

Final Report: Strategic Integration of Remote Students in Östersund

On 9–10 April 2025, the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform facilitated an onsite peer review in Östersund, Sweden, to support the municipality's ambition to make remote students more visible within the local business ecosystem.

Motivation of the Host to Call for an Interregional Peer Review

Östersund Municipality, together with Mid Sweden University and the local innovation network Gomorron Östersund, initiated an Interreg Europe Peer Review to explore the development of a "Remote Campus" as a strategic response to the rising number of remote students living in the region. With approximately 900 remote students currently residing in Östersund—many of whom lack physical access to academic infrastructure—this group represents both a social need and an economic opportunity.

The motivation for the review stemmed from a recognition that digital education has transformed how and where people study. Despite Östersund having one of the highest proportions of distance learners in Sweden, this demographic remains under-integrated in local policy, community life, and the labour market. The hosts identified an opportunity to leverage this untapped potential through shared learning and inspiration from European peers.

The aim was to gather insights and policy practices on how to design inclusive, multifunctional spaces that foster academic success, social belonging, and integration into the local economy. The initiative builds on existing collaborations and aligns with regional goals for sustainability, digital innovation, talent attraction, and workforce development.

The main motivations for the initiative were:

- To explore ways to better support remote students and enhance their opportunities to engage locally.
- To strengthen synergies between higher education, local businesses, and public services.
- To contribute to regional development by building more inclusive and connected educational pathways.

Specification of the Policy Challenge Encountered

The core challenge addressed was: How can Östersund develop a sustainable and multifunctional Remote Campus that supports remote students while also benefiting the wider community and economy?

While the municipality's Business Strategy for Sustainable Growth (2022–2026) highlights the importance of students for regional development, it does not currently account for the unique needs of remote learners. A recent pre-study revealed that these students often study alone from home, without access to communal spaces, academic support, or local job networks.

Key challenges identified:

- Social isolation and mental health concerns
- Limited interaction with the local labor market
- Lack of physical or institutional infrastructure to support remote learners, which contributes to a lower success-rate compared to campus-based education.
- Insufficient alignment between remote study options and regional workforce needs

The peer review focused on three thematic questions:

1. How to create an attractive environment for remote students?
2. How to design sustainable funding, governance, and management models?
3. How to strengthen the connection between remote students and the local labour market?

Östersund Municipality aim to address these challenges through systemic interventions such as the creation of a Remote Campus, the development of new funding mechanisms, and the establishment of integrated governance models.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing upon European best practices and tailored insights from the peer review, the following policy recommendations have been developed:

1. Define and Develop the Remote Campus Concept

- Recognize remote students in strategic planning and development documents.
- Learn more about the remote students and their situation. Make a survey, interviews and collect more knowledge to base the strategy on.
- The Remote Campus needs to be accessible with a central location and welcoming interior that provides core educational services: tutoring, counselling, quiet study zones, co-working spaces, technical infrastructure.
- Conceptualize the Remote Campus as a "Third Place" for distance learners, combining educational, cultural, entrepreneurial, and social activities to foster a vibrant student community.
- Develop and build the Remote campus on already existing collaborations and infrastructure to make it sustainable and manageable.
- Frame the Remote Campus as a national pilot aligned with inclusion, digitalization, and youth employment agendas

2. Identify and Serve Target Populations

- Engage diverse groups: current and prospective remote students, adult learners, entrepreneurs, and individuals traditionally underrepresented in higher education (e.g., individuals with disabilities, athletes, caregivers, and those with limited financial resources).
- Offer comprehensive services, including academic support, tutoring, career guidance, mental health services, and access to social and cultural activities.

3. Establish Robust Governance and Management Structures

- Create a participatory governance model involving the university, municipality, business sector, and students themselves as co-creators.
- Enable flexible and adaptive governance frameworks capable of responding to evolving needs ("open programming" principles).
- Define core roles: place manager, academic tutor, career advisor, and community manager.

4. Secure Diversified and Sustainable Funding

- Pursue a blend of funding sources, including European Union programmes (Erasmus+, ERDF, ESF), national government agencies, local industry sponsorships, and philanthropic contributions.
- Explore innovative financing models such as Social Impact Bonds to link funding to measurable educational and employment outcomes.

5. Strengthen Linkages to the Local Labour Market

- Develop structured matchmaking systems between students and employers through initiatives such as reverse job fairs, internships, hackathons, and workplace visits.
- Position the Remote Campus as a strategic intermediary supporting apprenticeships, entrepreneurial activities, and cooperative education programmes.

Brief Analysis of Feasibility and Proposed Implementation Calendar

Feasibility Assessment:

All proposed actions have been deemed feasible based on stakeholder consultations, peer review insights, and alignment with Östersund's strategic frameworks. The strong commitment of regional actors and the existence of relevant policy instruments further enhance the prospects for successful implementation.

The collaboration between Mid-Sweden university and the municipality with a strong mutual ambition for students and education, and existing infrastructure with Learning centre and the ordinary campus in Östersund creates a good foundation. Valuable knowledge and experience from GoMorrön Östersund, and the field of co-working places will be beneficial when creating a Remote campus for co-studying.

The anchoring and commitment of local stakeholders, partners and employers provides the opportunity for joint activities and shared responsibility.

Tentative Implementation Timeline:

Area of Action	Q2 2025	Q3 2025	Q4 2025	Q1 2026
Survey with remote students		✓		
Pilot Launch of Remote Campus			✓	
Mentorship and Belonging Initiatives	✓		✓	✓
Talent Matching and Internships	✓		✓	✓
Governance Model Finalization	✓	✓		
Funding Strategy Implementation		✓	✓	
Monitoring and Evaluation Systems			✓	✓

Conclusion

The integration of remote students into Östersund's regional development strategy represents both an important opportunity and a necessary step toward building a more resilient, inclusive, and dynamic local economy. By addressing current gaps in support structures, professional networks, and community engagement, Östersund can better harness the potential of its growing population of remote learners. The peer review confirmed that the integration of remote students is a shared European challenge. Östersund's ambitions were validated through inspiring examples and concrete policy tools presented by peers from across Europe.

One standout insight was the significance of addressing mental health among remote students. A well-designed, inclusive physical space can foster resilience and a sense of belonging—key components for student success and community wellbeing.

The peer review process has provided valuable insights and highlighted practical approaches that are adaptable to Östersund's context. The process brought both strategic clarity and renewed motivation to the local team. Moving forward, success will depend on sustained collaboration between education providers, the municipality, local businesses, and the students themselves.

During the process we have found that the "Learning centre" (the municipality's centre for adult and higher vocational education) which is located on Mid-Sweden university campus have potential to host a Remote campus. This provides a foundation for a long-term and sustainable initiative. The "Learning centre" already offer services like tutoring, counselling and examinations for other groups of students. But to develop the concept and meet the needs of remote students the Learning centre needs new functions like for example community manager and coordinators that work with the students, universities and the regional employers. To make progress towards a Remote campus, the Learning centre must be enhanced with added value and services – by the municipality, stakeholders and partners taking concrete action, showing commitment and actively driving activities that bring the remote campus to life.

By taking a proactive, structured, and inclusive approach, Östersund can create an environment where remote students are not only participants in higher education, but also active contributors to the region's social and economic vitality.

This report marks the beginning of a long-term commitment to building stronger connections, supporting diverse learning pathways, and fostering a community where all learners have the opportunity to thrive. The collaborative spirit established during this process provides a strong foundation for continued innovation, shared ownership, and collective progress. With Östersund as proving ground the concept of Remote campus can be refined and then be implemented in other parts of Sweden with similar needs.

Participants

Östersund municipality (Beneficiary organization)

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Gomorrön Östersund

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