
ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION WITHOUT BORDERS: A ROAD TO YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN THE CROSS-BORDER REGION BULGARIA – ROMANIA

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Abstract: This article presents a rationale for the development and implementation of the blended Bulgarian-Romanian Educational Scheme "Entrepreneurship without Borders". The approbation and evaluation processes were part of the of the project "Entrepreneurship for Youth Labour Mobility" ROBG169, financed under INTERREG V-A Romania- Bulgaria. The project addresses the following three bottlenecks in the provision of formal and non-formal Entrepreneurship education:

- insufficient links between vocational education and the business sector;
- limited representation of the economic potential of the cross-border region in the formal entrepreneurship education;
- the language barrier between Romanian and Bulgarian young people and teachers.

The project concept approaches these issues as opportunities and by applying cross-border cooperation in the educational field, researches their potential. It also takes into consideration the European Commission report on the Impact of Entrepreneurship Training. The relevant findings define the framework of a Joint Bulgarian-Romanian Educational Scheme for the provision of Entrepreneurship education in the formal curriculum. Then the project enables the teachers from two High Schools in Economics from Silistra, Bulgaria and Calarasi, Romania to jointly develop and implement 3 programs that make up the Joint Educational Scheme, namely: ‘Enterprise without Frontiers’, ‘Green Enterprise’, ‘Language training with group exchanges and study-visits to cross-border companies’ and ‘Practical experience’. In order to expand the impact of the training activities and to involve more people in the region, the project develops a learning platform for the provision of e-learning on entrepreneurship, part of the project website www.e4ylm.eu.

Firstly, the paper discusses the methods applied by the expert team when analysing the national policies and legislation on the provision of entrepreneurship education in school education in Bulgaria and Romania and in particular in the two economic vocational schools, participating in the project. The analytical findings from this comparative approach define the challenges and opportunities for joint cross-border educational activities between Bulgarian and Romanian educational institutions. Then, the expert team did a desk research to justify and design the content of the educational program, which was developed and approbated in the two participating vocational schools. The author also presents the Methodology used to evaluate the impact of the joint educational activities on the students’ skills to communicate across the borders and on their entrepreneurship knowledge. Based on the results of the survey, the article draws conclusions and recommends the application of specific educational activities in entrepreneurship in the cross-border region, so as to increase the employability of young people.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education, youth, impact, cross-border employability

1. INTRODUCTION

The Eurydice report on *Entrepreneurship Education at School in Europe* (2012) explicitly defines the entrepreneurship education as one of the key policy objectives of the EU institutions and Member States by describing its impact on transversal skills and entrepreneurial mind set of young people. Then in December 2014, the EU Council adopted conclusions on entrepreneurship in education and training, stressing that 'developing an entrepreneurial mind set can have considerable benefits for citizens in both their professional and private lives'. These papers also invite the Member States to 'encourage the development of a coordinated approach to entrepreneurship education throughout the education and training system' (Eurydice, 2016).

However, in 2017 empirical evidences indicate that although both the Bulgarian and Romanian educational systems provide formal and non-formal Entrepreneurship education, there is no coordinated approach between them. This situation results in a limited number of joint educational initiatives, which find grounds in the cross-border economic potential and encourage doing business in the region. The profitability of doing business across the borders is exemplified by Wach (2016), who scientifically proves that the businesses in Polish border regions do more profitable entrepreneurship endeavours than the companies in inner regions. Similar is the case with Polish and Czech enterprises, described by Kurowska-Pysz (2016), who suggests a cluster model to encourage entrepreneurship training for both companies and their youth employees so that the cross-border region thrives.

Based on the above recommendations, five organizations committed themselves to providing ‘entrepreneurship education without borders’ as a driving force to improve the Romanian-Bulgarian youth employability in the cross-border area. These are: the ‘Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture – Calarasi’ as the Leader and the Partners: ‘Secondary Vocational School of Economics, Administration and Services’ in Silistra, the Economic College, Calarasi and the non-governmental organisations ‘Partners 2000’, Calarasi and ‘Paralel-Silistra’, Silistra. They set up a team of researchers to survey the bottlenecks of the educational programs in the cross-border area.

To propose a joint solution, the expert team analysed the legal framework on entrepreneurship education and training in school education in Bulgaria and Romania as a whole and in particular the curricula in two economic vocational schools in Silistra, Bulgaria and Calarasi, Romania. Then it also studied the the conclusions of the EC report on the Impact of Entrepreneurship Training in both countries (European Commission, 2016) as well as well-founded scientific researches. Based on this solid ground, the experts proposed the development and implementation of a Joint Educational Scheme (JES) on ‘Entrepreneurship Education without Borders’ as part of the project ‘Entrepreneurship for Youth Labour Mobility’, financed under INTERREG V-A Romania- Bulgaria.

2. METHODS

Firstly, empirical data was collected during field studies in 2016. It was analysed to find out the differences in legislation, regulating the provision of state entrepreneurship education in Romania and Bulgaria. During the second phase, the expert team did a desk research and reviewed literature on the topic to justify and design the topics of the educational program Joint Educational Scheme (JES) on Entrepreneurship Education without Borders’, as the core of a cross-border cooperation project, to be submitted under the INTERREG Romania-Bulgaria 2014-2020. In the last stage, after the project activities had been accomplished, the JES impact was assessed by evaluating the participants’ transversal skills and intercultural mind set. This was the task of a specialized Monitoring group.

3. RESULTS

Differences in legislation

The comparative analysis of the Romanian and Bulgarian strategic and programming documents clearly shows some systemic differences in the introduction of entrepreneurship education. This distinction is particularly obvious in the primary level of secondary education.

In Romania, as Eurydice report states Eurydice (2012), entrepreneurial training is recognized as a cross-curricular objective at ISCED level 2 and established as an interdisciplinary link. Entrepreneurship is also part of the compulsory subject ‘Technological Education’ (curricular area Technology) organized in modules (two distinct modules per year of study), one of which is Family Economy, studied in ISCED 2 (2nd year) and as a compulsory separate subject, named ‘Entrepreneurship Education’ (curricular area Technology) (1 hour per week), studied in ISCED 2 (last year). The curriculum contains the general and specific competencies to be learned, the values and attitudes to be acquired, as well as some methodological suggestions that include the use of the educational approach ‘Training Company’ in virtual environment, Eurydice (2016).

In Bulgaria after 2016, ‘Entrepreneurship’ has been gradually introduced as a separate discipline (Preschool and School Education Act, 2016) and is explicitly integrated in the curriculum (Eurydice, 2016). This Act sets new state standards for entrepreneurship training in line with the current trends in the national and global economy. It defines school education as general, extended, profiled, professional and complementary. For each type, the Act provides a relevant curriculum for teaching entrepreneurship, being more specialized in profiled classes.

Based on this comparative analysis, the expert team defined the target group of students to be involved in the project. They included young people from the second stage of vocational schools in both countries, who study the profile ‘Entrepreneurship and Information Technologies’ or ‘Entrepreneurship and Geography’ and ‘Economics’ as obligatory educational subjects. For this target group, the discipline ‘Training Company’ is part of their curricula although in Bulgaria it is taught as part of the students’ practical experience while in Romania it is a virtual project.

Another conclusion from this comparative analysis convinces that, in the two neighbouring countries, strategic and programming documents do not address the issue of entrepreneurship education ‘without borders’, which makes use of the opportunities provided by cross-border cooperation. As the ‘EU Strategy for the Danube Region’ (2012) explains enhanced human and business contacts across the Danube have a strong potential for developing entrepreneurial skills in an intercultural environment. In this context, and with a view to further economic integration between Bulgaria and Romania, it is imperative to have joint educational programs to promote entrepreneurship. It is in this respect that the Joint Educational Scheme (JES) ‘Entrepreneurship without Borders’ can serve as a model for promoting youth employment and social inclusion in the cross-border region.

Devising the Joint Educational Scheme

In order to plan the educational interventions and teaching methods, the expert team discussed the empirical data

collected by Lackeus (see Lackeus, 2015) on learning-by-doing activities that can trigger the development of entrepreneurial competencies. This author suggests that ‘teachers should give their students assignments to create value (preferably innovative) to external stakeholders based on problems and/or opportunities the students identify through an iterative process they own themselves and take full responsibility’. The impact of such assignments leads to repeated interactions with the business world.

Furthermore, they analysed the recommendations of Moberg (Moberg, 2014) on what to focus the education of students in tertiary level. The author highlights the importance of new venture creations since this approach leads to developing skills such as self-monitoring and self-motivation as well as creativity, pro-activeness, and sense of initiative. These are typically non-cognitive entrepreneurial skills, have become increasingly sought for in the labour market. Also, the research by Catalin & Romita (2014) undisputedly shows the changes from the soft skills level and the changes in the attitudes and behaviours of the students, who were exposed to an entrepreneurship course over a period of time.

Therefore, the expert team also did a research on projects aiming to support students’ joint venture companies, which led to establishing cooperation with the offices of Junior Achievement in both countries. The reason was their running program ‘Enterprise without Borders’, which is an extension to JA Company Program <http://www.jaewb.org/about/>. This new one teaches the value and importance of international trade and the practical skills necessary to do business across borders. Each such Enterprise forms a business entity and negotiates a partnership agreement with one or more other sites in other countries, student companies registered under individual sites create joint-ventures with other students’ companies abroad. A website is available to help ‘matching’ between student companies interested in a joint venture or an import-export business. Students from different countries could register and post their offer to participate in the programme and supply information for a “marketplace” where products are on display and research on trading can occur. Since the programme ‘Enterprise without Borders’ encourages twinning between schools and teachers, the expert team decided to cooperate with the JA offices and rely on their involvement and support.

When devising the content of the program, the expert team built upon the conclusions and recommendations of the book ‘Entrepreneurship Education and Training Programs around the World’ (Valerio, Parton & Robb, 2014). The authors (Valerio et al, 2014), supported by the World Bank, analysed 60 programs and highlighted main topics which could be incorporated when devising the program landscape. However, they found out that all of them are delivered locally. In this case the role of the teacher is of high importance but the authors advocate the cooperation with the local business community as essential to introduce a real-world dynamic/perspective.

Based on the findings, the expert team developed and put into practice 3 programs that make up the Joint Educational Scheme (JES), namely: ‘Enterprise without Borders’, ‘Green Enterprise’, ‘Language training with group exchanges and study-visits to cross-border companies’ and ‘Practical experience’. The students from the two economic vocational schools in Silistra, Bulgaria and Calarasi, Romania participated in these educational activities. In order to expand the impact of the training activities and to involve more people in the region, the project team launched a learning platform for the provision of e-learning on entrepreneurship, as part of the project website www.e4ylm.eu.

The project activities under the Joint Educational Scheme on ‘Entrepreneurship Education without Borders’ were implemented in 2017-2018. They led to the establishment of a network for cooperation between entrepreneurship educators and joint trainings and webinars for them. Due to the practitioners’ efforts 10 cross-border training companies were established for 150 students with the help of 10 business mentors. Forty participants took part in the Language training module with group exchanges and study-visits to cross-border companies. A number of public events were performed in cooperation with the business community in the region for 600 participants. It is important to mention the creation of the www.e4ylm.eu and the related learning platform with 1000 customers.

The impact of the JES was assessed by a Monitoring group, consisting of 5 representatives of the partner organizations and 10 representatives of the education authorities, the business community and the employment institutions in the cross-border region Silistra - Calarasi County Council. The scope of the evaluation includes all 150 Bulgarian and Romanian students who have participated in cross-border training and project activities. The objectives of the evaluation are:

- Exploring the impact on participants' self-assessment and competences under the EU reference framework for the 8 key competences for lifelong learning;
- Participants’ approval of the activities under the JES;
- Recommendation on what can be done next;

The methodology for collecting data includes the use of pre-structured questionnaires for collecting information on the qualitative indicators. There are a total of 7 questions, one of which gathers information on the demographic characteristics of the participants. Of the remaining six, four offer Likert scale for assertion assessment and two -

digit. BG and RO languages are used so that each national group provides its assessment in its mother language.

Assessing the Impact

The scope of the evaluation includes all 150 Bulgarian and Romanian students who participated in most of the cross-border trainings and non-formal events on encouraging entrepreneurship. Questionnaires were filled in and returned by 88 students, 48 Bulgarians and 40 Romanians, aged between 17 - 19, with more than 50% of them being girls.

The first set of 5 statements with a Lacker scale explores the self-assessment of respondents about the impact of the JES on their self-confidence, ability to make informed decisions, self-perception in the multicultural environment as well as their knowledge on the company organization and the economic potential of the cross-border region. The results are presented in Figure 1 below.

More than 90% of the Bulgarian participants and 75% of the Romanians "totally agree" and/ or "partially agree" with the positive influence of the joint entrepreneurship activities. On the other hand, it is evident that the JES impact is not equal for the two cultural groups as more of the Romanian students indicate 'partial agreement' with the statements, while the Bulgarians are less hesitant.

This hesitation could also be traced in their answers to the statements concerning students' economic knowledge for the organization and operation of companies in the cross-border region. Again, more than 80% of Bulgarians are fully or partially convinced that they have improved their financial knowledge and their vision for business development between Silistra and Calarasi, while the Romanians are not that sure.

Figure 1 Assessment of self-confidence, decision making, self-perception, economic knowledge

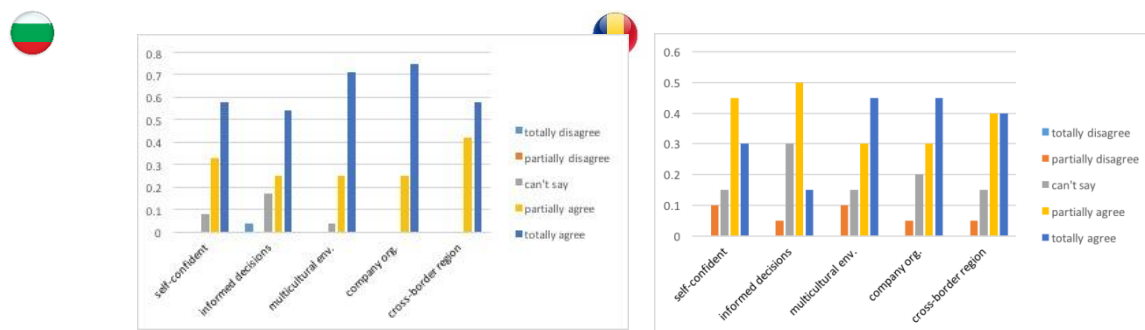
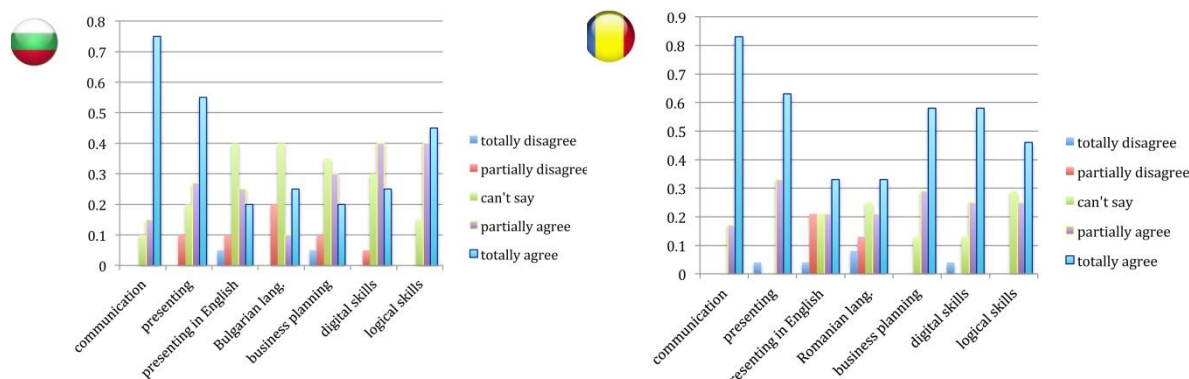


Figure 2 JES impact on participants' competences, as stated in the EU reference framework



The second set of seven questions gathers information (Figure 2) on the extent to which the JES helps develop these skills, indicated in the European Reference Framework:

- Communication skills
- Presentation skills in the mother language
- Presentation skills in English
- Language skills in Bulgarian / Romanian
- Business Process Planning Skills
- Digital skills and logical skills

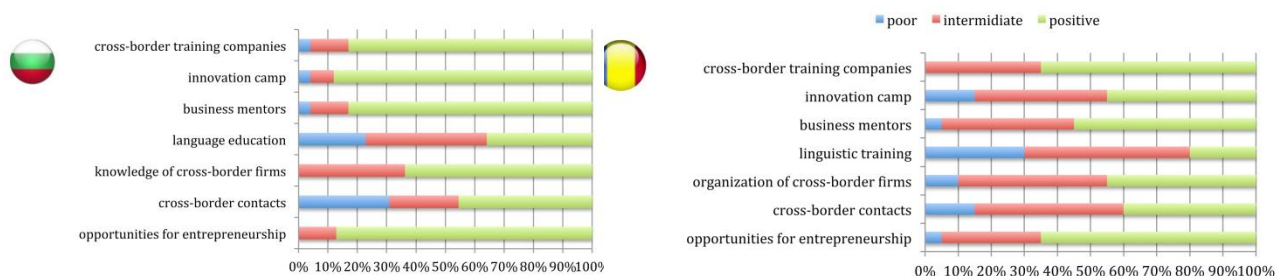
The impact of the entrepreneurship activities on improving the above described skills is highly valued. More than 70% of the Bulgarians and over 80% of the Romanians agree they have improved their communication abilities. The JES has positively impacted the presentation skills of more than half of them. However, there is a noticeable

difference how the respondents answer about the improvement of their skills in business planning, digital work and logic. The last three bars in Figure 2, the Romanian group evaluates the beneficial influence higher than the Bulgarian, who are more hesitant and a greater percentage answer with ‘partially agree’ and ‘can’t say’.

The last set of questions asks the students to evaluate their content as ‘poor, intermediate and positive’ with the JES implemented activities as follows:

- Establishment and operation of cross-border training companies
- Participating in innovation camps
- Working with business mentors in innovation camps
- Language training on the neighbour’s language
- Knowledge of the organization and functioning of cross-border firms
- Cross-border acquaintances and communication
- Practical exploration of opportunities for entrepreneurship

Figure 3 Evaluation of the JES activities



The results are presented in Fig. 3, the green bars indicating students’ approval of the activities, the red ones – intermediate score, while the blue – disapproval. It is obvious that for all educational activities the positive evaluations prevail, especially among the Bulgarians who evaluate highly the opportunities for setting up and functioning of cross-border training companies, the practical study of the opportunities for entrepreneurship followed by their participation in the two innovation camps. The answers of the Romanian participants are more diversified, with 65% of them evaluating as positive ‘the cross-border training companies’ and the joint activities with business mentors. Their scores of their participation in the innovation camps are also volatile as 15% evaluate this activity as poor although the majority approves it. However, the Romanian students liked the least the Bulgarian language courses and almost 30% of them evaluate these trainings as poor.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The experience of the project "Entrepreneurship for Youth Labour Activity" has shown the positive impact of cross-border cooperation and exchanges in the field of education and educational programs, which promote entrepreneurship. Developed and implemented in 2017/2018, the Joint Bulgarian-Romanian Educational Scheme "Entrepreneurship without Borders" had a very beneficial influence on the students’ personal growth and economic awareness about the potential of the cross border region. It is an excellent form for acquiring professional skills in organizing and managing training companies

The scheme combines the institutional stability and the content of formal education with the practical focus and creativity of non-formal education not only for students but also for their teachers. The assessment given by its participants highlights its relevance to:

- Expanding technological and entrepreneurial competences by incorporating knowledge about the economic profile of the cross-border region and interacting with companies from Bulgaria and Romania;
- Creation, registration and functioning of independent cross-border training companies;
- Overcoming the inadequate communication with the local business community and working with mentoring companies to support cross-border student companies;
- Building digital competences to work on-line with partners across the border;
- Building knowledge on the organization and functioning of existing businesses in the cross-border area through on-site study visits, talks with company managers and joint activities with them;
- Building skills for teamwork, development of activity and entrepreneurial behaviour;
- Expand cultural knowledge on the cross-border region and develop linguistic skills;

The content of the JES is aimed at expanding and developing mainly:

- Digital competences and communications;
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship: ability to plan and manage cross-border training companies;
- Cultural knowledge about the cross-border region and skills for communicating in a foreign language;

5. CONCLUSIONS

The application of the Joint Educational Scheme on ‘Entrepreneurship Education without Borders’ and its impact should be viewed as the first building block in a larger research project about the potential of joint cross-border curricula to influence the 8 key competences for lifelong learning of secondary school students. The implementation of this INTERREG project has been an iterative learning process and naturally there are many more interesting factors and dimensions that could be included in the assessment studies. In addition, the discussed results of the assessment of the JES impact convince in the necessity to re-apply the JES approach but increase our in-depth knowledge about a limited number of observed dimensions in entrepreneurship education. The ambition is that, in time, they will offer us valuable insights about the short term and the long term effects of different approaches to entrepreneurship education without borders.

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