SUPPORT SERVICES
FOR STUDENT-BUSINESS COLLABORATION

Good practice collection of support services for challenge-based student-business collaboration in sustainable entrepreneurship

Good Practice Profile: Ekipa

EKIPA

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Ekipa GmbH
Open innovation platform

Est. 2018
Germany
Frankfurt am Main

Number of employees
27

Geographic scope of activities
International

Type of intermediary
☒ HEI-external
☐ HEI-internal
☐ Hybrid

Intermediary set-up
☒ Single organisation
☐ Partnership of multiple organisations

Intermediation for SBC as
☒ Primary role
☐ Secondary role

Ekipa GmbH is a start-up from Frankfurt am Main, Germany that works to enable **open innovation processes** by bringing together universities, innovators (mostly university students, but also young professionals, young researchers and young companies) and established companies and organisations in innovation challenges and programmes. As Ekipa states, it wants to contribute to driving positive change by helping the digital generation create sustainable innovations.

Background

Ekipa co-founders Justin Gemeri, Nico Heby and Linh Phung launched the open innovation platform back in 2018 at Goethe University Frankfurt am Main's entrepreneurship centre "Unibator". The aim was to help better make use of students' untapped innovation potential and digital skills to contribute to sustainable innovations. Based on the belief that open innovation goes beyond networking, Ekipa has built an open innovation ecosystem based on a crowdsourcing approach. The company expanded its initial focus on students and now also offers young professionals as well as start-ups the opportunity to participate as innovators in the Ekipa ecosystem. Its first clients included the German multinational science and technology company MERCK and the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (F.A.Z.).

Funding & Financing Model

The primary source of revenue for Ekipa, a bootstrapping start-up that has developed without external investment funds, comes from collaborations with companies. Ekipa's innovation programmes are financed by the challenge providers, ensuring that participants incur no extra fees for their involvement.
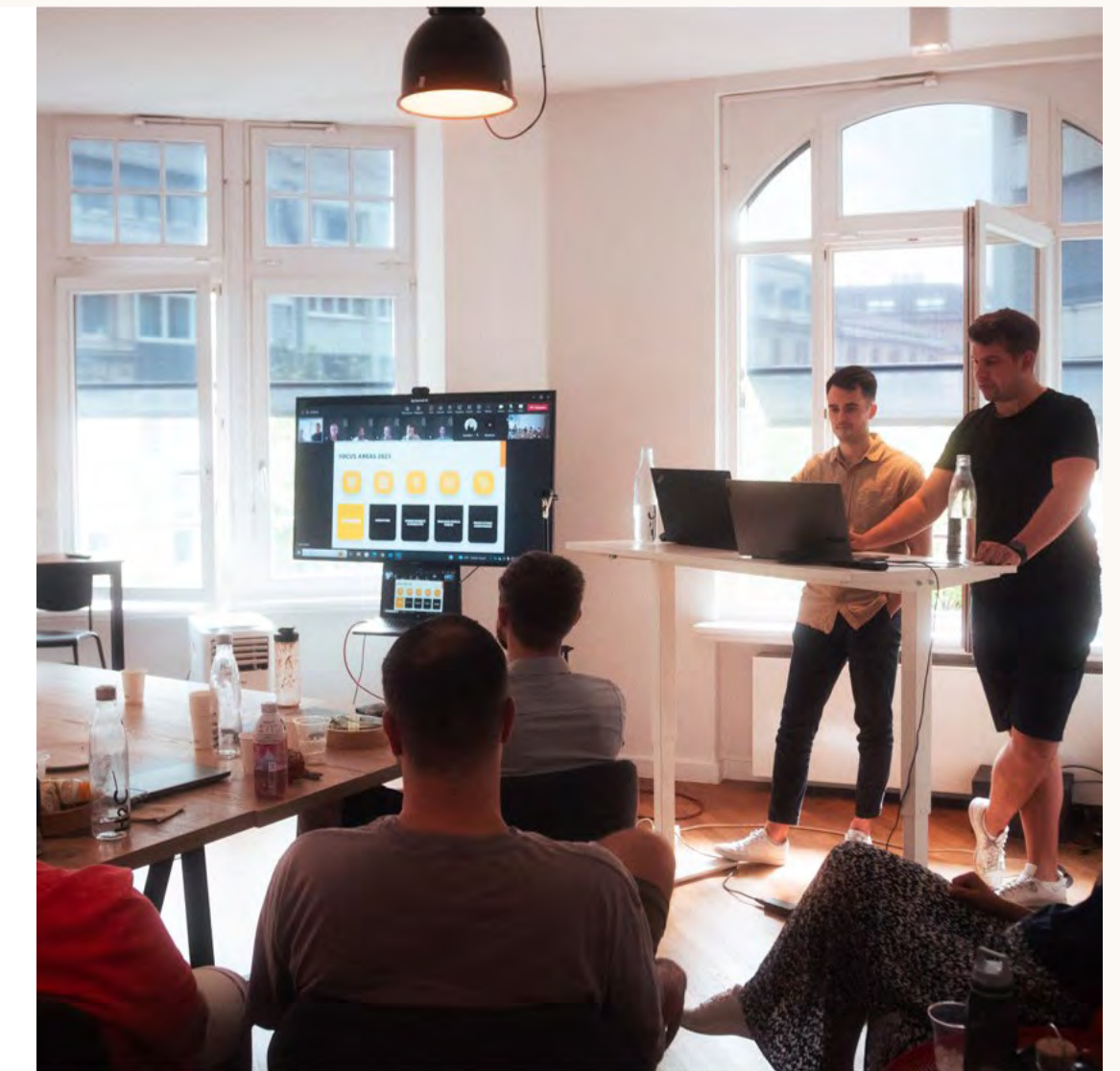
Intermediary Support Services & Activities

GENERAL SUPPORT

✳ Design, implementation and organisation of challenge formats.

✳ Provision of technical infrastructure to streamline challenge organisation, centralise communication and ensure smooth collaboration among participants.

✳ Support in communication and trust building between stakeholders, specifically expectation management between HEIs, students and companies by setting the scope and content of solutions (for instance, Ekipa provides documentation templates).

TEACHER- AND STUDENT-SPECIFIC SUPPORT

✳ Design and delivery of guest lectures, seminar series, workshops and coachings that can be integrated into HEI teaching, focusing on topics such as design thinking, pitching and start-up basics.

✳ Personality and competence development for students and academic staff.

✳ Supporting collaboration as well as post-collaboration start-up processes to help bring ideas into practice.

✳ Integration of academic staff into a global network of sustainability-oriented academics ("Academic Alliance"), providing useful methods and tools in preparation of co-creation formats.

✳ Design and delivery of work assignments specifically targeted to help students develop ownership of their own innovation projects and guide them through an innovation process.

✳ Creation of teams through matchmaking of participants.

✳ Mentoring of innovator teams during the challenge process.

✳ Provision of official certification after challenge completion.

✳ Setting the collaboration framework which enables students to keep IP rights.

COMPANY-SPECIFIC SUPPORT

✳ Provision of a free open innovation assessment for companies to design need- and goal-aligned collaboration formats.

✳ Joint identification of innovation fields and problems, and their transformation into tangible open innovation challenges.

✳ Finding and approaching the most suitable innovators for specific challenges.

✳ Supporting companies in selection of award-winning solutions, based on criteria such as "degree of innovation", "creativity and originality", as well as "consideration of the challenge briefing and questions raised in the challenge".

✳ Assisting companies in establishing and developing newly initiated cooperations.

Curricular Integration

Ekipa's University Relations Department guarantees flexible integration of collaboration formats into existing course structures to accommodate HEIs' and students' needs. Innovation challenges or programmes can be integrated into the curriculum on a semester or yearly basis. HEIs can work with three to ten organisations with real-world problems, translating the company problems into challenge cases suitable for being worked on by students.

International & Virtual Collaboration

× The Ekipa online platform (app.ekipa.de) functions as a central hub for collaboration between students, businesses, and HEIs. It provides tools for communication, project management, guidance and mentoring, and resource exchange and file sharing, allowing team members to work remotely across different locations and time zones. All information related to the challenge and company cases as well as background information about the respective challenge theme is provided to students via the platform.

× The platform makes up an important element to fulfil Ekipa's objective of transparent communication about programme progress and status updates with universities and companies.

× Co-working of virtual teams is further enabled by using digital software tools such as MURAL.

× Ekipa believes in team diversity as a critical factor for innovative approaches to problem solving, so the Ekipa platform's internal team building process matches team participants with different backgrounds in terms of academic and cultural backgrounds, and skills set.

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ACADEMIA

An ecosystem for innovation & co-creation

INDUSTRY

POLITICS
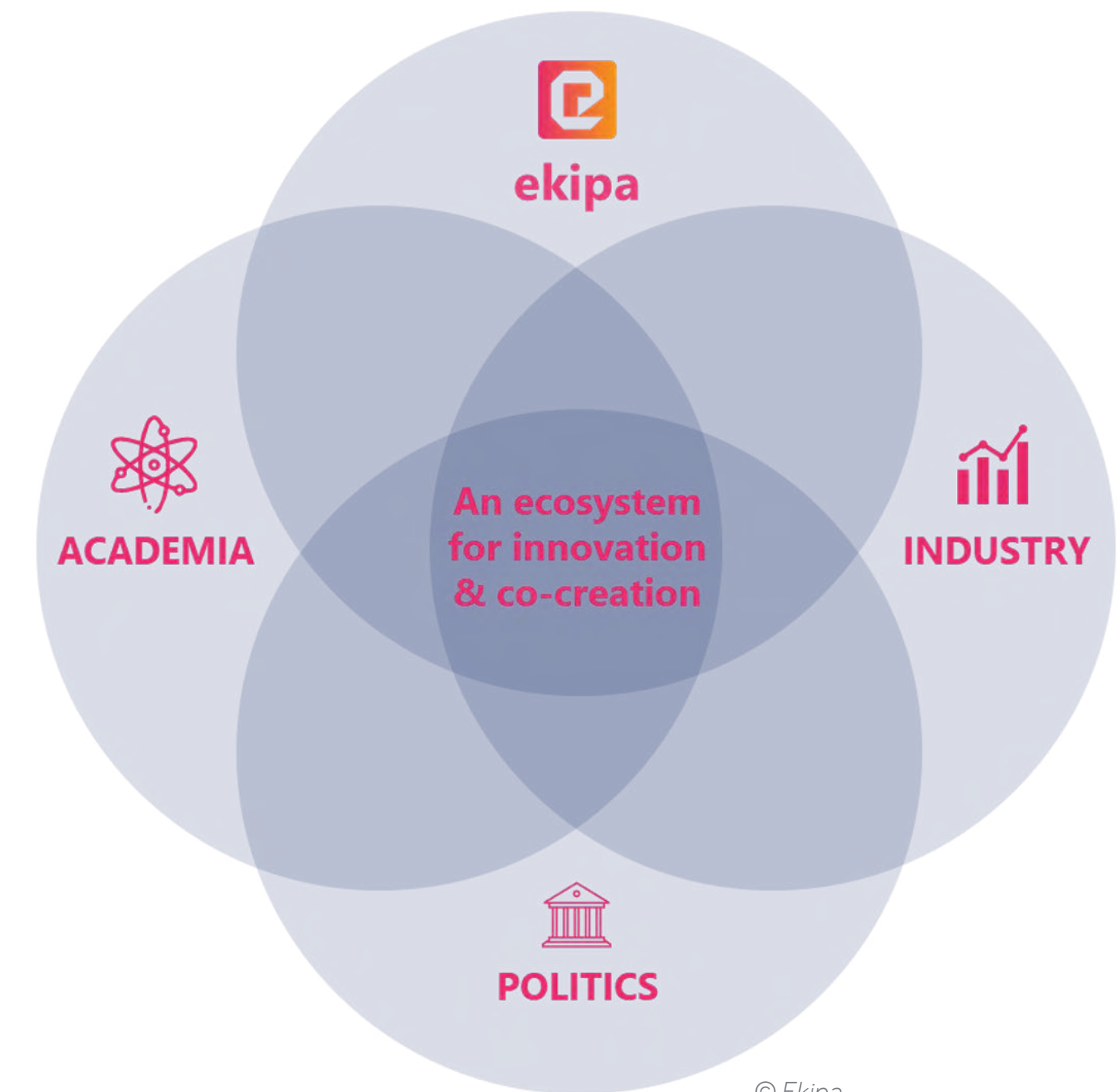
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Impact

VISION & MISSION STATEMENT

Ekipa positions itself as a "fundamental part of an **innovative and sustainable future**" and states that it wants to "connect and empower courageous people and organizations worldwide" as it is convinced that by doing so it "can positively **change people, markets and our world**."

SUCCESS FACTORS AND ENABLING CONDITIONS

- Familiarity with a wide variety of industries and strong partner network built up through its five-year experience of working on open innovation projects with established companies.

- Strategic focus on the digital generation and transformation helped Ekipa grow and gave rise to new opportunities in the wake of the COVID-19-pandemic, when Ekipa saw new clients come aboard.

- Maximising impact through strengthening internal capabilities and resources: In June 2023, Ekipa started piloting the four-day week company-wide, stating that this means no availability for stakeholders on Fridays, but that these can in turn expect increased productivity of Ekipa staff due to higher levels of well-being and motivation, less absence due to fewer sick days and a more stringent approach to project planning.

- Advanced communication strategy and measures in place to position Ekipa as innovation enabler, for instance through the regular podcast format *peak*, its innovation talk with innovation pioneers from the Ekipa network on topics including innovation, digital transformation, and start-ups. Challenge programmes are accompanied by communication and social media measures such as presentation of challenge results via publications, e.g., the Ekipa Impact Papers and the social media awards.

- Participation in entrepreneurial support programmes such as the scholarship programme offered by Youth Business International helped the company develop its offering and strengthen its network.

- An interdisciplinary and diverse team that brings together expertise from different sectors and disciplines.

- Free student participation and provision of attractive prizes and grants function as attractors for student participation.

- Firm embeddedness in the regional innovation ecosystem, for instance via the former "Frankfurt Valley" network, a central platform for start-ups, corporates, investors, and policymakers in the Rhein Main region in Germany.

RESULTS

- More than 150 challenges have been carried out on the Ekipa platform since 2018.

- More than 15.000 people have participated in Ekipa's innovation programmes.

- More than 300 HEIs have been worked with.

- Ekipa emphasizes that it doesn't merely contribute to idea generation, but the actual creation of sustainable innovations. Several results have emerged after challenge completion in the form of implemented solutions, start-up projects and (research) partnerships, for example:

  - AgraCheck, an agriculture start-up from Ekipa's innovation challenge programme Germany 4.0, successfully developed a „Check24 for farmers." With the challenge partners RWZ Rhein-Main AG and Germany 4.0, they received financial and strategic support to advance their platform for digital technologies in agriculture.

  - Other impressive collaborations include long-term and international (research) collaborations, e.g., between Samsung, newly founded start-up Medac, and a (research) start-up in the Netherlands; between Fraport and a start-up from Japan, or between Rolex and a start-up from Spain.

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⊡☆ Exemplary Challenge Format: *Innovate2030 – Digital Natives for a Sustainable Future*

Innovate2030 is an ongoing **global innovation programme series** based on the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, representing one of Ekipa's biggest challenge formats to date. The programme series is co-initiated with the German Environment Agency and calls young people (students, but also researchers, young professionals, and start-ups) to work with real-world problems of established organisations, including companies, and to develop new ideas and solutions for **Europe's digital and sustainable future**.

So far, three editions have been implemented as part of the programme series in the following challenge tracks: SDG12 - Responsible Consumption and Production (2021), SDG11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities (2022), and SDG13 - Climate Action (2023). On average, an edition features five to eight challenges submitted by challenge providers. Winning teams are awarded around 3,000 EUR prize money. In the case that the proof-of-concept is successfully developed by the end of the challenge, winning teams receive the opportunity for implementation of their solution in a joint pilot project.

RESULTS

☒ More than 1,600 participants, including students.

☒ More than 20 participating companies.

☒ More than 470 submissions of innovative solutions.

☒ More than 65 attendee countries.

☒ Implemented solutions and subsequent cooperations.

More information at:

https://ekipa.de/programme/innovate-2030/

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PUBLIC CONTACT DETAILS

Katharina Heby
Head of University Relations & Innovation Consultant, Ekipa
hello@ekipa.de

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