

Academic Entrepreneurship at Ca' Foscari University Venice and the case of the spin-off company VEASYT

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Abstract: This contribution presents research and academic entrepreneurship at the Ca' Foscari University Venice and focuses on one of its innovative spin-offs, VEASYT, the only spin-off in the linguistic and humanities areas. VEASYT offers digital solutions to overcome linguistic barriers and guarantee access to information and contents in particular to deaf people. It is the first company in Italy that offers video remote interpreting in Italian Sign Language to promote inclusion of deaf signers.

Keywords: Ca' Foscari University Venice; academic entrepreneurship; VEASYT; video remote interpreting; Italian Sign Language; deafness; language and communication disability; video-audio guides.

Summary: 1. Introduction: Ca' Foscari University Venice; 2. Research at Ca' Foscari; 3. Knowledge Transfer at Ca' Foscari; 4. Entrepreneurship at Ca' Foscari; 5. The spin-off VEASYT: a success story; 5.1. Milestones; 5.2. Services; 5.3. Research; 5.4. Recognitions; 6. Conclusions.

1. Introduction: Ca' Foscari University Venice¹

Ca' Foscari is a public university with a rich history of over 150 years. It was founded on August 6th, 1868 as the Scuola Superiore di Commercio (Royal School of Commerce). Today, it is recognized nationally and internationally for its research results and for the high quality of its international and interdisciplinary teaching. The main campus is located in Venice, with additional campuses in Mestre and Treviso. From Venice, Ca' Foscari is connected to the world offering courses in English, double degree programs, and hundreds of agreements with foreign countries for study and internships. The academic community is diverse and international. The city of Venice itself and its lagoon are a meeting point for various cultures and also serve as a research hub for the Humanities, Environmental Sciences, and Cultural Heritage.

Ca' Foscari University is part of EUTOPIA, one of the first university alliances funded by the European Universities Initiative program. Established in 2019, the network aims to improve the competitiveness of European universities internationally and help strengthen European identity.

Ca' Foscari University is organized into eight Departments, located across four campuses: 1) the Economic Campus includes the Department of Economics and the Venice School of Management (formerly Department of Management); 2) the Humanities Campus includes the Department of Humanities and the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage; 3) the Linguistic Campus includes the Department of Asian and North African Studies and the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies; 4) the Scientific Campus includes the Department of Environmental Sciences, Informatics and Statistics and the Department of Molecular Sciences and Nanosystems.

¹ Sara Alba is responsible for sections 1-4; Anna Cardinaletti is responsible for sections 5-6. Enrico Capiozzo, CEO of VEASYT, is kindly thanked for help collecting the data on VEASYT.

2. Research at Ca' Foscari

Research at Ca' Foscari combines humanistic, social, and scientific approaches to address the complex issues of our time. Over a thousand researchers contribute to advancing knowledge in fields that bridge tradition and innovation. The university develops cutting-edge projects that connect the humanities and social sciences with digital and hard sciences, generating an impact across disciplines and communities. Interdisciplinarity is one of the defining features of Ca' Foscari University, which has established six Institutes for Global Challenges, each driven by multidisciplinary research groups. One major area focuses on Economics and Management of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, addressing how new ideas and business models can drive sustainable economic growth. Closely related is the field of Public Governance, Welfare and Social Innovation, which explores policies and practices that foster social inclusion and well-being. Environmental sustainability represents another cornerstone of the university's research strategy, embodied in the area of Environmental Technologies and the Green Economy. This field connects natural sciences, economics, and technology to develop solutions for ecological transitions. Ca' Foscari also advances research in the Science of Complex Economic, Human and Natural Systems, promoting integrated approaches to understanding the interactions between society, economy, and the environment. Cultural and humanistic inquiry remains central through Cross-Cultural and Area Studies, which deepen the understanding of global diversity and intercultural dynamics, and Creative Arts, Cultural Heritage and Digital Humanities, where technology and creativity meet to preserve and reinterpret cultural expressions for the digital age. Together, these areas embody Ca' Foscari's commitment to interdisciplinary research that bridges science, culture, and society in pursuit of innovation and sustainable development.

3. Knowledge Transfer at Ca' Foscari

One of the toughest challenges for universities, not only in Italy, is to transform scientific results into solutions that can be applied in the market, i.e., to exploit the economic value of research, however excellent or innovative it may be. In its Interim evaluation of Horizon Europe², the European Commission points out that only one third of patented inventions registered by European universities or research institutes are commercially exploited. Research exploitation practices are part of technology transfer activities which at Ca' Foscari are approached in a more generalist way, reflecting the nature of the University, as “knowledge transfer”.

The knowledge transfer sector is part of the broader concept of the university's “Third Mission”, which aims to have a concrete impact on the local territory through public engagement activities, creation and consolidation of partnerships with public and private stakeholders, relations with businesses, value creation and promotion of innovation. As stated in Ca' Foscari University's 2021-2026 Strategic Plan, one of the defining objectives is to “create value for the local area by promoting an ecosystem that acts as an accelerator for projects and activities involving cultural institutions and economic, productive and professional organisations, with a view to technology transfer and the enhancement of knowledge”³. Knowledge transfer activities, which are by their nature cross-cutting and therefore spread across various Campuses and Departments, are centrally managed within the Research Area by the PInK Office (Promoting Innovation and Knowledge).

² European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Horizon Europe at MIDTERM – Delivering high returns for citizens and the economy, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/8784427>.

³ Università Ca' Foscari, Piano Strategico 2021-2026 Venezia: ponte per il futuro REVISIONE 2025, <https://www.unive.it/web/it/566/home>.

The PInK Office has a relatively recent history and was definitively structured in 2018, after Ca' Foscari participated in calls for proposals issued by the then Ministry of Economic Development (now Ministry of Enterprise and Made in Italy), aimed at strengthening and capacity building in the field of University technology transfer. The PInK team is composed of highly qualified individuals who deal with patent registration and commercialization of academic inventions, training and education on IP, entrepreneurship and knowledge transfer, supporting academics and students' entrepreneurial initiatives, negotiating and managing University-Industry collaborations and strategic research cooperation agreements. The office also seeks external funding by participating in national and international calls for proposals and funding programs. As is always the case with university Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs), the activities of PInK are characterized by its relationship with actors outside the University. The aim is to build bridges between research, institutions and industry to foster innovation and create value for the region. Academic research achieves excellent results that risk remaining confined within the university walls without benefiting society and the economy. The exploitation of these results is one of the focal points of knowledge transfer and takes many different forms, from collaborative research to the commercialization of industrial property rights, from supporting academic and student entrepreneurship to matchmaking activities between scientific competencies and the market. In addition to this external side, PInK's work also focuses on internal activities, including scouting, training and information for professors, researchers and students, as well as policy management and consulting on intellectual and industrial property and entrepreneurship issues.

4. Entrepreneurship at Ca' Foscari

Today, academic entrepreneurship is recognized as a key driver of innovation and economic growth, despite the fact that a certain mistrust of the business world persists in Italian academic circles. Ca' Foscari University recognizes and supports two types of entrepreneurial initiative: spin-offs and start-ups. Spin-offs are companies that are set up to develop innovative products or services based on research results and are promoted by professors, researchers, research fellows and PhD students. Start-ups, on the other hand, are launched or managed by students, recent graduates or graduates. PInK provides support in the form of training on business models, business plans, soft skills and current regulations. It also establishes partnerships with incubators and accelerators, assisting student and researcher teams throughout the accreditation process. Both spin-offs and start-ups must complete an accreditation process to access the services and benefits offered by the university, but the process is more complex for spin-offs. Spin-offs must go through several institutional steps and be approved by the university's governing bodies, who assess the soundness of the business plan and intellectual property-related assets. Benefits available to spin-offs include the use of the university logo, access to facilities and equipment, and promotional and networking opportunities.

In Italy, public employees are generally prohibited from engaging in commercial or entrepreneurial activities. However, professors and researchers at public universities are exempt, in order to encourage the exploitation of research results. While academic research often produces excellent results, many have a low Technology Readiness Level (TRL) and are not ready to become market-ready products or services. Further development work is usually required, typically carried out by the researchers who made the discovery or in close collaboration with them. The exception that allows professors and researchers, despite being public employees, to establish spin-off companies is intended to help bridge the gap between research and the market.

Until 2022, Ca' Foscari University's internal regulations did not set a time limit for the accreditation of spin-offs. The regulations were then amended for two main reasons: 1) the need to guarantee support, goods and services, which cannot be "infinite", to new spin-offs that will gradually be accredited; 2) State Aid legislation and distortion of competition. The European Commission's

guidelines “State Aid Rules in research, development and innovation”⁴ highlight that hosting start-ups, spin-offs or other businesses and institutions that carry out economic activities within the university’s premises constitutes indirect aid (unless the space is granted at market conditions). Indirect aid is subject to state aid rules, which must ensure transparent criteria for the granting and application of the “de minimis” regime (acquisition of the necessary declarations and updating of the National Register of State Aid). The accreditation of spin-off companies has therefore been limited to five years, coinciding with the so-called “start-up phase”. After this period, it is assumed that the company will be able to sustain itself and continue its activities independently. In some cases, the objective of the group proposing the spin-off since the very beginning is to make an exit within three to five years, i.e., to sell their company to another company and earn a profit on the shares they hold.

A typical example is as follows: a research group obtains a patentable result in the laboratory and submits it to the PInK Office for the necessary checks and prior art searches. The Commission for the Valorization of Knowledge approves the filing of a patent application to protect the invention and the research group, led by one or more professors, researchers, research fellows or PhD students, decides to establish a spin-off company that will develop a prototype and enter into a partnership with another company for industrial-scale production or for a total acquisition of both the patent and the shares of the spin-off. It is clear that this is a typical case for certain scientific fields, particularly Medical, Hard Sciences and Engineering. The 2024 Report compiled by the PNICube Observatory, a network of around 60 members including universities, academic incubators and other bodies promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, highlights that the number of innovative start-ups originating from academic research is significantly higher in the Medical and Life Sciences sector, followed in order by the Cleantech & Energy, ICT and Industrial. Academic entrepreneurship in the Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences still poses a challenge for universities. However, the advent of digital applications and, even more so today, Artificial Intelligence, has opened up much broader scenarios for its vast potential to connect seemingly distant scientific fields and bring to market innovative products and services in the fields of communication, social development and inclusion, promotion and preservation of cultural heritage. The spin-off company presented in the following pages has exactly these characteristics.

5. The spin-off VEASYT: a success story

VEASYT is a company based in Venice (<https://www.veasyt.com/>, last accessed on December 7th, 2025). It was founded in 2012 among the first spin-offs of Ca’ Foscari University Venice. Its name comes from the combination of the English words “visit” and “easy”, to signal their mission to make easy, i.e., accessible, any kind of interaction, as in visits to cultural sites or medical examinations.

Leveraging expertise from the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies in linguistic and sensory accessibility, the company offers digital services for full accessibility to content and information, aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Its main focus is on accessibility for deaf people.

VEASYT stands out for enhancing research results in Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences, an uncommon area for tech transfer, which is usually driven by hard sciences and engineering. Since the beginning, VEASYT has combined digital tools with linguistic expertise to support private companies and public administrations to improve the quality of life of deaf people in Italy. It is the first company that has introduced a video remote interpreting service in Italian Sign Language (LIS).

⁴ State aid rules in research, development & innovation – Addressing knowledge and awareness gaps among research and knowledge dissemination organisations – Decision tree, Publications Office, 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/675525>.

Its B2B and B2G business model provides services for both deaf employees of corporate companies and public entities, and deaf citizens and customers.

Since its foundation, VEASYT has developed digital and innovative solutions to overcome and remove communication barriers. As a University spin-off, VEASYT has drawn from the proximity to the academic world not only the scientific and linguistic expertise, but also the possibility to be updated in academic research on the special needs of different people.

The Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies (DSLCC) of Ca' Foscari University was the first in Italy to offer teaching and research on LIS and linguistic accessibility, deafness and language disorders since 2001 (cf. Cardinaletti 2018; Branchini, Cardinaletti, Mantovan 2024). Since its foundation, VEASYT has constantly collaborated with the Department faculty, ranking them among its ranks, hosting them and their students in its spaces, and participating in research projects and training initiatives on accessibility to language and communication. Lisa Danese, co-founder of VEASYT, is a linguist specialized in LIS who has helped to introduce and develop in Italy the research on translation from Italian to LIS and language simplification for the deaf (Danese 2009, 2011; Danese et al. 2011a, 2011b). Thanks to the close relationship with the DSLCC, VEASYT has gained a 360-degree view on the accessibility issues for all citizens with language and communication disabilities such as deafness, blindness, aphasia etc., specializing on the needs of people with hearing impairments.

VEASYT remained an accredited university spin-off company for 10 years. Following regulatory changes limiting accreditation to 5 years (see Section 4), it is now a “spin out” company continuing successfully on the market. In 2025, it has 18 employees and 15 freelance collaborators. It is the only company in Italy that has hired LIS interpreters on a long-term basis. This is particularly relevant after the formal recognition of LIS and professional LIS interpreters with Italian Law 69/2021 issued on May 21st, 2021.

5.1 Milestones

Founded in 2012, in 2014 VEASYT received an investment of 170.000 € from a business angel. It is the only Ca' Foscari spin-off that has received a private investment.

EXPO Milano 2015 was the first important customer of the VEASYT Live! video remote interpreting service in LIS. It was offered to the visitors at the reception desk. In 2018, VEASYT Live! was tested on hospitals and public bodies in the Veneto Region, and in 2020, it was offered in all the hospitals in the Lombardy Region (www.LombardiaLIS.it).

Between 2021 and 2024, VEASYT Live! was chosen by TIM, Fibercop, Generali Assicurazioni, Unipol Assicurazioni, Trenitalia, and many other companies.

In 2024, VEASYT received the ISO 9001 + 27001 + 27017 + 27018 certifications. While in the meanwhile, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, other small companies and/or associations are offering video remote interpreting in LIS, VEASYT is the only company offering video remote interpreting in Italy that has ISO certifications, guaranteeing the quality of its organization and information security standards.

5.2 Services

The first accessibility service developed by VEASYT was VEASYT Tour (<http://tour.veasyt.com/>, (last accessed on December 7th, 2025), namely accessible video-audio guides for tourism and cultural activities. These guides, which may be used on smartphones, tablets and computers, present the contents in various languages and modalities to satisfy the needs of different visitors: Plain Italian, in both the written and oral modality for people with linguistic and sensory (visual) disability, LIS for

deaf signers, and foreign vocal languages for foreign tourists, accompanied by many images (cf. Danese, Capiozzo 2012 for a detailed presentation of the video-audio guides).⁵ Video-audio guides are very frequent nowadays. But when the first prototypes were prepared in 2009 and the first accessible video-audio guides were released in 2012, nothing similar – to our knowledge – existed in Italy (see Danese 2009, 2011; Danese et al. 2011a, 2011b for the research needed to design accessible video-audio guides).

Many potential users often lack the language skills needed to understand and act on information, with unpleasant consequences on their access to services and consequently on their empowerment. Since the beginning, VEASYT has had the goal to make information accessible to the widest audience of users, especially the ones with language, cognitive and communication disabilities and deafness, also offering services in LIS. What nowadays appears to be standard in the cultural sector (cf. e.g. Bianchi 2021 and the other articles appeared in the special issue of *Lingue e Linguaggi* 43, 2021 - <http://sibase.unisalento.it/index.php/lingueilinguaggi/issue/view/1805>, last accessed on December 7th, 2025; also see Orletti 2022) was designed by VEASYT 15 years ago.

In 2013, VEASYT started developing its video remote interpreting service in LIS, i.e., VEASYT Live! (<https://live.veasyt.com/>, last accessed on December 7th, 2025), which is accessible from PCs, tablets, iPads, smart phones and can be activated by call or by reservation. This guarantees full accessibility to deaf signers in all the contexts in which it would be difficult, too expensive, or not appropriate to have LIS interpreters in presence. The video remote interpreting was also soon activated with foreign vocal languages such as Chinese, Arabic and Bengali in the health sector to guarantee inclusion for immigrants.

With the VEASYT Translate service, VEASYT has also been involved in translating written texts and video communications from Italian into LIS in historical-artistic contexts and for the public administrations.

To date, VEASYT offers digital solutions for accessibility to content with three macro-services:

- Video remote interpreting services for B2B and conference settings in LIS;
- Remote interpreting services for conference settings in vocal languages;
- Linguistic simplification and translation services in LIS in various contexts (e.g. museums, public administrations, private companies, tourists' facilities, etc.).

VEASYT has supported and is supporting public administrations and companies in the following sectors:⁶

- social health companies (e.g., in the Veneto Region: AULSS1 Dolomiti, AULSS2 Marca Trevigiana, AULSS3 Serenissima, AULSS4 Veneto Orientale, AULSS5 Polesana, AULSS6 Euganea; in Bolzano: ASDAA – SABES Azienda Socio Sanitaria Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano; in the Lombardy Region: ATS Milano, Regione Lombardia – Sistema Socio-Sanitario Regionale); in the Campania Region: Azienda Ospedaliera San Pio, Benevento;
- municipalities and public administration bodies (e.g., Roma Capitale – Segni di Integrazione Lazio; Comune di Milano; Comune di Padova, Comune di Treviso);
- universities and research centres (e.g., Università Ca' Foscari Venezia; Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza"; Università degli Studi di Perugia; Scuola Internazionale Superiore di Studi Avanzati (SISSA), Trieste; Politecnico di Bari; Università del Salento);
- companies in the insurance sector (e.g., Generali SPA; UnipolSAI SPA);

⁵ Some of these guides can also be found on the website www.accessibitaly.it (last accessed on December 7th, 2025), which maps Italian museums and art venues that offer accessibility services for the deaf.

⁶ Information on the public administrations and companies where the video remote interpreting service is active can be found at the following link: <https://www.veasyt.com/it/press.html>. Information on accessibility events and services can be found at the link <https://www.veasyt.com/it/blog.html> (last consultation of both websites: December 7th, 2025).

- multi-utility companies (ENEL SPA; ENEL X Italia; ENI SPA; Veritas SPA; Ferrovie dello Stato SPA);
- telephone and telecommunications service companies (TIM - Telecom Italia SPA; Fibercop SPA);
- retail companies (e.g., Decathlon Italia);
- cultural operators and museums (e.g., in the Veneto Region: Istituto Regionale Ville Venete IRVV, several Veneto Villas; in Venice: Gallerie dell'Accademia, Museo d'Arte Orientale, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia; La Fenice Theatre);
- B2B service companies;
- tourist accommodation operators.

VEASYT believes in the importance of including all citizens through accessible language and works every day to make it the standard. To this aim, VEASYT is also engaged in the training of stakeholders in order to raise awareness and promote the exchange of best practices with the ultimate goal of making their communication more accessible and inclusive.

More and more administrations and companies are in the process of offering accessibility services. VEASYT has developed the technological, linguistic and organizational skills to offer high quality services on a par with similar companies in European and extra-European countries. It is ready to support the public administration to comply with recent legislation such as the Decreto legislativo number 222 issued on December 13th, 2023, which requires to ensure accessibility to public administrations for people with disability and uniformity of protection for workers with disabilities in public administrations throughout the country with a view to their full inclusion.⁷

5.3 Research

Thanks to its innovative nature and its academic origins, VEASYT has maintained a strong bond with the Ca' Foscari University Venice over the years. The Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies (DSLCC) and VEASYT have collaborated in research and training activities and national and European projects. The synergy between the academic-scientific reality and the corporate reality has allowed mutual growth on the one hand and the scientific validation of VEASYT activities on the other.

The DSLCC has involved VEASYT as a partner in the national project *ADAPT: Accessible Data for Accessible Proto-Types in the Social Sector* (2013-2018; https://www.dedalus.com/italy/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2021/06/SMART-CITIES_MIUR-min.pdf, last accessed on December 7th, 2025), funded by the Ministry of Education and Research in the “Smart Cities and Communities and Social Innovation” funding line, and in many regional research grants funded by the ESF of the Veneto Region.

Since 2012, the DSLCC has been the Italian partner of the international Erasmus+ Project “Spread the Sign” and the subsequent projects “Spread Share”, “Spreadthesign 360°”, “Sign Language for Beginners”, “Social haptic signs for deaf and blind in education”. “Spread the Sign” is a video dictionary of the sign languages of the world (Cardinaletti 2016; 2025). It currently contains more than 632,000 signs from 44 sign languages used in European and non-European countries (<https://www.spreadthesign.com/en.au/about/statistics/>, last accessed on December 7th, 2025). The European Sign Language Centre based in Örebro (Sweden) is the project leader. Ca' Foscari University Venice was chosen for the preparation of the video dictionary of the Italian Sign Language (LIS) (<https://spreadthesign.com/it.it/search/>, last accessed on December 7th, 2025). Two

⁷ “[...] garantire l’accessibilità alle pubbliche amministrazioni da parte delle persone con disabilità e l’uniformità della tutela dei lavoratori con disabilità presso le pubbliche amministrazioni sul territorio nazionale al fine della loro piena inclusione [...]” (Decreto legislativo 222, Article 1).

collaborators of VEASYT have been collaborating for more than 10 years in both the implementation of the project activities and the administrative part.

VEASYT also participated in the Erasmus+ project “SHIFT in Orality - SHaping the Interpreters of the Future and of Today” (2015-2018) (<https://site.unibo.it/shiftinorality/en>, last accessed on December 7th, 2025). The University of Bologna Alma Mater Studiorum was the lead partner. In addition to VEASYT, a Spanish company specialized in telephone interpreting was participating, together with other European universities specialized in the study of interpreting. This project aimed to create scientific material for academic training on remote, video and telephone interpreting for students enrolled in university courses dedicated to interpreting and translation.

VEASYT is now a partner of the “SITE - Shaping Inclusive Tourist Experience” project, funded by the Interreg Italy-Croatia 2021-2027 programme to promote accessibility in the touristic sector. The University of Trieste is the lead partner. The project partners are universities, administrations, and companies in Italy and Croatia.

5.4 Recognitions

The company has received many awards and prizes for innovation in the cultural, digital, and health sectors, including:

- European ICT Challenge – Startup Initiative Intesa Sanpaolo, October 2014: selected for ICT section and bootcamp;
- Friuli Venezia Giulia Startup Competition, December 2014: winner in the ICT category;
- Consorzio Arsenà.IT and Forum PA, May 2015: finalist at Forum PA in Rome, “Sanità digitale (Digital Healthcare)”;
- UniCredit Start Lab, August 2015: winner in the “Digital” category, among 420 candidate companies;
- Assocamerestero – ICE – MISE, May 2016: selected for the “Progetto InnovAzione (Innovation project)”;
- Don Giulio Tarra Prize, Pio Istituto dei Sordi and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano (for projects and research to support deafness), September 2016: “Tools” category;
- European Youth Award, Graz, November 2016: winner of the European award in the category “Connecting cultures”;
- Italian Innovation Day 2017 Tokyo, May 2017: selected by the Italian Embassy in Japan and NTT Data;
- “More Than Pink” Award, 2018.

6 Conclusions

This paper has presented the internal organization of research at Ca’ Foscari University Venice and the way entrepreneurship is promoted and supported. One of its spin-offs, VEASYT, has been presented as a case study given the fact that it has been the only spin-off in the linguistic and humanities areas. VEASYT has integrated digital and linguistic knowledge to offer innovative services to overcome linguistic barriers for people with linguistic and communication disability. What nowadays appears to be common and widespread (such as accessible video-audio guides and video remote interpreting in LIS) was designed by VEASYT about 15 years ago, when the discussion on accessibility to language and communication was still underdeveloped in Italy.

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