



RISE START CUP 2026

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

SPU

Submission Deadline

10/Sep./2026

1. Introduction

The RISE Project (**Reinforcing Integration of Skills for Employability and Internationalisation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**) is pleased to launch the **1st edition of RISE Start Cup Competition 2026**.

The competition aims to:

- Promote innovation, entrepreneurship, employability, and international cooperation among students from the partner universities of the RISE Project (Italy, Spain and Kurdistan region of Iraq)
- It provides students with an opportunity to transform innovative ideas into practical solutions addressing current societal, economic, environmental, and educational challenges.
- Designed to drive sustainable development, the RISE Start Cup challenges students to launch entrepreneurial projects that enhance job skills, global reach, and university-business cooperation.

2. Theme of the Competition

Participants are invited to submit innovative project ideas related to the following topic:

“From Local Ideas to Global Impact: Cross-Border Innovation for Sustainable Communities and Regional Development”

The competition theme:

From Local Ideas to Global Impact: Cross-Border Innovation for Sustainable Communities and Regional Development

Encourages projects that begin by addressing a local challenge but have the potential to create regional or international benefits through collaboration, innovation, and knowledge sharing. A strong proposal should align with each part of the theme:

1. From Local Ideas to Global Impact

- Identify a specific local problem or opportunity.
- Develop an innovative solution that can be adapted or replicated in other communities or countries.
- Demonstrate how local success can contribute to broader regional or global development goals.

2. Cross-Border Innovation

- Foster collaboration between partners from different countries.
- Promote the exchange of expertise, technology, research, or best practices.
- Build international networks among universities, NGOs, industry, or government institutions.

3. Sustainable Communities

Projects should improve one or more aspects of community well-being, such as:

- Education and lifelong learning
- Digital transformation
- Renewable energy and energy efficiency
- Environmental protection
- Climate resilience
- Public health
- Social inclusion
- Gender equality
- Youth empowerment
- Entrepreneurship

4. Regional Development

The project should strengthen regional cooperation by:

Creating economic opportunities.
Enhancing innovation ecosystems.
Supporting capacity building.
Promoting technology transfer.
Developing sustainable policies or practices.

3. Objectives

The main objectives of the RISE Start Cup are the following:

- To promote an entrepreneurial culture among students
- To enhance employability opportunities and future skills
- To encourage innovative solutions to address societal and economic challenges
- To foster cooperation between partner universities
- To strengthen international networking and partnership opportunities

4. Eligibility

In order to participate in the RISE Start Cup, the following are the main eligibility criteria that university partners will have to fulfill:

1. Each RISE partner university may nominate one students' team to participate in the RISE Start Cup Competition;
2. Each team must consist of minimum **two** students up to **four** students (being aware that the project budget can cover up to two students' participation during the days of the competition);
3. Students shall be enrolled in a Bachelor degree;
4. Each partner university will select one academic mentor (professor or lecturer);
5. Participants must be enrolled at a RISE partner university during the project lifetime (academic year 2025-2026);
6. The participation is open to every faculty interested;
7. Teams will present an **innovative business idea**;
8. The overall activity is conducted in English.

5. Event Dates and Venue

RISE Start Cup 2026: 9-10 November 2026 at Duhok Polytechnic University, Duhok.

RISE Networking Event: 11 November 2026 at University of Zakho, Zakho

6. Competition requirements for the selection by the university

Each team willing to participate shall submit **by September 10th:**

- One-page CV (For each team member)
- Executive Summary about the innovative project idea (maximum 2 pages)
- One-page motivation letter
- To fill in the application form **here:** <https://forms.gle/oQehZCxa6rQyAuE57>

Selected university's teams will follow a training/engagement path starting from mid-September until the Start Cup Competition Day.

Each university team will have to submit the following materials to the RISE jury **by October 29th:**

- Business Model Canvas
- Pitch Deck Presentation (maximum 8-10 slides)
- Short video presentation (maximum 3 minutes) or project poster
- **For all these materials, the university will share the project templates to be used.**

Requirements for the final selection during the day of the Start Cup Competition:

Business project ideas must demonstrate:

- Innovation and originality
- Relevance to the competition theme
- Potential impact
- Sustainability
- Feasibility and scalability

7. START CUP phases and Selection Process

Phase 1 – Publication of the Call for the Start Cup and Internal University Selection

- Application by the students teams shall be submitted **by August 31st, 2026**
- Each partner university will organize a local selection process and nominate one best team **by September 15th, 2026**

Phase 2 – Preparation/online cross-cultural mentorship between mid-September and end of October

- All the students teams selected will participate in at least 4 webinars of preparation (organised with UNIMED Start Cup, UMU and UNINT and local stakeholders)

Phase 3 – Start Cup competition, evaluation of the Jury and award

- The jury, composed of 1 representative of the HE Ministry + 1 from NGOs and civil society + 1 from local authorities + 1 Alumni + 1 from industry, will evaluate the above-mentioned materials and the pitch on the day of the Start Cup Competition according to predefined criteria in order to select the best innovative business idea.
- Three finalists will be selected and will present their projects during the Networking Event in Zakho University; all the teams will attend the Networking Event

8. Evaluation criteria

The business ideas are evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Innovation and creativity (25%)
- Feasibility and implementation potential (20%)
- Social and economic impact (20%)
- Contribution to employability and Internationalisation (15%)
- Sustainability and scalability (10%)
- Quality of presentation and pitching (10%)

9. RISE Start Cup Awards

- Certificates of Excellence
- Mentorship opportunities
- Visibility through RISE and UNIMED networks
- Opportunities for future collaboration and project development

10. Proposed agenda for Start Cup and Networking Event

Day 1: Arrival of the partners (students and faculty members) in Duhok during the day. An intercultural activity for the students as an ice-breaking activity will be organised, followed by a welcome social dinner

Day 2: Start Cup Competition at DPU + social dinner

Day 3: Transfer from Duhok to Zakho in early morning around 8 am for the Networking Event, which will last the entire day. The morning would be dedicated to roundtables with stakeholders, while the afternoon would focus on networking activities, followed by a dinner in Zakho.

11. Confidentiality

All application materials will be treated confidentially and used exclusively for evaluation and dissemination purposes related to the RISE Project. Intellectual property rights remain with the participants.

12. Participation in the Networking Event

The same student teams selected for the RISE 2026 Start Cup, together with their academic mentors, will participate in the Networking Event. Each partner university is entitled to send three students and one professor to attend both events.

13. Contact Information

For further information, participants are encouraged to contact their university focal points:

RISE Local Coordination Team : relations@spu.edu.iq