



ACE Sustainability & Expansion Action Plan and Network Expansion

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Task Leaders	SPI and EBN
Authors	Douglas Thompson, Margaret Mulligan, Sofia Esteves, Anna Pawlus
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1. Introduction

1.1 About ACE

The “Accelerating Cross-border Engagement” (ACE) programme was launched in September 2013 as a pilot initiative to accelerate the early engagement of highly innovative ICT startups, SMEs and entrepreneurs in cross-border cooperation and venturing. Funded by the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) of the European Union (EU) for a period of 27 months, at its launch ACE involved 15 partners (leading incubators, clusters, living labs and accelerators) from across 12 European countries.

Table 1 - ACE Consortium

Full Partner Name	Country	Role in Project
European Business and Innovation Centre Network (EBN)	Belgium	Coordinator
Sociedade Portuguesa de Inovacao – Consultadoria Empresarial e Fomenta da Inovacao S.A. (SPI)	Portugal	Impact Assessor
European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL)	Belgium	Dissemination Partner
Coventry University Enterprises Limited (CUE)	United Kingdom	Supporting Companies
JIC, Zajmove Sdruzeni Pravnickch Osob (JIC)	Czech Republic	Supporting Companies
Forum Virium Helsinki OY (FORUM VIRIUM)	Finland	Supporting Companies
Cap Digital Paris Region (CAP DIGITAL)	France	Supporting Companies
baden württemberg connected (bwcon)	Germany	Supporting Companies
Dublin Business Innovation Center Limited (Dublin BIC)	Ireland	Supporting Companies
Meta Group S.R.L (Meta Group)	Italy	Supporting Companies
Technoport SA (Technoport)	Luxembourg	Supporting Companies
Instituto Pedro Nunes, Associacao para a Inovacao e de Senvolvimento em Ciencia e Tecnologia (IPN)	Portugal	Supporting Companies
Lunds Universitet (LU Open)	Sweden	Supporting Companies

Ionad Forbartha Gnó Teoranta (WESTBIC)	Ireland	Supporting Companies
iMinds VZW (iMinds)	Belgium	Supporting Companies

These partners committed to pooling their knowledge and expertise in internationalisation and opening up their existing facilities and support networks of investors and mentors to ACE companies from any EU member state. In this way, between 1 September 2013 and 30 November 2015, 133 tech startups and SMEs from 18 European countries received a total of 327 targeted support measures to accelerate their international growth and fast-track their access to new European markets.

1.2 Scope of this Deliverable

Founding partners entered into the ACE programme with a view towards the long-term sustainability of the ACE cooperation mechanism and the gradual expansion of the ACE network. With this in mind, a preliminary action plan for network sustainability and expansion was developed early on in the second year of the programme. This was refined and rolled out during the remaining pilot funding period. This deliverable documents the core elements of the action plan (section 2), reports on the current status of the action plan implementation (section 3) and the expansion of the network to date (section 4). It incorporates Deliverable 4.3, Sustainability & Expansion Action Plan and Deliverable 5.2 Network Expansion.

2.Sustainability and Expansion Action Plan

2.1 Objectives of the Sustainability and Expansion Action Plan

From the outset, it has been clear that the sustainability of the ACE cooperation mechanism and expansion of the network of ACE partners depends on:

- i. the continued commitment of and identification of alternative funding sources by founding partners; and,
- ii. the ability of new network partners to fund their participation and comply with the ACE quality management system (QMS) established in Work Package 4, Quality Management & Impact Assessment, of the ACE project.

The Sustainability and Expansion Action Plan described here takes these essential considerations into account. It also builds on the key findings of the Year 1 independent external review of the ACE project and the mid-term evaluation of results (Deliverable D4.2) to develop a feasible strategy for sustainability and expansion of the ACE Programme in the short- and medium-term. As joint coordinators of the ACE Programme EBN and WestBIC undertake to update this action plan in December 2016 to report on the first 12 months post-pilot of the ACE Programme and based on this assess the potential for its longer-term sustainability and continued expansion.

2.2 Elements of the Action Plan

The results from the mid-term and final evaluation of ACE (documented in detail in Deliverable 4.2) demonstrate that the keys to the success of the programme are:

- i. the customisation and very practical nature (e.g. introductions to potential clients and distributors) of the support available to match the individual internationalisation goals of each participating startup and SME; and,
- ii. the flexibility in the delivery of this support to fit in with the often fast-evolving needs and priorities of early-stage ICT companies.

Following the presentation of these mid-term evaluation results to all founding partners during a consortium meeting in March 2015, it was agreed that, in order to ensure these core features of the ACE programme - customisation of support and flexibility in its delivery - can be maintained beyond the pilot period, the sustainability and expansion action plan should take a multifaceted approach in the first year post-pilot. The preliminary action plan was updated and refined to feature the following elements:

- i. ACE Light: Founding partners are committed to self-funding their continued participation in the cooperation mechanism established in ACE beyond the pilot period. Until the end of 2016 (at least) this will continue to be coordinated by EBN and WestBIC, through quarterly rather than monthly coordination meetings - hence the term “ACE Light”.
- ii. Engagement with EBN Special Interest Groups: From the outset, the ACE programme has been designed to build on and connect with existing and emerging internationalisation support services to deliver customised value-added support to high potential startups and SMEs. Therefore, when in December 2014 EBN announced the roll-out of special interest groups addressing internationalisation and access to finance, ACE partners identified these as potential vehicles for the

longer term sustainability of ACE internationalisation and cross-border venturing activities and sources of new, quality-checked¹ ACE network partners.

- iii. ACE Training Manual and Guides: The successful expansion of the ACE network depends on the ability of new network partners to comply with the ACE quality management system (QMS) established in Work Package 4, Quality Management & Impact Assessment, of the ACE project. To facilitate this the key lessons learned in ACE have been distilled into a set of concrete recommendations that are presented in the *Accelerating International Growth: A Practical Guidebook for Business Support Organisations*² published by the ACE consortium in November 2015.

Alongside this comprehensive Guide to the ACE cooperation mechanism, a sister guide on *Living Lab Services for Business Support & Internationalisation*³ has also been published. This aims to: (a) raise awareness of Living Labs as a service to SMEs; and (b): encourage the engagement of ENoLL⁴ members in the ACE network.

- iv. Sector-specific ACE Creative Programme: In January 2015, founding ACE partners EBN, bwcon, Technoport and Meta Group began work on a new Horizon 2020 project that aims to accelerate the international growth of Europe's most innovative and promising ICT-driven creative SMEs. At the kick-off meeting for this new project, the ACE partners involved shared with other consortium members their experiences from ACE. Observing that what ACE is to the ICT sector as a whole, the new project was to the ICT-driven creative industries, i.e. a customised package of support measures to help ICT-driven creative companies enter new European markets, the new project consortium proposed to join the extended ACE network and to brand their programme ACE Creative⁵, so as to build on and further grow the established ACE community and brand.
- v. OpenPass4Growth: The first recommendation from the Year 1 external review of the ACE Programme was to make an additional effort to engage with large corporate and other SMEs or partners which match the interest of the programme companies. These efforts were extremely well received by both ACE companies and the larger corporates and other partners engaged. The relationships established will continue to feed into ACE light and be sustained through EBN's

¹ EBN is a network of EU|BICs, quality-certified business support organisations, which dedicate their efforts and resources to help entrepreneurs with innovative ideas, turn those ideas into viable, successful and sustainable businesses. EU|BICs are clearly recognisable via the EU|BIC trademark, which certifies their compliance to a set of standards known as the EU|BIC [Quality Mark Criteria](#), the only quality system recognised by the EU.

² This Guidebook is available to download at: <http://europeanace.eu/index.php/guides>

³ This Guide is also available to download at: <http://europeanace.eu/index.php/guides>

⁴ European Network of Living Labs

⁵ www.acecreative.eu

new Open Innovation service, OpenPass4Growth⁶ which was launched during the final ACE event at the EBN Congress in Brussels on 28-30 October 2015.

- vi. Showcasing Success Stories: Success breeds success and one of the recommendations from the Year 1 external review of ACE was to better showcase the programme's accomplishments through ACE company success stories. The ACE project website was thus updated to include a dedicated "Startup Stories" section and a high profile competition and event for the ACE Awards organised and widely promoted.
- vii. Local ACE Meetups: One of the added value aspects of the Summit identified by participating companies in the mid-term evaluation of ACE (deliverable 4.2) was the B2B and peer learning opportunities it provided. In consultation with the ACE High Level Advisory Board, partners have committed to sustaining this element through local meetups for ACE graduates and potential new or future ACE companies in 2016. Where possible these will be organised in partnership with ACE Creative International Bootcamps (see section 3.4 below).

The implementation of these actions to date and the current status of the network expansion are described in more detail in section 3 below.

3. Implementation of the Action Plan

3.1 ACE Light

As briefly described in section 2 above, founding partners have committed to self-funding their continued participation in the cooperation mechanism established in ACE beyond the pilot period. Until the end of 2016 (at least) this will continue to be coordinated by EBN and WestBIC, through quarterly coordination meetings. These coordination meetings will be run in partnership with the EBN Internationalisation SIG (see details in section 3.2 below) which is chaired by joint ACE coordinator WestBIC. In contrast to the pilot phase and in line with recommendations that emerged from the impact assessment (Deliverable 4.2) it is foreseen that recruitment of companies to ACE Light in 2016 will be on an ad hoc basis rather than in response to a widely publicised open call. EBN and WestBIC will track the number of companies and level of support delivered in this way in 2016 and report back on the effectiveness of this less resource intensive and more flexible approach in an update to this Action Plan at the end of the year.

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<http://ebn.be/index.php?lnk=K2tiZmlkaWp5MVZzVWF6SzFUWkpHOVMrdEhmcXdNWDNDTTFVCVHdEemIKST0=>

3.2 Engagement with EBN Special Interest Groups

As part of its overall services offering, in December 2014 joint ACE coordinator EBN launched a number of Special Interest Groups (SIG) to address the growing demand of EBN members to get actively involved through sectorial (vertical dimension) and thematic (transversal cross-cutting dimension) dynamics. Two of the thematic SIGs, focused on (i) acceleration, funding & growth and (ii) internationalisation, were immediately identified by ACE partners as of particular relevance to the medium- and long-term sustainability and expansion of the ACE programme's activities and network.

ACE partners thus invited the members of both of these SIGs to attend the second ACE Summit in Milan in March 2015 and organised for the Acceleration, Funding & Growth SIG to hold their first meeting there. During this first meeting of the Acceleration, Funding & Growth SIG it became clear that the focus of this group would be very much on how to accelerate the growth of startups and SMEs through improved access to finance and investment readiness. In order to continue and expand the cross-border venturing activities begun in ACE in collaboration with this SIG, ACE partners nominated Dublin BIC, cross-border venturing task leader in ACE, as Chair of this SIG. This was endorsed by a majority of the SIG members, who also expressed their commitment to participate in future ACE activities related to cross-border venturing as associate partners (see table of associate ACE partners in section 4 below).

All SME-facing ACE partners also joined the Internationalisation SIG and identified this as a potential vehicle to sustain and expand ACE's core internationalisation (smart take off and soft landing) activities. ACE partners thus nominated joint ACE coordinator WestBIC as Chair of the Internationalisation SIG. Again this was endorsed by a majority of the SIG members, who also expressed their interest to participate in future ACE activities as associate partners (see table of associate ACE partners in section 4 below) and expressed an interest to host the quarterly ACE coordination meetings in 2016. In addition, the Internationalisation SIG has committed to sustain and build on the networking activities initiated by ACE to continue bringing together leaders in startup creation, growth and internationalisation and committed to pooling their knowledge and expertise and opening up their facilities and support networks to companies referred onto them by other network partners.

Figure 1 - Welcoming members of the EBN Internationalisation Special Interest Group to the ACE Network, October 2015.



3.3 ACE Training Manual

The function of the ACE Training Manual in this Sustainability and Expansion Action plan is twofold:

- i. To serve as a practical training manual for new ACE associate partners;
- ii. To share the lessons learned in ACE with a wider audience.

Entitled *Accelerating International Growth: A Practical Guidebook for Business Support Organisations* the ACE Training Manual was developed collaboratively with inputs from all ACE founding partners and published, as part of a series of EBN Technical Notes, in November 2015. This publication distils the lessons learned in ACE into a set of concrete recommendations for accelerating the international growth of ICT startups and SMEs, exemplifying each recommendation with a real-life example from ACE. It is available on the ACE website and being widely promoted and disseminated by all ACE founding and new associate partners. It forms the basis for EBN's 2016 training programme⁷ and will be used in particular in the workshops on: investment readiness & access to funding; setting up a seed acceleration programme; coaching & mentoring; and, Open Innovation in Practice.

⁷ www.ebntraining.eu

Figure 2 - Snapshots of the ACE practical guidebook



Alongside this comprehensive Guide to the ACE cooperation mechanism, a sister guide on *Living Lab Services for Business Support & Internationalisation*⁸ has also been published. This guide is being widely promoted raise awareness of Living Labs as a service to SMEs among business support organisations.

3.4 ACE Creative

As described in section 2 above, a sector specific spinout of ACE for ICT-driven creative and digital entrepreneurs was launched by a handful of founding and new associate ACE partners in January 2015. Building on the lessons learned in ACE, ACE Creative will provide customised support packages to accelerate the international growth of 100+ ICT-driven creative companies in 2015 and 2016.

Figure 3 – ACE Creative Logo



As can be seen in Figure 3, the ACE Creative logo is inspired by and adheres to the visual identity of the ACE logo to reinforce and sustain the established ACE brand identity.

In addition the 100 companies that will be intensively supported through customised support packages, ACE Creative will support another 400+ entrepreneurs through a series of 15 international bootcamps that will be held across Europe. Building on the lessons learned in ACE, these bootcamps will welcome a balance of local and international entrepreneurs. Some

⁸ This Guide is also available to download at: <http://europeanace.eu/index.php/guides>

of these bootcamps will focus on investment readiness as a precursor to internationalisation, others on the internationalisation process itself. Local ACE graduates will be invited to these bootcamps to share their ACE experiences and network with the ACE Creative entrepreneurs as they set out on the internationalisation process. Where there is a significant cluster of local ACE graduates (e.g. Ireland, Luxembourg) the founding ACE partner will also be encouraged to organise one of their local ACE meetups as part of the Bootcamp (see section 3.6 below).

3.5 OpenPass4Growth

During the second year of ACE, as recommended in the Year 1 external review additional efforts were made to engage with large corporate and other SMEs or partners which match the interest of the programme companies. These efforts included:

1. The Tech Giant Tour at the Silicon Stroll Bootcamp organised by ACE Partner Dublin BIC during which ACE companies had a chance to visit Google, PayPal and IBM and hear first-hand about their perspectives on the key upcoming technology trends.
2. The participation of Orange France, Altran and CGI France in the second ACE Summit.
3. Targeted pro-bono support from Vasu Briquez⁹, a former senior executive with 35+ years in the ICT sector. Leveraging her connections from this time Vasu Briquez facilitated introductions between ACE companies and several corporate venturing partners including SAP and Microsoft. These fast-track introductions were highly valued by both ACE companies and the larger corporates and other partners engaged. The relationships established will continue to feed into ACE light and be sustained through EBN's new Open Innovation service, OpenPass4Growth¹⁰ which was launched during the final ACE event at the EBN Congress in Brussels on 28-30 October 2015.

3.6 Showcasing Success Stories

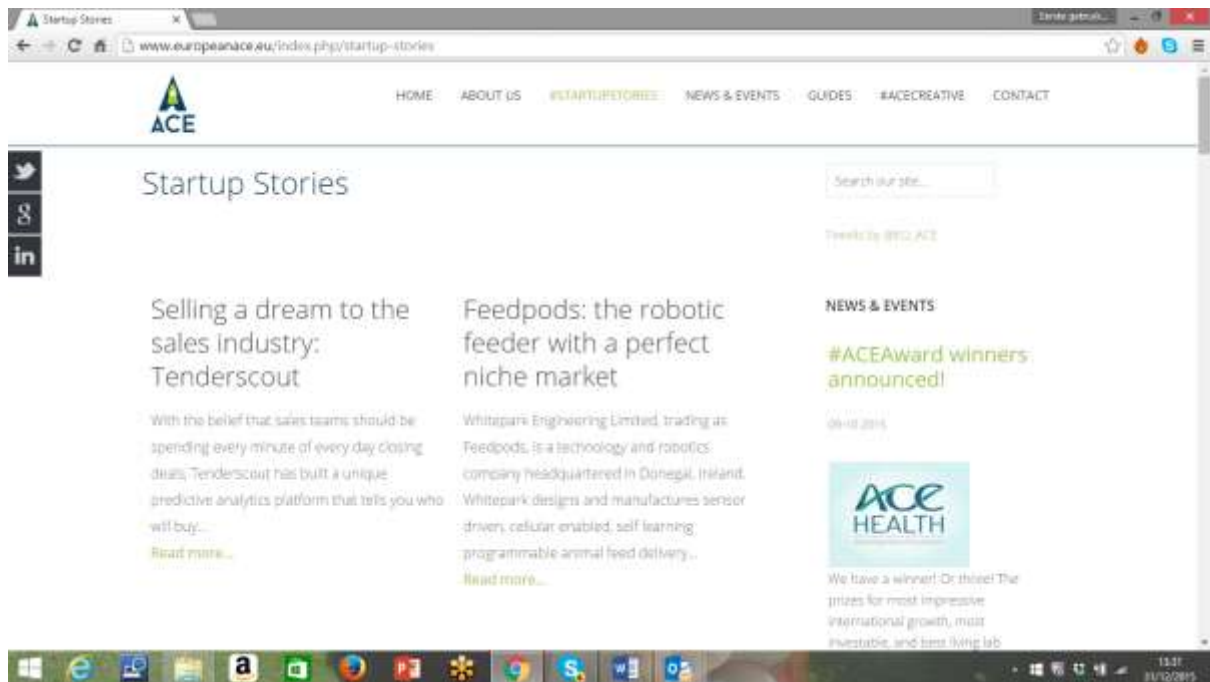
As recommended following the Year 1 external review of ACE, during the second period of the ACE 27-month pilot increased efforts were made by all consortium partners to identify and effectively showcase ACE success stories. The ACE website was thus updated to include a dedicated "Startup Stories" section which features several inspiring spotlights on individual companies as well as a downloadable catalogue of all ACE companies, with a short profile of the company and a quote from the entrepreneurs on their ACE experience and its impact on their international growth.

⁹ <http://ebn.be/index.php?lnk=SzIVK2g1R3NBSG96STU3c3pUSGE0Z1IJY0hIZWZVUUFGRmgwL0ZzNHJXbz0=>

¹⁰

<http://ebn.be/index.php?lnk=K2tiZmlkaWp5MVZzVWF6SzFUWkpHOVMrdEhmcXdNWDNDTTCVHdEemIKST0=>

Figure 4 – The Startup Stories section of the ACE website



ACE also ran a high profile competition and event for the ACE Awards in partnership with joint coordinator EBN. As an international network EBN was able to provide ACE with a highly visible platform for the Awards by inviting the winners to have a booth and speak at the EBN Congress, an annual event which attracts 400+ innovation practitioners and high-level policy-makers.

Three Award Winners were selected as follows:

- Overall Award for Most Impressive International Growth: ACE Health, Ireland
- Special Award for Most Investor Ready: AllSquare Golf, Luxembourg
- Special Award for Best Use of Living Labs to Internationalise: AgeWell Biometrics, UK

Figure 5 – ACE Awards Event at the EBN Congress



3.7 Local ACE Meetups

As briefly mentioned in section 2 above, one of the added value aspects of the Summit identified by participating companies was the B2B and peer learning opportunities it provided. In 2016, ACE partners have committed to sustaining this element through local meetups for ACE graduates and potential new or future ACE companies in 2016. Where possible these will be organised in partnership with ACE Creative International Bootcamps (see section 3.4 above) and other relevant events and initiatives such as Startup Europe Week¹¹.

4. Current Status of Network Expansion and Next Steps

4.1 Network Expansion

As a result of the actions undertaken to date, ACE has grown from a network 15 founding partners from 12 European countries in September 2013 to a community of 30 ACE Partners and 183 tech startups and SMEs (133 supported through the original ACE programme, 50 through ACE Creative) from 20 European countries at the end of November 2015. The table

¹¹ <http://startupeuropeweek.eu/>

below provides an updated overview of the expanded ACE network of founding and associate partners.

Table 2 – Expanded ACE Network, 30 November 2015

Partner Name	Country	Expertise in Internationalisation	Expertise in Access to Finance
CEEI Cap Innove	Belgium	X	X
Cork BIC	Ireland	X	X
Tender Auditor	Hungary	X	X
Business Development Friesland	Netherlands	X	X
Nantes Atlanpole	France	X	
Laval Mayenne Technopole	France	X	X
Sviluppo Basilicata	Italy	X	X
North East BIC	United Kingdom	X	
Media Deals	France, Germany, United Kingdom		X
CEEI Asturias	Spain	X	
CEEI Burgos	Spain	X	
NoriBIC	United Kingdom	X	
Novitech	Slovakia	X	
Gea Strategy & Consulting	Romania	X	
Creative Business Cup Association	Denmark	X	X
European Business and Innovation Centre Network (EBN)	Belgium	X	X
Sociedade Portuguesa de Inovacao – Consultadoria Empresarial e Fomenta da Inovacao S.A. (SPI)	Portugal	X	X
European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL)	Belgium	X	
Coventry University Enterprises Limited (CUE)	United Kingdom	X	X
JIC, Zajmove Sdruzeni Pravnickch Osob (JIC)	Czech Republic	X	X
Forum Virium Helsinki OY (FORUM VIRIUM)	Finland	X	
Cap Digital Paris Region (CAP DIGITAL)	France	X	

baden württemberg connected (bwcon)	Germany	X	X
Dublin Business Innovation Center Limited (Dublin BIC)	Ireland	X	X
Meta Group S.R.L (Meta Group)	Italy	X	X
Technoport SA (Technoport)	Luxembourg	X	X
Instituto Pedro Nunes, Associacao para a Inovacao e de Senvolvimento em Ciencia e Tecnologia (IPN)	Portugal	X	X
Lunds Universitet (LU Open)	Sweden	X	
iMinds	Belgium	X	X
Ionad Forbartha Gnó Teoranta (WESTBIC)	Ireland	X	X

4.2 Next Steps

As joint coordinators of ACE, and coordinator and Chair, respectively, of the EBN Internationalisation Special Interest Group (SIG), EBN and WestBIC will continue to oversee the implementation of the Action Plan set out in this document in 2016. In partnership with the Internationalisation SIG EBN and WestBIC will host quarterly meetings for all members of the extended ACE network to monitor the number and profiles of companies being supported and identify any barriers to implementation or other potential risks to the continued effectiveness of the ACE cooperation mechanism.

As joint coordinators of ACE, EBN and WestBIC undertake to provide the European Commission, which co-financed ACE through FP7 in its pilot phase, with an update on the activities and impact of the ACE Programme in its first 12 months post-funding in December 2016.