

# Analysis of good-practice features of pre-incubation activities

Del. 3.1



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## Scope

This document is the study derived from the deliverable 3.1 “Analysis of good-practice features of pre-incubation activities”.

The Scope of this document is to understand the pre-incubation process and the importance of this process offered, to preview the process, to categorize the practices and to understand what good practices are and how to identify existing good practices. At the end of this document, a checklist of the methodology that all partners will use for the collection of good practices is presented.

The collection of good practices will be a research procedure including a combination of subjective, investigative and story-telling material. The aim of the study is not to present quantitative and comparative data on all pre-incubation facilities and initiatives operating in the target territories or in Europe in general, but rather to focus only on successful initiative (good practices) and describe the circumstances under which it became to be so. The guidelines described in this document are not limited and restrictive. They are initial guidelines that each partner can modify according to its needs and work plan.

## 1. Pre-Incubation Process

If incubators are said to support new businesses, pre-incubators could be said to support nascent entrepreneurs. Pre-incubators are defined as a ‘...risk-reduced environment where entrepreneurial ideas can be tested for market viability before progressing into the business incubator’ (Dickson, 2004, p. 533). As a fairly recent concept, in contrast to the well-established and researched theories and practice of business incubation, pre-incubation remains an under-researched topic (Dickson, 2004). The concept was developed to promote enterprise and spin-out ventures from universities.

Pre-incubation is about the learning and development within the business plan environment, in which the participants can complete courses by developing their own business idea and getting the support needed for doing it. Pre-incubation occurs as a pre-filter for new feasible business ideas and thereby avoids greater costs and

disappointments of setting up a company. The pre-incubation support addresses the obstacles that academics often have concerning entrepreneurship: insufficient economic knowledge, unknown market potential of the developed products and services, high financial risks and lack of capital and missing personal skills.

Some incubators or universities offer a dedicated pre-incubation program. These programs are designed for companies and people with innovative ideas not ready for the incubation program, because they do not meet all required selection criteria. During a few weeks the participants are provided with the support needed in developing the business idea and plan, testing the markets and building up the resources, by means to strengthen the integral business proposition and to prepare for the incubation selection procedure. Services of the pre-incubation for the nascent entrepreneurs are often free of charge or of nominal costs. Principally the services are based on the individual and independent work done by the participant so that the services consist mainly of training and guidance. Pre-incubation activities are a way to influence the quality of the business propositions of potential start-ups and to get to know the entrepreneurs. At the same time, it is an excellent method to promote the incubator facilities to students inside the university and external professionals.

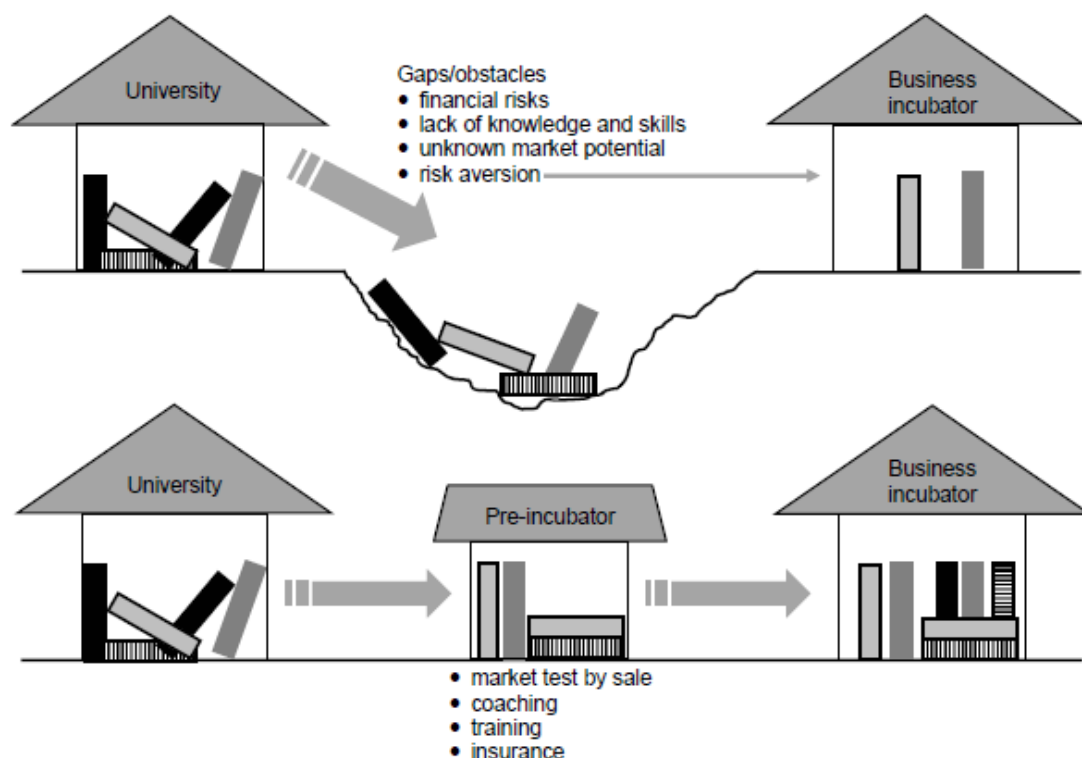
The first defined pre-incubator in Europe was established in 1997 at the University of Bielefeld, in Germany, and HEIs have subsequently been the most likely hosts for pre-incubation centers (USINE, 2002). Pre-incubators serve as solution providers for potential entrepreneurs, tackling issues such as financial risk, gaps in business and personal skills, unknown market potential of the new product or service, lack of capital and ignorance of the worth of their intellectual property (USINE, 2002).

There are many crucial steps that the young entrepreneur has to take in the initiation phase ([www.nbia.org](http://www.nbia.org)):

- Development of the idea for new product or service,
- Searching for the required resources (information, finance, and people)
- Development of business model
- Producing the product for the market
- Selling in the market

All those steps are inevitably affected by the individual factors (like skills, motive) or grouping factors (team management), development phase (technical problems) or marketing process (interactions with venture capitalists or customers, etc).

A pre-incubator as a facility for a very early stage of the start-ups that still have to formulate their business plans, develop a prototype, establish an entrepreneurial team and lead the embryonic business to an investment and or market ready stage. It is the access available to the tenants of the incubator to managers, administrative, management, financial, legal, insurance consultants as well as to scientists, academicians, prospective customers (Peters & Rice & Sundarajan, 2004). The main role is to increase the experience and the competence of the entrepreneurs and the possibility to test the market of a business idea before the company formation, therefore lowering the risk of market failure.



*Pre-incubator is designed to fill the gap between the institute of higher education and the business incubator (Source: USINE, 2002)*

Pre-incubation is the starting point of a longer process of development for the new business, consisting of three stages:

- (1) Pre-incubator stage – ideas and teams are nurtured;
- (2) Incubator stage – once there, a business plan is prepared; and
- (3) Post-incubator stage – when enterprises move out to ‘grow-on space’ (Broadfoot and Sheen, 2002; UKBI, 2004).

As recognized by Hackett and Dilts (2004b), USINE (2002) confirms the importance of pre-incubators in serving as a mechanism for filtering out non-viable businesses. The presence of pre-incubation services linked to universities can also encourage an entrepreneurial awareness and stimulate entrepreneurial activity (Dickson, 2004). Pre-incubators focus on the entrepreneur with ideas or innovations, rather than assisting businesses that are already established (USINE, 2002). Pre-incubation facilities have been initiated by many HEIs, with as much diversity as standard incubators.

However, some characteristics are common to all and Dickson (2004) categorized them into four groupings, as follows.

- (1) *Targeted processes.* The pre-incubation process provides the emerging entrepreneur or the entrepreneur participant’ with the support necessary for the development of the business idea and plan, building up the required resources for the creation of a viable business and then testing the market. Typical pre-incubator services include:
  - Office facilities (for example, telephone, furniture, computer, fax, office) (Allen and McCluskey, 1990; Fry, 1987)
  - Business plan assistance (feasibility studies and analysis, official documents, etc);
  - Practical guidance (connections to the authorities, completing applications, etc);
  - Mentoring (by experienced entrepreneurs, other companies, experts, senior students, ‘enterprise godfathers’, etc) (Stephens and Onofrei, 2012);
  - Training (workshops, seminars, lectures, etc);
  - Financial counseling (completing applications and assistance in obtaining financial support, etc) (Allen and McCluskey, 1990; Fry, 1987);
  - Networks (connection to the existing network of the pre-incubator or business incubator; created also in events, joint training and through the joint location); and
  - Nominal cost to the would-be entrepreneur (Voisey *et al*, 2006).

Not all services can be provided directly by the pre-incubator and the presence of local business support networks, both public and private sector, allows for the delivery of enterprise ‘education’. Linking the pre-incubation facility to the next stage incubator provides a mutually beneficial arrangement for both and a clear pathway of progression for the new business. Unlike many ‘standard’ incubators, pre-incubators do not offer services such as non-executive directors, dedicated office space and financial investments by stakeholders, because pre-incubation establishes whether there is a basis for the business and provides a stable platform for development, with future investment in mind. Consequently, pre-incubator costs are likely to be lower.

(2) *Selection policies.* Pre-incubation processes serve as a ‘risk mitigation strategy’. The would-be entrepreneur has access to an environment in which knowledge-based support is provided at low cost and in which the viability of the idea can be developed and tested before taking on the significant risks associated with new business start-ups (Dickson, 2004). Selection of candidates is also seen as a risk-reducing strategy for the incubation chain, as funding targets are often associated with successes recorded and not the number of business ideas tested. Pre-incubators may have a more readily accessible environment, designed to encourage students and graduates to test the viability of a business idea and their own skills (Voisey *et al*, 2006), offering the option to ‘fail’ quickly and cheaply without significant negative consequences (Hackett and Dilts, 2004a).

(3) *Period of pre - incubation.* Pre-incubation is a phase in the business incubation process (UKBI, 2004) and hence the time a business idea spends in the pre-incubation stage is limited before it progresses into the business incubator. The time spent in the pre-incubator is often defined as the ‘probationary period’ and may vary from a couple of months to several years, depending on the culture and operation of the pre-incubator (Dickson, 2004).

(4) *Linked.* There is an assumed link between enterprise education, pre-incubation and business incubation. The process is most often linked to the presence and support of universities, as a continuum of enterprise education, pre-incubation leading to new business formation and next stage incubation (Dickson, 2004). Pre-incubation service centers are likely to be linked to universities, to promote and support graduate entrepreneurial intent, acting as feeders for other incubators. Because no two incubators are precisely alike but share



traits such as co-location of businesses, shared services, management assistance and networking, pre-incubation facilities may vary in their delivery of a common purpose (Peters *et al*, 2004).

### ***Pre-incubation: activity, outputs and outcomes***

The European Commission (EC) reports that it wishes to focus on learning about entrepreneurship, from primary school through to university level. Facilitation of entrepreneurship in HEIs should, the EC argues, be incorporated into various subjects, particularly within scientific and technical studies, in order to provide students with specific and contextualized training on how to start-up and operate a business (Europa, 2011). The point is also made that entrepreneurial skills also benefit individuals in their personal and social lives (Europa, 2011). ‘Hard outputs’ and ‘soft outcomes’ result from time spent in pre-incubation and may be counted as a measurement of success (Voisey *et al*, 2006). What are pre-incubation activities; and with what results? Nascent entrepreneurs are admitted into pre-incubators with the aim of:

- Acquiring the skills required to operate a business venture effectively and also to perform a real market test of their product or services before progressing – either to independence or next-stage incubation;
- Testing the market – this involves purchasing, production and sales – which provides an opportunity for the entrepreneur to test and improve necessary business skills (USINE, 2002; Voisey *et al*, 2006); and
- Benefiting from in-house advisory services – often delivered by the manager of the pre-incubator, other agencies may be called on to deliver marketing advice, seminars, workshops, market analysis and business planning; that is, the ‘training’ element (Voisey *et al*, 2006).

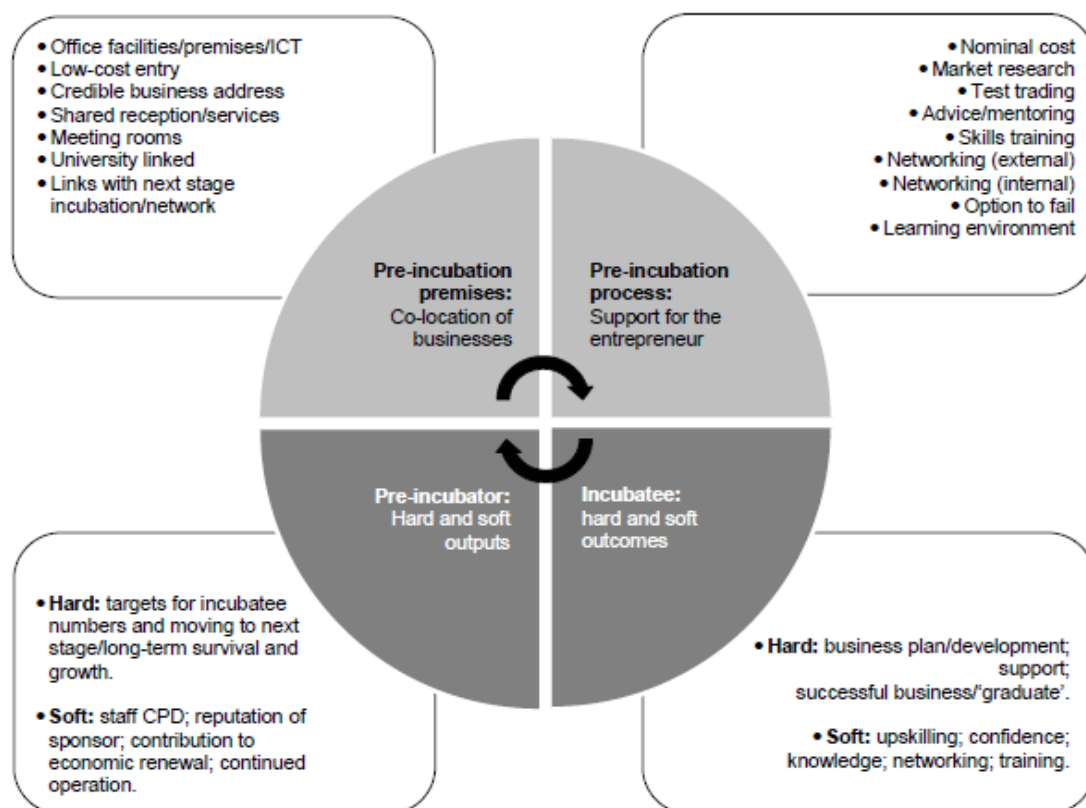
On completion of the pre-incubation phase the nascent entrepreneur should have gathered enough knowledge and skills to scope and start to implement what will be required to take the new product or service to market successfully. The pre-incubation process ultimately leads to a decision on what to do next with the business idea, the options being:

- To end the process, returning to employment or education;



- To extend the testing period to modify the product or service, in line with customer's needs and expectations;
- To start a business, given a successful outcome from market testing, based on a robust and valid business plan;
- To monetize the business idea as it stands; and
- To seek an alliance with, for instance, a venture capitalist.

Voisey *et al* (2006) presented a conceptual framework for identifying the indicators of success in incubation. The upper part of the following figure describes the facilities offered by the pre-incubator in terms of physical resources and support. The lower half lists the hard and soft outputs for both the pre-incubator unit and the incubatees. The key research topic to be addressed will be assessment of the impact of the incubator upon its members and wider external economy. This will include consideration of the businesses attracted, their support needs and their impact in terms of turnover and employment created.



*A conceptual framework for the operation and results of pre-incubation facilities and activity. (Source: Voisey et al, 2006.)*

## 2. Practices Categories

Candidates for Good Practice may either be at an early stage of development, fully mature, or somewhere in-between. In this context, practices can be classified against the following evolutionary scale:

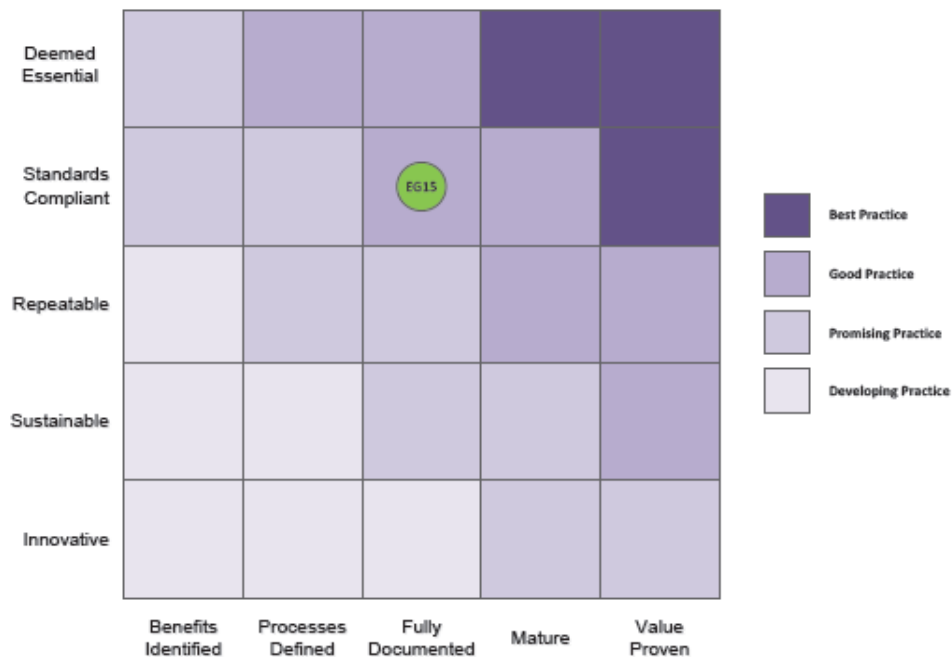
1. Developing - A program, activity or strategy that is in concept or development and shows potential to become a best practice. Its relevancy, effectiveness and potential for replication among other organizations is not yet proven.
2. Promising - A program, activity or strategy that has worked within one organization and shows promise during its early stages for becoming a best practice with long term sustainable impact. A promising practice must have some objective basis for claiming effectiveness and must have the potential for replication among other organizations.
3. Good - A program, activity or strategy that meets most of the following criteria: leads to an actual change, has an impact on the policy environment, demonstrates an innovative or replicable approach, and demonstrates sustainability.
4. Best - Those methods or techniques that have consistently shown results superior to those achieved with other means in a given situation and that could be adapted for other situations. This must be shown to work effectively and produce successful outcomes by the evidence provided by subjective and objective data sources.

Evolution to a higher classification is achieved by meeting additional criteria as improvements are made. In general, this necessitates rigorous evaluation, demonstrated success and impact and capacity for replication. The criteria suggested by this methodology are addressed in the following section.

### *The Matrix*

The following matrix provides a framework for ranking a Practice against the criteria required to classify it, or identify where the Practice is in the evolutionary scale. Positioning a Practice on the matrix provides an indication of the potential for that Practice to be classified as Best Practice. Practices placed in the lower left of the

matrix are those that have a lower ranking, whereas those placed in the upper right of the matrix are those that are ranked highest. The resulting Ranking will indicate where a given Practice is on the evolutionary scale.



The Criteria listed here are not hard-and-fast and can be adapted to more closely fit the needs of the enterprise.

Those suggested here are:

### VERTICAL AXIS

The Criteria for this axis are:

Criteria	Related questions
<b>Innovative</b>	Is this a unique idea, does it break new ground, does it significantly enhance an existing Practice?
<b>Sustainable</b>	Does it require more effort than it is worth, is it dependent on an individual, does it have sponsorship, is it funded?

***Repeatable***

Is it restricted for any local reasons, can it be easily replicated elsewhere?

***Standards Compliant***

Does it comply with local and/or industry standards?

***Deemed Essential***

Can the business do without it, has it become embedded in the business operations?

*HORIZONTAL AXIS*

The Criteria for this axis are:

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Related questions</b>
<b><i>Benefits Identified</i></b>	What does it deliver, how is this unique, who/what does it benefit?
<b><i>Process Defined</i></b>	Are the processes well defined?
<b><i>Fully Documented</i></b>	Is it well documented, is the documentation complete and up-to-date?
<b><i>Mature</i></b>	How long has it been in operation, how stable is it, is it well integrated?
<b><i>Value Proven</i></b>	Is it expensive to implement and operate, does it require a lot of attention, what benefits has it delivered, can the benefits be financially quantified?

***Classification of Practices***

Classification of a Practice is incremental across both axis of the model. This means that all prior requirements must be met to achieve a level, i.e. it is accumulative and dependent on the criteria preceding it being fulfilled. A Practice is classified at the lowest cumulative level it has achieved. A scoring matrix to determine the degree of achievement of criteria, such as the following, can also assist in the classification of a Practice:

Criteria	Benefits Identified	Processes Defined	Fully Documented	Mature	Value Proven
Deemed Essential	6	7	8	9	10
Standards Compliant	5	6	7	8	9
Repeatable	4	5	6	7	8
Sustainable	3	4	5	6	7
Innovative	2	3	4	5	6

This can be employed to rate each Practice by mapping the fulfilled Criteria onto the matrix. The reasons for the resulting classification can then be justified based on the Criteria met. These canals are to indicate Criteria that need more development in order for the Practice to receive a higher classification.

### 3. Good practice definition

A “**good practice**” can be defined as follows: A good practice is defined as anything that has been tried and shown to work in some way—whether fully or in part but with at least some evidence of effectiveness—and that may have implications for practice at any level elsewhere. A good practice is not only a practice that is good, but a practice that has been proven to work well and produce good results, and is therefore recommended as a model. It is a successful experience, which has been tested and validated, in the broad sense, which has been repeated and deserves to be shared so that a greater number of people can adopt it.

#### *Potential Benefits of Good Practices*

It is important to understand the impact identifying and incorporating good practices can have. Good practices can offer significant long term benefits including, but not limited to:

- Improved quality of services offered to beneficiaries.
- Cost savings resulting from increased productivity and efficiency.
- Increased quantity of services offered.
- Improved use of resources by avoiding “reinventing the wheel.”
- Identification and replacement of poor practices with proven strategies and programs.
- Increased funding from public and private funders interested in funding programs and strategies based on a proven track record of success.
- Cost effectiveness resulting from using limited resources for increased impact and outcomes.
- Increased performance from management and staff.

### *Good practice criteria*

The following set of criteria will help you determine whether a practice is a “good practice”:

- **Effective and successful:** A “good practice” has proven its strategic relevance as the most effective way in achieving a specific objective; it has been successfully adopted and has had a positive impact on individuals and/or communities.
- **Environmentally, economically and socially sustainable:** A “good practice” meets current needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poorest, without compromising the ability to address future needs. Practices have the potential of long-term income generating.
- **Gender sensitive:** A description of the practice must show how actors, men and women, involved in the process, were able to improve their livelihoods.
- **Technically feasible:** Technical feasibility is the basis of a “good practice”. It is easy to learn and to implement.
- **Inherently participatory:** Participatory approaches are essential as they support a joint sense of ownership of decisions and actions.

- **Replicable and adaptable:** A “good practice” should have the potential for replication and should therefore be adaptable to similar objectives in varying situations.

## *Good Practice Identifying Process*

A four-step approach is suggested to identifying good practice:

1. **Identify Users’ Requirements.** Although this step seems obvious it is not uncommon to start by designing a database. One should start by considering where one can really add value, looking at what areas need attention and who is making the innovative step towards this pre-incubation issue. Who will benefit most from better knowledge and understanding of good practices? How will they access and use these?
2. **Discover Good Practices.** There are several ways to identify good practices. One is to examine organizations or research teams that deliver excellent results and are therefore likely to be using good practices. Having discovered these, one will then need to discern what parts of their overall approach or methodology represent good practice. This is likely to be done best by people knowledge of the relevant practice. But other approaches exist too: they include communities of practice, after-action reviews and retrospects, and exit interviews. Also, much can be learned from the practices of other organizations in the same field, or even from organizations in others. One way also in which you can identify existing good practices is through conducting thorough literature reviews to pinpoint those practices that have been identified and validated by other academicians. Also, through networking with other academics to determine the practices they have identified as good.
3. **Document Good Practices.** Good practice descriptions are commonly kept in a database in standard format. The Good Practice template will be used as the format to document the listed good practices.
4. **Validate Good Practices.** A practice is only good if there is a demonstrable link between what is practiced and the end result. Still, in most cases judgment is needed as to what constitutes good practice. A frequent approach is to have a panel of peer reviewers evaluate a potential good practice. Validation involves



a comparative assessment of the practice against both *objective* and *subjective* data. The best validation process will include a comparison and evaluation of the best practice against both categories of data.

### *Subjective data*

Subjective data is data gathered from internal reviews, assessments, and feedback mechanisms regarding the success of the practice and is often more autobiographical or qualitative in nature. Sources for obtaining subjective data can include:

- Management and staff
- Beneficiaries
- Reports
- Peers

### *Objective Data*

Objective data is data gathered from sources both internal and external to the organization that provides an objective basis for comparison of the success of the best practice through like-kind analysis. Sources for obtaining objective data can include:

- Subject matter experts
- Research evidence
- Independent evaluations

## ***Good Practice Template***

This template can be used as a checklist to verify that you have covered as much as possible when documenting a good practice of a pre-incubation facility. The purpose of this template is to guide you when identifying and documenting good practices. The right hand column describes the meaning of the element.

Element	Guiding questions
<b>Title / Year of foundation</b>	What is the name of the Pre-Incubation facility and which is the year of its foundation?
<b>Organization</b>	Which organization/company (if any) offers this good practice?
<b>Objective/Mission</b>	What is the aim/objective/mission of this good practice?
<b>Legal Status</b>	Which is the legal status of this pre-incubation facility (or of the

<b>Location /geographical coverage</b>	business that hosts the pre-incubation facility)? Where this good practice is applicable? What is the geographical range/coverage where the good practice has been applied? Are there any geographical restrictions? Please specify when possible, the country, region, province, district, town and village.
<b>Introduction/Description</b>	What is the context (initial situation) and challenge being addressed? Provide a short description of the good practice being addressed and specify the period during which the practice has been carried out? What are the processes and steps involved?
<b>Stakeholders and Partners</b>	Who are the beneficiaries or the target group of the good practice? Who are the users of the good practice? Who are the institutions, partners, implementing agencies, and donors involved in the good practice, and what is the nature of their involvement?
<b>Organisation development</b>	Which is the organizational structure of the good practice? Who owns this structure?
<b>Methodological Approach / Period of pre-incubation / Selection policies</b>	What methodology has been used in order to address the initial issue and lead to a successful outcome? What was the process and in which way it was a participatory process? How long did it take to learn lessons and identify key success factors? Which is the middle period of pre-incubation per beneficiary? Do they provide selection policies and if yes which are they?
<b>Validation</b>	Confirmation by the beneficiaries that the practice addresses the needs properly. Has the good practice been validated with the stakeholders/final users? Provide a brief description of the good practice validation process (if any).
<b>Impact / Efficiency</b>	What has been the impact (positive or negative) of this good practice on the beneficiaries? Have these beneficiaries been financially and/or economically improved or gained knowledge and experience, and if yes how? Are there any performance measurements associated with the good practice (ex. Number of new businesses created / established companies or number of business plans implemented?)
<b>Innovation and Success Factors</b>	In what way has the good practice contributed to an innovation? (for example: offers new products or new services, uses new technology and know-how, offers innovative business concept, employs highly educated staff, has an R&D department or implements R&D Projects, has a strong international focus and is internationally competitive)  What are the conditions (institutional, economic, social, and environmental) that needs to be in place for the good practice to be successfully replicated (in a similar context)? Are there any?
<b>Constraints</b>	What are the challenges encountered in applying the good practice? How have they been addressed?
<b>Lessons learned</b>	What are the key messages and lessons learned to take away from the good practice experience? What proves difficult? What would the originators of the practice do differently if they were

<b>Sustainability</b>	<p>to do it again?</p> <p>What are the elements that need to be put into place for the good practice to be institutionally, socially, economically and environmentally sustainable?</p> <p>If applicable, indicate the total costs incurred for the implementation of the practice. As much as possible, provide also some cost/efficiency indications: What are the institutional, social, economic and/or environmental benefits compared to total costs?</p>
<b>Replicability and/or up-scaling</b>	<p>What are the possibilities of extending the good practice more widely? If you were giving advice to beneficiaries living in another geographic area, what are the conditions that should be met/respected to ensure that the good practice is replicated, but adapted to the new context?</p>
<b>Financial assessment</b>	<p>Which are the key performance indicators? Which are the revenues, the funding, and the financial resources in general?</p>
<b>Tools / Techniques</b>	<p>Which services do they offer? For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Office facilities (telephone, furniture, computer, fax, office, etc.)</li> <li>– Business plan assistance (feasibility studies and analysis, official documents, etc);</li> <li>– Practical guidance (connections to the authorities, completing applications, etc);</li> <li>– Mentoring (by experienced entrepreneurs, other companies, experts, senior students, ‘enterprise godfathers’, etc)</li> <li>– Training (workshops, seminars, lectures, etc);</li> <li>– Financial counseling (completing applications and assistance in obtaining financial support, etc)</li> <li>– Networks (connection to the existing network of the pre-incubator or business incubator; created also in events, joint training and through the joint location);</li> <li>– Nominal cost to the would-be entrepreneur</li> </ul>
<b>Links</b>	<p>Does it have strategic alliances or networking with universities or other public authorities or funding organizations? What kind of networking does it offer (if any)?</p>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<p>Conclude specifying/explaining the impact and usefulness of the good practice. When possible, use anecdotal evidence such as a storytelling or testimony of a man or a woman showing the benefit of the good practice.</p>
<b>Contact details</b>	<p>What is the address of the people or the project to contact if you want more information on the good practice?</p>
<b>URL of the practice</b>	<p>Where can one find the good practice on the Internet?</p>

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