

Oh, so you're running a business, too? - Using the JA Company Program as a vehicle for international exchange

During the UF Bothnian Arc NY -project Ung Företagsamhet Norrbotten and City of Oulu have been using the Junior Achievement (JA) Company Program as a vehicle for facilitating international exchange between high school students and teachers from Sweden and Finland. Project was funded by Interreg Nord, Region Norrbotten and Regional Council of Lapland.

The purpose of the project has been to contribute to increased cooperation within entrepreneurship education in the Bothnian Arc region in the north of Sweden and Finland. The project has also contributed to increasing awareness of opportunities for young people to work and start companies across borders and to knowledge exchange and cooperation between teachers who work with entrepreneurial education.

During the project, we have been arranging trade fair exchanges where students running student companies had the chance to sell their products and take part in competitions. We have organized conferences for teachers and students, seminars connecting local business with teachers and students, teacher training events, physical and digital innovation camps, and class to class-exchanges.



Photo description: "Project offered opportunities for students to sell their products in Sweden and Finland. One selling event was organized in Shopping Center Valkea in Oulu city center.

The Company Program gives high school students the opportunity to learn about entrepreneurship by running their own business for a year as a part of their regular studies. During the academic year, they develop and sell an actual product or service. The Company Program in different countries has a similar structure and content. The students brainstorm business ideas, open bank accounts, do market research, write business plans, take part in competitions organized by the local Junior Achievement organization in their country and, most importantly, run their own companies and face all the opportunities and challenges that come with that experience.

Benefits of using the JA Company Program as a basis for international exchange:

- It is a well-structured program which has a clear framework for the academic year.
- The students and teachers from both countries work with the same goals and mostly the same activities, they can recognize their own challenges and experiences in each other.
- It is easy for the participants to see clear benefits of working together, the students and teachers can give feedback to each other based on common experience.
- Trade fairs, contests and other existing parts of the JA Company Program can be given an international twist and offer concrete and fun learning experiences where the students get to sell and/or showcase their products and services.

Drawbacks of using the Company Program as a basis for international exchange:

- Being engaged in the Company Program is a busy time for students, many students enjoy the work and the challenge and often spend a lot of time working with their companies. At the same time, they still must manage the rest of their studies. Adding international exchange into the mix can also add additional stress.
- If you work with the students while they are engaged in the Company Program, it is better if the work can be integrated in what they are already doing with the program since time is such a limiting factor for them. Thus, it can be more difficult to mix schools who are doing the Company Program and schools who do not. (It can be done by working with younger or older students, who are not involved in the program.)

Activities for using the Company Program as a basis for international exchange:

Trade fair exchanges

Every year in both Luleå and Oulu, there is a big trade fair for that year's Company Program students. We organized international exchanges around the trade fairs, where the students got to exhibit their products and services. It also raised awareness of cross-border cooperation and opportunities for work/study and business among local students, even if they themselves did not visit the other country.

Competitions

As a part of the trade fairs, we organized Best Visiting Company contests for the visiting students who got to practice their skills presenting in an international context. During Covid, we did digital formats for both trade fairs and contests.

Digital class to class exchanges

We let a Finnish and a Swedish teacher work together to create digital class to class exchanges, where students from both classes got to work together and helping each other with their companies, for example by giving feedback to each other's business ideas or helping each other with ideas for sales or social media. The students met digitally between two to four times during the year.