

## U!Innovate: A new European Incubator Model

Jip Lenssen, EURASHE

Koen van Damme, HOGENT

This workshop presents the early-stage concept of the U!Innovate hybrid interregional business incubator and invites participants to critically explore its relevance, feasibility, and adaptability within diverse European higher education contexts. Positioned within Phase 2 of the U!Innovate initiative, the session is designed as a participatory validation exercise rather than a showcase of a finalised solution. The workshop seeks to engage representatives from higher education institutions, innovation ecosystems, and entrepreneurship support structures in a collaborative discussion on how a European incubator model can effectively respond to institutional needs and regional realities.

The proposed incubator aims to combine digital and physical support mechanisms to foster entrepreneurship, innovation, and interregional collaboration among students, startups, mentors, and institutional partners. During the session, participants will be introduced to the minimum viable concept of the incubator, including its target users, user journey, and core service components such as mentoring, training opportunities, and ecosystem connectivity.

The workshop will begin with a brief introduction to U!Innovate and the objectives of Phase 2, followed by a presentation of the incubator concept and its intended value proposition. The central part of the workshop will consist of small-group discussions in which participants will reflect on guiding questions related to implementation, institutional readiness, adoption barriers, and contextual requirements. Participants will be encouraged to identify both enabling factors and potential obstacles for integrating such a model within their own institutions and regional ecosystems. The session will conclude with a plenary exchange highlighting key insights, recurring themes, and critical considerations for further development.

The workshop aims to generate qualitative feedback that will directly inform the next iteration of the incubator within Work Package 3 (WP3). Expected outcomes include validation of the overall concept, identification of missing elements and implementation gaps, and deeper understanding of institutional expectations and operational challenges. Particular attention will be paid to issues related to scalability, stakeholder engagement, mentoring structures, and cross-border collaboration.

By involving stakeholders early in the design process, U!Innovate adopts a co-creative and iterative approach to innovation support in higher education. The workshop therefore represents an important external validation moment, ensuring that the future incubator model is relevant, usable, and aligned

with the evolving needs of European higher education institutions and their entrepreneurial ecosystems.