

## From Lab to Market: The role of universities of applied sciences in closing the deployment gap

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The concept of smart cities is at a turning point: the emphasis is shifting from technology-first deployments to human-centric and socially sustainable urban services. While technical capabilities are advancing rapidly, a persistent “valley of death” remains between research and viable implementation. Promising innovations often stall after early pilots due to limited real-world validation, fragmented stakeholder ownership, and insufficient alignment with the social and economic needs of diverse urban communities.

Tallinn's Ülemiste City is the larger business park in Baltic countries, with 400 companies, 18 000 talents, generating an annual turnover 2,5 bln €. It also ranks as the third-largest contributor to the Estonian economy, based on labor taxes, following Estonia's largest cities, Tallinn and Tartu. Ülemiste City provides a high-density, real-life environment where new solutions can be tested with real users and operational constraints. As the academic anchor of this ecosystem, the Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences (EEK Mainor/EUAS) acts as an intellectual hub, contributing applied research and expertise in social and economic sustainability.

This contribution presents a joint strategic initiative by EEK Mainor and Ülemiste City to establish a Smart City Competence Centre. The Centre is designed not only as a testbed, but as an active driver that integrates industry, academia, and civil society to reduce risk and accelerate adoption. Its purpose is to make the pathway from research to implementation more reliable by combining practice-based validation in a living environment, structured stakeholder co-creation, and support mechanisms that address long-term service viability. By explicitly foregrounding social sustainability alongside economic feasibility, the Centre challenges a technocratic view of smart cities and aligns with the direction of EU policy priorities, including the European Green Deal and New European Bauhaus principles. It formalises existing efforts into a coherent platform for challenge-based education and practice-based innovation.

We argue that the core challenges we face are shared across Universities of Applied Sciences and their partners across Europe. The session therefore leverages the collective intelligence of the EURASHE community to stress-test and refine the operational model of such competence centres. We explore how Universities of Applied Sciences can go beyond their traditional educational role and become practical hubs for socio-economic sustainability and real-world impact.