



How to: Start a mentoring service

Handbook for starting up a student-to-student mentoring service for entrepreneurial ideas

Introduction

In this handbook, knowledge and experiences from Spark* NTNU and similar organizations at other universities are presented, with the goal of helping new or existing student-to-student mentoring organizations develop. By combining information and experience from different organizations, we have articulated what seems to be best practices. We want to thank Spark* Nord at Nord University and Nyskaping at the University of Agder for their contributions.

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Key definitions:

Mentoring service: Students mentoring other students to succeed at making ventures out of their own ideas.

Mentor: Student guiding other students through their venture creation.

Mentee: Student being guided by another student to help make their business idea a reality.

1. What is Spark* NTNU?

Spark* NTNU is a free mentoring service by and for students with a business idea. Their goal is to give all students at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) an opportunity to explore innovation and entrepreneurship while they are studying. Their approach has proven to be successful, which is shown in their key numbers (from 2021):

- 570 student projects have been mentored since the beginning in 2014
- 420 000 euros have been given out in funding to the student projects provided by TrønderEnergi
- Currently 30 employees, 70 active startups and 70 alumni startups

In addition to being a mentoring service by and for students, Spark*NTNU has several different offerings that help startups. They have a collaboration with the regional energy company TrønderEnergi which offers soft funding. The startups pitch their idea, get feedback and potentially receive up to 2400 € to kickstart their project.

The students that receive guiding from Spark* also have free access to Spark Coworking Space, which is located at the University. In addition the startups have free financial management with Tripletex, free IP-related help through NTNU Technology Transfer Office (TTO) and free legal aid from a lawyer. Spark* NTNU has employees working with organizing free events, courses, and workshops. Some of the successful events are SparkUp Night for inspiration, Join a Startup Night for finding new team members, and F**k Up Nights where students can share their own previous mistakes so that everybody can learn from each other.

The concept behind Spark has been successfully spread to Nord University in Bodø and Mo i Rana, Chalmers University of Technology and Lund University.



Student-to-Student



**Low threshold mentoring
service**



**Building Entrepreneurial
mindset**

2. Core activity

The goal of the mentoring organizations is to develop the students' entrepreneurial mindset and skills by supporting them during their entrepreneurial journey, regardless of how mature the idea is. The role of the mentor is to provide guidance and support to the mentees to help students pursue their entrepreneurial ideas.

2.1 What is mentoring?

The mentor's key activity is to guide the mentee to take the idea further. The most common topics that mentors discuss with their mentees are motivation and ambition, market research, and funding. Other topics that the mentees often need help with are team-related issues like recruiting a well-functioning team and finding the right team composition. The team often needs help with balancing product development and business development. The mentors set goals and milestones together with the startups to ensure that there is general progress. The startups also receive help with administrative matters like company establishment, economy, and applications.



3. Find your place in the innovation ecosystem

When you are starting out, you should map out the existing innovation ecosystem at your university. You can do this by talking to the students, professors, administration, and other relevant organizations. Try to answer these questions:

- Do the students feel the need for a mentoring service?
- Are there existing startups on campus?
- Who is making students interested in entrepreneurship?
- Who do the students go to if they need help with their business idea today?
- Where can you find students interested in entrepreneurship? Which organizations are they involved with today?
- Which study programs involve innovation at your university today? Who teaches them? Who studies them?
- Which engagement topics of innovation does the university support today?

After mapping out your university's innovation ecosystem through these questions you can use that information to figure out where there is room for your organization. Remember that you want to contribute to give the best possible opportunities to the students, and therefore you are not competing with any other organization that also helps the students. You should build bridges and communicate early with the other organizations at your university.

4. Building the organization

Starting a mentoring service at your university is much like starting a business. There are several ways of running the organization, and in this section, we will present a selection of them. It is important to know which type of business model you are going for, before approaching the different actors you want to work with through the process. The most important thing is to always ensure that the organization is mentoring startups. Everything else should be adapted and arranged around the mentoring.

4.1 Organizational structure

There are several different ways of structuring the organization. To ensure that they can always offer a high-quality service with continuity, the organization should reward the mentors for their job. It is expected of the mentors that they are self-driven and work continuously. Since they are students themselves and time can fall short, they should therefore be rewarded.

The reward should be of a character that makes them want to prioritize working as a mentor. An hour-based salary works well at NTNU because a lot of the students have a high alternative cost because of a lot of other job opportunities alongside studying. It is important to give the employees an added value in terms of networking, experience, and knowledge.

Which organizational model a mentoring service has, depends on their access to resources. That is why we have presented three different organizational structures. There are many more ways to do this, and it will depend on the resources available and regulations in the specific country.

4.1.1 Three different ways to structure the organization

1. Funded by the University and other institutions

Spark*NTNU is funded by both NTNU and other local, commercial partners. This makes the organization able to reward the employees for their job with an hour-based salary. This secures continuity in the organization and following up with the mentees will be done efficiently.

2. Rewarding the employees by giving them credits

It is possible to make an organization where the mentors are not rewarded for their job with a salary, but with credits.

3. Rewarding the employees by giving them a certificate for volunteer work.

They would still get very useful experiences. To succeed with this sort of model, it is important that they get acknowledgment and rewards in the form of certificates. This should be a maximum of a one-year involvement as a mentor to ensure that they will prioritize the job.

5. Running the organization

5.1 Recruiting

To build a stable and effective organization you need a good team. In the beginning, it is recommended to have a team of at least two or three members. Mentoring is the core business and should be in focus. The most important role in the organization is therefore the mentors. In the beginning, it is natural that all employees are mentored. One of the members should, in addition to being a mentor, take the role of the leader. When the organization grows and has the resources needed, you can extend the organization to have people focusing on promoting the service, planning events, and helping startups with specific tasks and problems. Remember that all employees should sign a confidentiality agreement/NDA so the organization is a safe space for the startups to discuss ideas.

5.1.1 The different roles

Mentors:

The role of the mentor is to provide guidance and support to the mentees to help them pursue their ideas and guide them through the entrepreneurial journey, regardless of how mature the idea is. Both the mentee and the mentor can learn a lot from the experience, so the mentor should be eager to learn. If you want to read more about the role of a mentor you can read more about in this handbook: [How to: Be a mentor](#).

When recruiting mentors, think about how the different mentors would have contributed to giving the best offer to the mentees possible. Recruit people with different knowledge, experiences, and methods. There are also some specific qualities you can look for in a candidate. Mentors should have or want to acquire a coaching mindset. Working with people should appeal to them, and they should be motivated to learn from the process and be able to challenge established mindsets. If they do not have any previous experience with entrepreneurship, they should have an interest in learning more about it. What characterizes a good mentor is being able to work independently, being self-driven, and likes helping people succeed.

Leading the organization:

As the leader of a mentoring service, the most important task is to make it as simple as possible for the mentors to do their job. This involves building the organization in a way that secures efficient and productive mentoring. To do this, the leader must gather the needed resources of money, knowledge, and network. The leader is responsible for recruiting employees that have the needed competence and motivation. To make sure the employees thrive at work, they need to have an organizational culture. In addition, the leader should make sure that the organization has a good relationship with the other organizations at the university. The leader is the face of the organization and has to make sure that the mentoring service is visible and accessible.

Add-ons:

As the organization grows, it can be beneficial to recruit people who can work with marketing, events, and IT. At Spark NTNU they also have a deputy head of the organization that works with administration, a head of mentors, and a head of soft-funding.

5.1.2 Attracting the best employees

A good place to start recruiting is to find out where students with an interest in entrepreneurship are today. You can ask if you can give a short presentation in classes that are about innovation or entrepreneurship. Maybe there is a coworking space or some organizations where innovative students go today, where you can hand out flyers and give information. Go to events that attract the most engaged and committed students and ask to set up a stand. It is always easiest to start where there are people who already have shown

interest in entrepreneurship. It is highly recommended to recruit a diverse group of people on all levels. This includes students from different study programs, gender, age, and cultural background.

5.2 Transferring knowledge to new employees

In Spark, all leaders, administration, and a lot of the mentors are replaced by new employees every year in the spring semester. This is done in a specific order to ensure that the transfer of knowledge goes smoothly. Already in January, they hire a new leader, and this person leads alongside the previous leader in over a month before the previous leader leaves their position. After that, in February, they recruit the deputy head of the organization and the head of mentors.

In March, they recruit the new mentors and transfer the startups to the new mentors. This involves giving every new mentor a buddy, who is responsible for giving them the knowledge and the help they need to get comfortable with being a mentor. In addition, they have mentoring sessions with both new and previous mentors present, to make sure the startups get to know the new mentor in a comfortable setting. The new mentor can learn by observing the mentor and how they work with the different startups. When the new employees are in place in May, the whole organization has a large social event where the new employees get to know the employees that are leaving. The point of this is to create a low threshold for asking previous employees for guidance and help in their new position. This also helps set the standard of how the organizational culture is and kicks off the next school year with a new generation of employees.

It is recommended for the organization to produce some resources that can be handed over to new employees. This could include an overview of the innovation ecosystem at the university and the different funding opportunities. You can collect experiences and tips from previous employees that can give the new employees a head start.

5.3 Graphical profile and marketing

Getting in touch with the mentoring service should be an easy thing to do for the students. It is important that in the marketing of the mentoring service it clearly states that the service is free for the students and that all ideas are welcome. The organization can't reach its full level of impact if the students at the university do not know you exist. Building a good reputation and a brand from the very beginning is very important. When you are starting up your new organization, you should think about how you want to communicate with the students and what message you want to give. Are you trying to reach out to new startups or students with ideas, then think about where these students receive information today. Use these channels to communicate what you offer that fulfills their needs and use words and photos that apply to them.

To ensure that the students recognize you and to separate you from the other organizations you should make a unique graphical profile and logo. If you do not have any knowledge or

resources for this in the beginning, then [canva.com](https://www.canva.com) could be a helpful tool to use. The name you choose should have an available domain name, and if possible it could be smart to buy this early on.

5.4 Activities

In addition to the core activities, which is mentoring the students, there are a lot of different offerings that can be useful for the startups and for your organisation as activities can give you a lot of attention from potential startups and mentors.

5.4.1 JASUN

This is short for Join a Startup Night and is an event that's run once per semester at NTNU. The main purpose of the event is to facilitate networking between startups who want to recruit new team members and students who want to join a startup. The event consists of the startups pitching on stage for 3 minutes each. After that, there is a mingling session where the people interested in the different ideas can talk to the startups. All students at the university are welcome to the event. [Video](#) from JASUN at Spark NTNU in 2019.

5.4.2 Fuckupnight

This is an event where the focus is to learn from other startups' mistakes. Several startups go on stage and share their experiences and tell others where they went wrong and what they would have done differently. All students are welcome to the event.

5.4.3 Spark up nights

This event aims to inspire the existing startups and mentors by booking several motivational speakers that share their own startup experiences. Often they put together speakers with different knowledge, like specific technology that could be relevant, social impact, or financial strategy. It is a social event where there is mingling and food after the presentations.

5.4.4. Courses

Spark* NTNU offers different courses like financial management, HR, and presenting techniques both for the startups and for the mentors. If there are any courses that are requested Spark often invites people or organizations to arrange and teach the courses.

5.4.5. Boost her project

Spark* NTNU has a side project that aims to raise the percentage of female entrepreneurs in the organization. Boost encourages female students to create their own ventures. They do this by creating a social network, hosting events, and by using social media to inspire. [Click here](#) to see their website, even though it is in Norwegian it might give you an idea of how they work.

5.5. Building culture

Even though the employees mostly are working independently, they must feel like a part of a team. Spark* NTNU have some tips to ensure a good internal culture:

- Meetings with all mentors every other week, with check-ins and the opportunity to ask questions to the other mentors. The point of this is to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences, and that the mentors help each other. These meetings should be social events that the mentors enjoy going to.
- Once a month, Spark NTNU has a meeting with the whole organization, including the ones working with promotion, events, administration, boosting female entrepreneurship, and soft-funding. This makes sure that the threshold to contact each other across departments is low. This is also a social event with food and mingling.
- Have a Slack channel or another low threshold communication platform where people can post questions and get quick feedback from other employees.
- During the whole year, Spark NTNU hosts several different team-building events for all employees. This can be everything from cabin trips to inviting all employees to eat cake together at lunchtime.

5.6 Financial structure

The amount of money needed to start and run the organization will depend on how many people are on the payroll, how many events you are having, and how you structure the organization. One of Spark* NTNU's main sponsors is the local energy company Trønder energi. They are interested in innovation and have set aside means that must gain the local community. It is valuable for them to sponsor Spark* NTNU because they get in touch with the innovation ecosystem at campus and they get to contribute to the development of an important service in their local community. These types of companies could be a great place to start looking for a long-term sponsor.

In the beginning, when you still have no "proof of concept" at your university, you can try to get funding from your university for one semester so you have the time to produce some results that are appealing. This could be the number of startups mentored. Other types of organizations that could be interested in being sponsors are banks, innovation firms, consultancy firms, or others interested in the people working in the organization and the startups. In the next chapter, you can read some of the most important selling points when recruiting a sponsor.

Selling point and arguments for recruiting a sponsor

Spark* wants to be able to offer low-threshold mentoring to students at the university, as well as inspire and contribute to the local innovation ecosystem. In Trondheim for instance, Spark* has since its inception supervised 544 start-up companies, of which 66 are alumni startups, 71 are active startups, 345 are dead startups and 62 are dormant startups. In this section we would like to take a look at the commercial value of Spark*, and what selling points can be used when trying to find a sponsor.

Social responsibility and value creation

The social responsibility that involves demanding more innovation and entrepreneurship in society is an important selling point on why it is desirable for sponsors to sponsor Spark*. Spark* presents the opportunity for students to create new companies that in turn can contribute to the economy and potentially also solve different challenges in society. Spark* gives students the chance to get mentoring for ideas that can in turn generate value in society. This is done by giving students a low-threshold platform where they can develop their ideas further.

Network

Spark* can help students increase their overall network. Students are given the opportunity to build networks across fields of study at their university. Students also get the opportunity to connect a direct network to the business community and the innovation environment in their city. A broader network will help students develop their business ideas, and might also help their careers in the future.

Contributing to the Innovation ecosystem

The sponsor can contribute to the local innovation ecosystem. Spark* is also a low threshold organization that gives all students with a business idea and entrepreneurial interest an opportunity to get involved in the innovation ecosystem. The innovation may positively benefit from a potential increase in the number of start-up companies that are founded at the university and succeed as a result of mentoring through Spark*. Spark* may also increase the number of jobs in the local community, and provide more employed students at the university. In Trondheim for instance, Spark* has contributed to strengthening Trondheim's position as technology capital as there are several technology-related start-ups that seek mentoring through Spark*. Spark* can also organize events and guidance that lead to a strengthened innovation environment through inspirational lectures and workshops.

Commitment and ownership among students

The overall goal for Spark* is to create a valuable offer for students that receive mentoring. In short - Spark* can facilitate the building of future entrepreneurs, whilst creating commitment and ownership among students. These are values that a potential sponsor might view as valuable when considering to sponsor the organization. Spark* lets students at the university be challenged in practice. Students get the opportunity to bring what they learn directly into a business perspective. This can give students increased ownership and a greater commitment related to their academics. Practicing the theory they learn can provide a greater academic benefit for students. Ideas that arise within academic subjects will be able to continue with a supervisor as a catalyst for the project. Students can learn entrepreneurial skills that come in handy during their studies, and later in their careers. Not only does Spark* offer value to students with a business idea, but can also provide the opportunity to put their own skills into practice by joining a start-up company. In Trondheim, Spark* offers a *Join A Startup Night* where students can find their future part-time job. The students who also work at Spark* might also benefit from mentoring and working in the organization. Mentors might also have many of the same benefits as mentees, such as for instance network. Engage has also performed a study on [Students as educators](#) which highlights this effect.

Branding among students

The sponsor will through sponsoring Spark* gain exposure to three main groups at the university: students, staff, and the different start-up companies. Increase the sponsor's position within a professional environment. Branding for the sponsor may happen through workshops, logos, and other contributions to the organization. Sponsoring a well-known organization like Spark* may also increase the sponsor's position in the recruitment of students as future employees. The start-ups created through Spark* may also be potential future business partners for the sponsor.

This guide is created by mENT in collaboration with Engage NTNU. If you have questions, need help, or have feedback, you can reach us at:

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