# **The entrepreneurial education for people with disabilities in CEE region**

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# **The entrepreneurial education for people with disabilities in Central Europe**

## **Abstract**

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has undergone significant transition from planned to liberal economy, in which entrepreneurship played a central role. Entrepreneurial education play a significant role providing talented individuals for business community, who cares about the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. As entrepreneurial education in this region is shifting from self-education through trial-and-error as a response to transitioning economy to designed offerings, it is essential to consider to what extent and in what ways these offerings are inclusive for people with disability (PWD) – a historically disadvantaged group that is further constantly growing due to the ongoing Ukraine war in the CEE region. This paper explores the entrepreneurial education for PWD in Central Europe and provides suggestions for higher education institutions on how to develop more inclusive entrepreneurial education for PWD.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial education, disability

**Introduction**

Entrepreneurship is driving economic and social progress (Smalbone & Welter, 2008; Fayolle et al., 2016) and could be used as a major policy tool for the transformation of both efficiency-based and innovation-driven economies (Van Vuuren & Alemayehu, 2018). Through entrepreneurial action and engagement with the diverse co-founders‘ teams (Timmons & Spinelli, 2007), entrepreneurs are able to identify business opportunities and expand boundaries in business, fulfil self-employment dreams, develop creative ways of utilising resources and technological progress, spur innovations and address global challenges (Thortton, Ribeiro-Soriano & Urbano, 2011; Elmassah et al., 2022). Entrepreneurs tolerate uncertainties, challenge the existing business models and create value for their clients, investors and themselves (GEM, 2023). The governments recognize the importance of entrepreneurship to the national economy and support the emergence of the Entrepreneurial ecosystem (Neumann, 2021). For example, recent years demonstrated a rapid development of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Lithuania (Serpenskas & Giedraitis, 2019), which remained resilient even during unfavourable geopolitical conditions (Invest Lithuania, 2024). According to the GEM report in 2022/2023 ( GEM Lithuania National report, 2022), Lithuania was ranked 1st among Group B countries, those where an average annual GDP per capita is between 20,000 and 40,000 USD, in terms of the totality of evaluations of various entrepreneurship indicators. Among these indicators, Lithuania leads in entrepreneurship education at schools (4.7 out of 10 points), commercial and professional infrastructure (6.8 / 10 points), and social and cultural norms (6.2 / 10 points).

While the entrepreneurship is at its core for the economic dimension, scholars aslo emphasize (Dakung et al., 2022) that entrepreneurship fosters the social dimension of inclusion and empower individuals by promoting non-discriminatory employment opportunities because entrepreneurs themselves make decisions when choosing the co-founders and partnerships, deciding on timing and the conditions under which they begin entrepreneurial action and further engage in the economic activity.

The social inclusion of people with disabilities in entrepreneurial activities matters because the population of people with disabilities are steadily growing due to the ageing society, epidemics and geopolitical outcomes (Kitching, 2014). Disabilities, as defined by The World Health Organisation (WHO) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, is an umbrella term which refer to impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions (WHO, n.d.). It may vary according to many characteristics- type, duration, severity, ect., and therefore requires an individual approach because people with disability are not equally disadvantaged in the labour market (Kitching, 2014). While research indicates that people with disabilities more often engage in self-employment rather than entrepreneurial action due to various personal and contextual reasons (Maritz & Laferriere, 2016, Ortiz García & Olaz Capitán, 2021), these numbers differ in the EU countries (Kitching , 2014). Globally, the people with disabilities in the adult population aged 18 and older are already reaching approximately 16% of the total population. In the context of the European Union (EU), these numbers are even higher- 27% of the EU population over the age of 16 reporting a form of disability, as EU statistics report (Consilium, 2023). Among the Baltic states, Latvia has the highest rates of people with disabilities -38.5%, Estonia- 30.5% and Lithuania- 27.9%. However, concerning employment, only 50.6% of people with disabilities are employed, compared to 74.8% of non-disabled individuals (Consilium, 2023). In addition, the unemployment rate for disabled people aged 20-64 is at 17.1%, which is significantly higher than the rate of 10.2% for non-disabled individuals. It is important to note that women and young persons with disabilities are more likely to face discrimination in the job market (Rizova et al., 2023 Lecerf, OECD ). These numbers are much higher than the EU average; therefore requires serious consideration about their economic and social inclusion.

Up till now, despite various governmental attempts to address discrimination against people with disabilities in all areas of social and economic life, the practice of increasing the inclusion of people with disabilities in entrepreneurial action is yet scarce. For example, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Index doesn‘t exclusively focus on measuring entrepreneurship for people with disabilities despite acknowledging the other dimensions of diversity, such as gender, age, and ethnicity (GEM, 2022). However, various international organisations, such as the United Nations (e.g. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), World Health Organisation, OECD and EU (e.g. Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union) advocate for inclusivity. Thus it is important not only to ensure the human rights of people with disabilities but also to harness their potential to contribute to innovation and value creation within entrepreneurial firms.

Moreover, the EU regulatory environment for sustainability reporting is also undergoing changes to promote inclusivity for people with disabilities. The Corporate Sustainability reporting directive (CSRD) (Kreusch, L. 2022; European Comission, n.d.) is being updated to address human rights, social matters and treatment of employees, diversity on company boards, and thus foster diversity and inclusion of people with disabilities in more active economic participation. According to the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), which is applicable for business entities operating in EU countries, since 2024 listed and big companies and since 2026 listed SME‘s will need to comply with sustainability requirements and report their social and environmental information and thus empower investors and stakeholders to assess both the sustainability performance and financial risks of companies. The forthcoming changes to this directive will be even more robust. This impacts startup ventures and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as well, especially those involved in the supply chains of big companies and multinational enterprises (MNEs) due to the indirect effects of the CSRD. As MNEs enhance their sustainability reporting, they will likely demand similar transparency and compliance from their suppliers. Thus by adopting sustainable practices, entrepreneurial ventures and SMEs will be able to attract more investors, gain a competitive edge, and contribute to a more sustainable global economy.

The existing challenges and ongoing regulatory changes will highly affect the whole entrepreneurial ecosystem, especially its dimensions of talent (Stam, 2015; Stam and Van der Ven , 2021), to which falls the entrepreneurial education, because universities play a central role in sourcing the potential entrepreneurs., but yet there is a lack of social inclusion in business education and the majority of HEI are not providing sufficient entrepreneurship education for students with disabilities (Luke and Uzoigwee, 2022, Dakung et al., 2022). Therefore, to investigate entrepreneurship education for people with disabilities, we further review the existing literature to suggest the theoretical framework for further investigation in the context of Lithuanian Entrepreneurial ecosystem.

**Theoretical framework**

**The variety of methods of Entrepreneurship education**

Entrepreneurship is closely connected to entrepreneurship education because „it is indeed possible to teach and educate people in entrepreneurship“ (Fayolle, 2008, p. 326). The terms of entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial education often used interchangeably, Entrepreneurship education more often refers to the formal education and training that is provided to individuals who want to become entrepreneurs, which could include courses, programs, or degrees in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial education is a broader term that encompasses the development of an entrepreneurial mindset and the acquisition of skills and knowledge that can be applied in any field or industry. It plays a critical role in the formation of a high-quality entrepreneurial ecosystem which produces productive entrepreneurship (Stam and Van der Ven, 2021; Kansheba & Wald, 2020). Liñán (2004, p. 9) suggests Entrepreneurship Education as a concept which includes “the whole set of education and training activities within the educational system or not - that try to develop in the participants the intention to perform entrepreneurial behaviours, or some of the elements that affect intention, such as entrepreneurial knowledge, desirability of the entrepreneurial activity, or its feasibility.”

However, scholars identify several education related challenges that, in addition to the previously discussed existing external forces, affect entrepreneurial education. One is that Entrepreneurial Education in Europe is often related to the narrow definition of entrepreneurship and often focuses on the education of independent entrepreneurship, therefore needs to be redefined to the broader perspective of entrepreneurship and be applicable not only to business students (Seikkula-Leino, Ruskovaara, Pihkala, Rodriguez & Delfino, 2019) to reach the desired entrepreneurial outcomes. Second challenge is that Entrepreneurial Education has yet to pursue conservative models, which do not catch up with the rapidly emerging innovations, such as AI, blockchain, etc. (Kariv, Matley & Fayolle, 2019), thus the result of such discrepancy between the existing dissemination of knowledge. Thus entrepreneurial education in the form of experiential learning through the practical application of knowledge is often integrated into entrepreneurial education programs using informal learning environments, such as business incubators, accelerators and collaboration centres (Guerro et al., 2016; Ratten, 2017). However, despite that it supports the replication of entrepreneurial behaviour (Pittaway & Cope, 2007), and learning from and through experience (Kassean et al., 2015), which makes them more innovative and sensitive to the social and economic issues (Moroz, Hindle & Anderdsson, 2010), quite often it also confuses the future entrepreneurs, which tires to navigate among such variety of programs and their own needs (Kariv et al., 2018). The third and major challenge is that entrepreneurial education is not yet inclusive for people with disabilities, those who have already been called missing entrepreneurs (OECG, 2017) and this challenge hasn‘t been addressed properly (Pavey, 2006; Munoz et al., 2020; Munoz et al., 2022).

Moreover, there is no single method that successfully develops entrepreneurs (Bae et al., 2014). Entrepreneurial education in the formal education system could consist of several types of teaching methods in order for the learning outcomes to be replicated and transferred (Lawton Smith, 2023).

The theory-based teaching method (Fiet, 2001) is based on teaching students to understand entrepreneurship theories and concepts and often encompass in-class learning. The practice-based teaching method (Neck, Greene& Brush, 2014) helps to experience entrepreneurship in practice and learn from prior entrepreneurs (Fayolle, 2013; Yacine, 2021). Among such pedagogies dominates case study-based learning, experiential learning by developing business models or writing business plans (Osterwalder & Piqneur, 2010), participating in various „real world“ computer based simulations (Gibson & Sodeman, 2014) and utilisation work-based approach as partnership between business, HEI and student (McEwen, O.Connor, Williams & Higson, 2010) or practices to establish a real venture (Henry et al., 2005; Kolb and Kolb, 2009; Duval-Couetil, 2013). However these practices often requires interactio with the real world in the authentic work environment (Ferrandez et al., 2016).

Third type- the combination of these two methods (Yamakawa, McKone-Sweet, Hunt Greenberg, 2016; Bauman & Lucy, 2021) allow to study theoretical framework and their application in the real life environment to gain entrepreneurial experience. This allows the development of the cognitive approach to problem-solving needed in successful entrepreneurship, which is distinct from the problem-solving approach adopted by traditional managers. However, this third, seemingly most effective approach requires redevelopment of the curriculum to achieve smooth theory and practice integration and effective combination of linear entrepreneurship process with creative, risky and non-linear entrepreneurial methods (Neck et al. 2014) .

In addition to learning theory and practice, for the succesful entrepreneurship it is needed a certain entrepreneurial mindset, individual characteristics and traits, which are critical for the new venture success, thus the students should understand their own personalities and desires, to develop emotional intelligence, resilience and risks tolerance (Greenberg & Nielsen, 2015; Blass, 2018). In addition, there is a growing trend that soft skills, which reflects individuals‘ personality attitude to work and ability to work in temas, which are gaining preference over the hard skills, which involves knowledge and theory ( (Bauman &Lucy, 2021). Moreover, Robles (2012) reveal thatamong ten soft skills needed for business executive are the integrity, flexibility, work ethics, social skills, communication and others. However, students with disabilities, depending on their own individual disability story, may encounter a more broader spectrum of challenges and opportunities, which affects the development of their soft skills. Thus, until now, there is a huge lack of understanding of the needs of students with disabilities and their demands for entrepreneurial development (Lawton Smith, 2003; Butkeviciene & Lawton Smith, 2024).

**Framework of inclusive entrepreneurial education for people with disabilities**

To address the issue of inclusive entrepreneurship education, scholars developed and further investigated the framework of Inclusive Entrepreneurial Education for People with Disabilities (Kruger & David, 2020; Butkeviciene & Lawton Smith, 2004). The initial framework of Inclusive Entrepreneurial Education for People with Disabilities is based on social innovation approach (Kaletka et al., 2016) has been developed by Kruger & David (2020) and consists of multiple layers of contexts: context of role, functions, structures and norms. However, at the core of the framework and the central pillar is „Co-creation and Co-production as facilitators of Inclusiveness” (Kruger & David, 2020, p.5), which allows to empathize and tackle the problems that students with a disability encounter and explore and enable their other abilities. Such a framework of IEEPD allows to design of the entrepreneurship curricula with sensitivity to the wide and diverse range of disabilities while taking into account their unique abilities, talents, and requirements. It helps to be tailored to the individual needs of each student with the utmost empathy. Although entrepreneurship education should generally be tailored to individual demands, it must be done at a deeper level for students with disabilities (Vanevenhoven, 2013).

In the central pillar of IEEPD, co-creation refers to a collaborative approach of creative problem-solving between diverse stakeholders at all stages of an initiative. In entrepreneurship education for persons with disabilities, co-creation involves tailoring educational methods, learning tools, and skills to individual demands and capabilities. It could start already in the course planning stage when students, together with their teachers, jointly adjust each course and test it in the pilot session. Co-production involves implementing previously determined solutions, emphasizing efficient use of existing resources and assets. In the context of entrepreneurial education, co-production might involve choosing the right teaching and learning methods based on individual needs, or when realizing an inclusive educational service to include students with disabilities as teaching assistance. Moreover, co-creation and co-production within the entrepreneurship course shall enable actors with different backgrounds to jointly create and carry out innovation through cross-sectoral collaboration and the acquisition of basic knowledge (Kruger & David, 2020). Such an inclusive entrepreneurial education framework also serve to people without disabilities to increase their social skills and to better customize the existing entrepreneurial programs according, which required to meet the expectations of the different type of entrepreneurs (Anderson & Jack, 2008).

**Ways of reshaping the entrepreneurial education for PWD**

However, it is challenging to implement the IEEPD within the HEI and to re-shape the entrepreneurial education services for this often marginalized group, „making education for persons with disabilities turn into education with them (Kruger & David, 2020). There are few possible ways to redevelop entrepreneurial education for the people with disabilities and ensure the implementation of the co-creation and the co-production of the entrepreneurship course. As Kruger & David (2020) suggest one way is to involve PWD in the educational process.

There is another possible way that has been little explored yet, which involves increasing the number of educators with disabilities who could be involved in preparing and implementing entrepreneurship education courses. Such educators are likely to have encountered different abilities and disability-related challenges themselves, and therefore could better empathize with their students. This option is also grounded in the perception that Higher Education Institutions (HEI) stand as role models within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, guiding social norms and teaching social inclusion-related theories and practices that are applicable to business students. Relating to the concept of integrity, HEI institutions not only teach social sustainability for business students, especially the subject of diversity, equity, and inclusion, but demonstrate integrity by their own example.hv

However, there is limited research analyzing the involvement of faculty members with disabilities. Despite the progress towards diversity, equity, and inclusion, academics with disabilities have been overlooked (Richards & Sang, 2019). Recent research in North America shows (Dali, 2018) that faculty members with disabilities are found to be a (doubly) neglected group and disclose oppressive workplace environment experienced by faculty members with disabilities.

A survey (Pain, 2017) of disabled academics in the UK shows that while students with disabilities have yet to gain some support, academics with disabilities do not experience the same. Moreover, faculty members with disabilities may be hesitant to disclose their disability due to concerns about job security and career advancement opportunities.

Thus some contradictions emerge also when considering the HEI role in teaching social sustainability and DEI for entrepreneurship students, while faculty with disabilities are a neglected demographic. Such a paradoxical situation may undermine students’ trust in the sincerity and integrity of faculty members delivering these messages to the students. (Dali, 2018). Grigely (2017) observed that there is insufficient data available regarding the number of disabled faculty members, the nature of their disabilities, and how their disabilities affect their academic lives. Additionally, there is a lack of personal stories being shared by academics with disabilities through conference panels or scholarly magazines. There are tremendously limited cases of scholars and educators with disabilities (Lockett, 2017; Mendlesohn, 2017) who, by their own examples, remain open about their own disability and advocate on behalf of disabled faculty members.

Thus we suggest the framework for the further investigation of the Co-creation and co-production of the entrepreneurial education for People with disabilities based on the original IEEPD framework.

Picture 1 insert here

Thus in order to further explore the potential to integrate faculty with disabilities in the co-creation and co-production in IEEPD we will investigate the demographics of faculty with disabilities in the Lithuanian Universities, who operates in one of the leading group B entrepreneurial Ecosystems as GEM 2022/2023 reports.

**Methodology**

In this research we use the exploratory literature review (Koseoglu, S., & Bozkurt, A. (2018) and secondary data analysis to answer the research questions: To what extent and in what ways the designed educational offerings are inclusive for people with disability in the context of Lithuania? Therefore Therefore, by analyzing the IEEPD framework in the abductive manner against the established framework for EE. we will examine the following:

* Historical overview of PWD as a group, their role and participation in the society and education in the context of Lithuania, as an economy in the transition (society views, accessibility, teaching methods -> this group has been historically separated from the society and education has been built from the lowest to the highest level without thinking how to include them). The future entrepreneurs would come from the environment where they are used to be segregated.
* Changing view on PWD in the society (internal motivation): active efforts to uplift the inclusion of PWD, especially thru entrepreneurship, examples such as ‘Pirmas Blynas’ and others specifically directed to create inclusion of PWD.
* Changing situation in the CEE region (external motivation): war in Ukraine, thru which understanding that PWD will be an immense part of the society due to the ongoing war. Lithuania is one of the most active supporters and helpers of Ukraine. Many immigrants from Ukraine come to live in Lithuania and entrepreneurship is one of the quick way they can integrate.
* Is there internal and external pressures in the country to ensure inclusion of PWD in the entrepreneurial education offerings.

By answering these questions we explore to what extent and in what ways the system is inclusive? What needs to be done? Our study strives to shed the light on whether and how does the HEI entrepreneurial education for students with disabilities corresponds to the HEI practices in involvement of educators with disabilites in teaching entrepreneurship and how does HEI intergrity manifest in the context of Lithuanian HEI.

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**Appendix**

Picture 1. The framework of co-creation and co-production of IEEPD s

