia UAS has implemented the Draft Program innovation platform to promote student, staff and alumni entrepreneurship for a decade already. In a typical call, the number of applications has been ca. twenty, and less than half of the applicants are women. Thus, this specific call for women received multiple amounts of women-driven new business ideas. In general, also the quality of ideas was high and many of the participants (both rewarded and non-rewarded) have continued to develop their businesses successfully. Also, the authorities in each piloting region have been impressed and all of them are about to continue the practice although the project funding has ended.

Also based on the feedback collected from the participants, it is clear that there is a specific need for a targeted business idea competition initiative for women. Nearly half of the second pilot respondents stated that they consider their participation in the competition was an important push towards becoming an entrepreneur, or alternatively, it supported those who had already started their businesses. In addition, many of the respondents stated that they may not have had the courage to participate at all without this special targeting. All participants who pitched their ideas to judges also received valuable expert feedback about their business ideas. Participants were also able to network among the other competitors and build new partnerships. Based on the feedback, participating, in general, was an empowering experience.

## **Lessons learnt**

The key point for success was both a profound background study of existing best models to arrange innovation platforms for new start-ups and being aware of the barriers, which usually hinder women to participate in such initiatives. Draft Program by Karelia UAS was selected as the baseline, over which the pilots were built. Careful planning of the process, timeline, guidance, contractual issues, judging criteria and many other details were critical to managing the innovation platform successfully. When the first pilot call was launched, each project partner was engaged to make grassroots marketing in their regions both in business advisory organizations, in events and meetings, newsletters and brochures, and directly to potential participants.

Gender sensitivity, or rather a human-centric approach was the key driver for all actions. Applicants were treated positively and with encouragement, they were helped to improve their pitches before the actual contest, online testing possibilities were offered to avoid technical hassles, and each participant was provided with a summary of instructive feedback by the jury members. Also, possibilities to network among the participants were offered, which opened extra synergies. After the second call, also some targeted business coaching was provided. Feedback was collected after the first pilot, which helped the project team to further develop the second pilot. As the second pilot round was regional, it was possible to take into account regional special features. Feedback was also collected from the jury members, which helped to evaluate the process from the business advisory and funding point of view. As the process was planned carefully, no major challenges or obstacles came across. The covid-19 pandemic would have caused difficulties if the initiative wouldn't have been an online approach already in the first place.

## **Conclusion and future outlook**

The W-Power innovation platform created and targeted especially for women lowered the threshold of women to pitch their new business ideas publicly and to get support to their ideas in terms of seed-funding and business coaching. Feedback on the initiative has been positive both from the participants, jury members and the organizing institutes. In fact, the concept will continue in many of the regions as a permanent business support practice after the project has finished. Excellent new businesses got a kick-start from the innovation platform and are now up and running. The variety of the businesses is wide from a gluten-free bakery to artisan glass products, and from inclusive interior design to well-being courses in a forest. Many of the rewarded participants have already gained success and are now functioning as role models for the next generation of applicants.