D08.1 Report on Arqus Business Incubation Alliance

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ABIA: Arqus Business Incubation Alliance - Shaping Innovation Together in Europe

Connecting Universities, Strengthening Regions

The Arqus European University Alliance brings together nine European universities with shared goals in research, teaching, innovation and societal impact. At its core is a simple but important question: how can universities better connect their competences and regional networks to support students, researchers and companies across Europe?

Arqus is more than an international university network. The alliance creates concrete opportunities for joint educational programs, research projects, start-up support and exchange between regional innovation ecosystems.

The partner universities come from different European regions and bring their own disciplinary and regional strengths. These include competences in digitalisation, artificial intelligence, health, mobility, green tech, agriculture, manufacturing and social innovation.

This diversity is one of the alliance's main advantages. The partners do not only cooperate at institutional level. They also bring in their respective regional networks, including companies, start-ups, research institutions, technology transfer offices, public bodies, investors and incubators.

In this way, Arqus combines local embeddedness with European reach. Students and researchers can develop their ideas at their home institution while building contacts with other European markets, universities and innovation ecosystems.

Arqus Business Incubation Alliance (ABIA)

The **ABIA (Arqus Business Incubation Alliance)** was developed and established to better link the various institutions providing support for businesses and start-ups in the Arqus alliance, and to strengthen them as a network.

On the one hand, this has enabled the incubators to get to know one another better. They can now refer their entrepreneurial teams to a specific network partner in order to make the best possible use of that partner's expertise. This means that start-up teams from all Arqus universities can draw on the entire network and gain experience in internationalisation and foreign markets even before their business is established.

Learning from Each Other

ABIA brings together various entrepreneurship centres and incubators at universities and facilitates cooperation. For example:

- The **University of Granada** organises its programme through **UGRemprendedora** (ugremprendedora.ugr.es) and Breaker.
- The **University of Graz** supports its start-ups via **Unicorn – Uni Start-up & Innovation Hub** (unicorn-graz.at)
- The **University of Leipzig** supports founders via **SMILE – die Gründungsinitiative an der Universität Leipzig** (smile.uni-leipzig.de)

A list of all support organisations has been compiled under 'Entrepreneurial Arqus' (ISLYE Exchange Programme - Granada - Arqus).

Learning about the various European approaches and adopting suitable best practices improves the support provided within the ABIA network.

Linking Local Ecosystems

A key focus of Arqus lies in connecting local innovation ecosystems. The participating universities are closely linked to their regions and know their specific industries, networks and support structures. Arqus creates the conditions to make these local structures accessible across Europe.

For founders, this connection is particularly relevant. The first step of a start-up usually happens in the environment of one's own university or region. But for further development of a business model, international contacts, new markets, specialised expertise or additional funding opportunities can be decisive.

With the **Linking Local Ecosystems** initiative, Arqus supports exchange between regional start-up and innovation structures. The alliance creates opportunities to learn about each partner's offers, to connect contacts and to develop joint formats for knowledge and technology transfer.

This includes international mobilities, competitions for innovative start-ups, joint events, contacts to incubators and accelerators, and the exchange of experiences between the participating universities.

ISLYE – International Soft Landing for Young Entrepreneurs

A concrete offer within Linking Local Ecosystems is **ISLYE – International Soft Landing for Young Entrepreneurs**. The programme targets students and researchers who have developed a business idea and want to test whether it could also work in another European market.

"Soft landing" describes a low-threshold entry into a new ecosystem. Founders get the chance to visit a partner university, meet local contacts and build first connections to companies, potential customers, suppliers, research partners or other start-ups.

Participants can:

- get to know local start-up incubators and accelerators,
- take part in entrepreneurship programmes at partner universities,
- present their business idea to regional actors,
- receive initial assessments of potential target markets,
- build contacts with companies and other founding teams,
- identify possible partners for distribution, research or financing,
- further develop their internationalisation strategy.

An important advantage of the programme is that participants do not have to enter an unknown market alone. The respective partner university establishes contacts to local start-up and innovation structures and can help identify suitable contact persons.

ISLYE is explicitly not a classical exchange programme. The focus lies on the concrete further development of a business idea. Participants should find out which market could be interesting for their venture, what requirements exist there and which partners are relevant for the next development steps.

ISLYE Mobilities in the Reporting Period

The entrepreneurial exchange programme between the partner universities has begun to exchange teams between the incubators of the partner universities. In the reporting period, teams travelled between the universities to establish new international contacts and present their prototypes. The direct contact between the young start-up teams from different universities is particularly fruitful and sustainable.

In total, **eight young entrepreneur teams got to know the ecosystems of the partner universities**. **16 young entrepreneurs** used this opportunity.

Sending University	Team	Persons	Destination	Proposed Time
Granada	GeoPasos	2	Leipzig	11th–13th September 2024
Leipzig	Smartfarming	2	Padova	29th September–6th October 2024
Padova	Astrodemo	2	Graz	24th–27th February 2024
Leipzig	Math Edu	1	Wroclaw	18th–20th March 2025
Minho	Omnium	2	Leipzig	14th–17th April 2025
Leipzig	Hybeam	3	Granada	27th July–8th August 2025
Leipzig	Rhizome	3	Maynooth	20th–27th September 2025
Leipzig	AI dt	1	Minho	25th–26th November 2025





The stories of some visits can be found here: ISLYE – International Soft Landing for Young Entrepreneurs

Previous examples show the programme's range. Teams from the field of virtual reality, for instance, visited the start-up ecosystem at the University of Granada and took part in the start-up and investment event Alhambra Venture. Other founders travelled to Leipzig, Graz or Lyon to meet local start-ups, discuss their business models and build contacts with potential partners.

For Leipzig University, ISLYE is also an important instrument. The SMILE start-up initiative and the Leipzig start-up ecosystem offer international teams access to start-up counselling, local companies, research institutions and other start-ups. Conversely, Leipzig teams can use ISLYE to learn about other European markets and support offers.

ARQUS INTERNATIONAL INNOVATORS AWARD

Another central offer is the **Arqus International Innovators Award**. The competition seeks innovative and internationally oriented start-ups from the Arqus university environment.

The focus lies particularly on so-called **Born Global start-ups**. These are founding teams that already have an international market in mind early on and do not develop their products or services exclusively for their own regional market.

The award offers these teams a platform to present their business models at European level. It is not just about selecting a winning team. The competition aims to create visibility, promote exchange between universities and enable contacts with potential partners for international implementation.

Teams get the opportunity to:

- present their innovation to an international audience,
- sharpen their business model and internationalisation strategy,
- receive feedback from experts,
- build contacts with other start-ups and universities,
- identify potential cooperation partners,
- increase their visibility in the European innovation ecosystem.

The award is coordinated jointly by Leipzig University and the University of Minho. It emerged within the Arqus initiative Linking Local Ecosystems and aims to improve the transfer of knowledge and technologies between the local ecosystems of partner universities. Until the 2023 edition, the competition was carried out under the name **Virtual Company Creation Challenge**.

WINNERS AND EVENTS

Every year, entrepreneurial projects or young start-ups from partner universities compete for the "Arqus International Innovators Award". All winners can be found here: Arqus International Innovators Award





In the reporting period, **four competitions were realised**. Three times, the finalists and the winner were presented at a local start-up festival, so the teams could network with the local ecosystem.

- **2023**: The first winner was the Portuguese team **"Karion Therapeutics"**. All finalists of the competition met at the **MACHN Festival in Leipzig** to meet central German entrepreneurs. (machn-festival.de)
- **2024**: A year later, the award went to Italy, won by the team **"Astrodemo"**.
- **2025**: More than 1,000 voters selected **"Arc technica"** from Minho as the winner. The finalists explored the Italian entrepreneurial ecosystem at the **"Start Cup Padua"**. (Start Cup Padua | Università di Padova)
- **2026**: The fourth competition was organised. See the videos here: Arqus International Innovators Award 2026: Vote for your favourite project! In July 2026, over 1,100 voters selected the team from Vilnius: **"Elite Education Academy"** as the winner. The winner was announced on stage at **Alhambra Venture in Granada** (alhambraventure.com), where all finalists from Granada, Graz, Leipzig, Padua and Vilnius were pitching. See the pitches here: La UGR y la Alianza Arqus lideran la transferencia de conocimiento en Alhambra Venture

One result is that in the cities where the awarding ceremony has already taken place, our universities are now also being recognised as international players in the field of entrepreneurship by the ecosystems.

Entrepreneurship as a Shared Field of Action

Arqus does not support entrepreneurship exclusively through individual competitions or mobility programmes. The goal is to permanently anchor entrepreneurial competences in the universities and to accompany students and researchers on their way from the first idea to implementation.

This concerns different phases of the founding process. At the beginning, there is often the question of whether a concrete business idea can emerge from a scientific insight or a societal problem. In the further

course, teams need support in developing the business model, searching for first users, technical implementation, financing and internationalisation.

Arqus connects different offers and experiences of the partner universities for this purpose. These include:

- international exchange and mobility offer,
- joint entrepreneurship programmes,
- workshops and trainings,
- contacts to incubators and accelerators,
- support in developing international business models,
- pitching and competition formats,
- connections to companies and regional innovation networks,
- exchange of experiences between incubators and technology transfer offices.

An important aspect is the connection of teaching, research and business practice. Students and researchers should not only acquire theoretical knowledge about entrepreneurship, but test their ideas as early as possible on real challenges and potential user groups.

The various Arqus offers can complement each other. A team can, for example, first take part in an entrepreneurship programme at its own university, then test a foreign target market via ISLYE and later use the International Innovators Award to present its idea internationally.

Making Experiences Visible

The Entrepreneurship Success Stories of the alliance show how concrete development steps can emerge from international contacts. They make visible the practical benefit that international mobility, exchange and networking can have for young companies.

One example is the Leipzig start-up **greenhub**. The team develops products for vertical farming and supports research and data collection around plant cultivation. In 2021, greenhub used a mobility to Bergen, Norway, enabled by Arqus ISLYE, to examine the European market and build contacts with potential customers, suppliers and partners.

From the project, the **greenhub solutions GmbH** developed. The company was able to win financing from business angels, moved to larger premises in Leipzig and now works with international partners. The contacts built up during the mobility also supported the further orientation of the business model. One

target market of the company is, for example, the Netherlands, where first customers could already be won. Moreover, greenhub was involved in a European funding application with 18 research partners.

Another example is the development from **AIRALL to AIRFARM**. Mattia Sartor and Linda Facco presented an idea for using eVTOL drones for sustainable mobility in cities in 2023 as part of the Arqus International Innovation Award.

In the further course, however, it became clear that the regulatory requirements and certification hurdles for the use of such systems in urban areas were still very high. The team therefore decided to transfer the existing drone and AI competence to another field of application.

From this emerged **AIRFARM SRLS**, a start-up in the field of precision agriculture. The company uses professional drones and artificial intelligence to support wine-growing businesses and agricultural experts with multispectral monitoring, vegetation maps, agronomic data analysis and variable applications. The goal is to make production processes more efficient and sustainable by reducing the use of resources.

The two examples show that founding processes often do not run linearly. International programmes help not only to transfer an existing business model to a new market. They can also contribute to recognising new fields of application and transferring technical know-how to another economic or societal context.

EAS-EL as a Current Example

A current example of cooperation within Arqus is the project **EAS-EL, European AI Sandbox for Entrepreneurial Learning**. The Arqus consortium managed to apply successfully for a project of the EIT Higher Education Initiative. The project combines AI education, entrepreneurship, technical infrastructure and responsible governance.

Within EAS-EL, all Arqus universities are jointly (as beneficiaries or associate partners) developing a European education and innovation ecosystem. Planned elements include:

- a cross-university AI Sandbox,
- a curriculum with 20 modules,
- training offers for 4,000 participants,
- support for at least nine start-ups or scale-ups,
- hackathons and challenge-based learning formats,
- mentoring and pitching,
- stronger connections to the EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities.

The AI Sandbox should offer students, researchers and start-up teams a secure environment in which they can develop and test AI applications. It provides technical resources and tools while considering requirements for data protection, data sovereignty, security and responsible AI.

The project thus directly connects to existing Arqus activities. The training offers and the AI Sandbox developed within EAS-EL can be used in the future for international challenge formats, hackathons and founding teams within the alliance. At the same time, established Arqus offers such as ISLYE and the International Innovators Award provide concrete opportunities to support EAS-EL teams in their internationalisation and further development.

EAS-EL also shows how the regional strengths of the partners can complement each other in a joint project. Leipzig brings in experience in AI and spin-off support. Graz has established entrepreneurship offers and strong regional connections to mobility, green tech and health. Granada complements the consortium with experience in entrepreneurship education and in a Regional Innovation Scheme context. Vilnius strengthens the integration of a widening region into the European innovation system.



OUTLOOK

The Arqus European University Alliance is developing into a common European space of action for education, research, transfer and entrepreneurship. The existing programmes and projects show that cooperation does not have to stop at strategic agreements, but can be translated into concrete mobilities, competitions, start-up support and joint infrastructure.

With ABIA, the incubators and entrepreneurship centres of the partner universities are better networked and can refer teams to the most suitable partners. With ISLYE, young entrepreneurs get the opportunity to learn about new markets and regional ecosystems. The Arqus International Innovators Award makes innovative and internationally oriented start-ups visible and supports them in building European contacts.

The Entrepreneurship Success Stories show what development can emerge from these offers. EAS-EL complements these activities with a focus on AI, technical infrastructure and responsible innovation.

This creates an increasingly coherent support pathway: from the first entrepreneurial idea, through international testing, to the development of a viable business model and European scaling. It establishes a network in which innovation does not stop at university or country borders, but is continuously developed through cooperation and transferred to different regional contexts.

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