

EARLY SPARKS: FOSTERING ENTREPRENEURSHIP COMPETENCES IN BALKAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative study of national strategies targeting the integration of entrepreneurship education in primary and secondary schools in five Balkan countries, namely: Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, and Romania. The article details institutional frameworks, curriculum integration, teacher training programs, and key competences emphasised in each country; it also discusses specific activities deployed in order to facilitate the development of entrepreneurship competences and mindsets among students with the support of government strategies and policy initiatives. Additionally, the article identifies best practices from other European countries in implementing entrepreneurship education and offers practical recommendations for policymakers and educators. The ultimate goal is to enhance students' entrepreneurship competences and prepare them to navigate their way through the complexities of the modern world with confidence and resilience. The research presented fills a critical gap in relevant literature by providing insights into the ways in which entrepreneurship competences are cultivated at different educational levels across the countries studied. Findings will be globally valuable for policymakers and educators who aspire to improve entrepreneurship education in similar socio-economic contexts.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship Education, Primary and Secondary Education, Public Policies, Balkan Countries

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1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship education aims at preparing students for a particular vocation, enterprise or business by cultivating and improving their entrepreneurial spirit, aspirations, motivation, and pioneering and adventurous nature. Another aim is to help entrepreneurs find and identify business opportunities by developing students' necessary strategic skills and tools (Liu, 2019). However, some people give a different interpretation, arguing that the goal of entrepreneurship education should be to develop students' creativity, opportunity awareness, initiative, and innovation rather than to establish new organisations. The latter also give a broader definition to entrepreneurship, which makes it applicable in all spheres of society (Lackéus, 2015). As a result, not only can entrepreneurial education benefit economic growth and increase employment (Panigrahi & Joshi, 2016) but also determine whether someone will become an entrepreneur, enhance democratic values, and encourage learners to participate in democratic processes and community development. Furthermore, this definition emphasises the importance of ethical and sustainable practices in business, aligning economic activities with broader social and environmental goals, and promotes a wide range of competences such as creativity, problem-solving, leadership, and resource management (Web-1).

The United Nations (2015) recognised that entrepreneurship competences are essential for equipping young individuals to innovate, start businesses, and create job opportunities in the rapidly changing global environment. Recognising the importance of entrepreneurship competences, Sarri et al. (2022) argue that entrepreneurship education should focus on cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset from an early age. Hassi (2016) supports this view, noting that students who participate in entrepreneurial initiatives at primary school will benefit more from similar programs in the future compared to students who do not. This gradual development ensures that children not only acquire the necessary basic skills and understanding to navigate the complexities of the business world, but also cultivate their critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving competences. By the time such children become adults, they possess a robust skill set and a confident entrepreneurial mindset, which are essential for their personal and professional growth, as well as for their contribution to economic growth and innovation.

This article aims to map and compare the national strategies of five Balkan countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Romania) regarding the integration of entrepreneurship in primary and secondary education. Due to their location in Southeast Europe, the countries selected connect the Balkan region with the rest of the world. Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania are already members of the European Union, while Albania and North Macedonia have been granted the candidate status. Moreover, the geographical contiguity and historical interrelations of Balkan countries foster opportunities for mutual influence and collaboration (Weichert et al.,

2009). These countries exhibit certain commonalities in their political and historical contexts. They share cultural and heritage elements, while four of them (except Greece) experienced communist regimes. The intertwined histories of these countries have cultivated similar social and economic frameworks.

The article constitutes a pioneering study of entrepreneurship education at primary and secondary schools across the five countries selected. The comparative analysis of their interventions aims to showcase best practices and to identify shared challenges in the implementation of entrepreneurship education. The study highlights effective strategies, such as specific teaching methods and policy initiatives that can also be adopted elsewhere. The findings will offer useful information to policymakers and educators paving the way for reforms and curriculum development. This research not only fills a critical gap in relevant literature but also offers practical recommendations for improving entrepreneurship education and, thus, providing insights globally valuable to similar socio-economic contexts.

2. Literature Review

In 2006, the European Commission and the Norwegian government hosted a conference that led to the Oslo Agenda for Entrepreneurship Education in Europe. This agenda outlined actionable steps for the incorporation of entrepreneurship education at all educational levels (European Commission, 2006). This is important because countries can stimulate economic development, create new businesses, and generate employment opportunities by fostering students' entrepreneurship skills and mindsets (Pacher & Glinik, 2024). Furthermore, the European Parliament and the Council endorsed a recommendation on critical competences for lifelong learning in December 2006, identifying entrepreneurship as essential for social inclusion, active citizenship, personal fulfilment, and employability (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2006). According to Morakinyo and Akinsola (2019), entrepreneurship education is extremely effective in improving youth community involvement in the 21st century.

The next significant step in supporting the development of entrepreneurship competences came in 2008 with the European Commission's "Small Business Act for Europe" initiative. This initiative aimed at enhancing the EU's overall entrepreneurship policy, highlighting the importance of education and training systems that promote entrepreneurial mindsets and skills from a young age (European Commission, 2008) since early efforts in developing skills can prove to be especially impactful in the long term (Huber et al., 2014). In 2013, the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan marked a significant advancement in recognising entrepreneurship competences; it focused on providing entrepreneurship education and training to foster business creation and growth, removing administrative obstacles, and assisting entrepreneurs during critical stages of their business. Additionally, the plan aimed to rekindle entrepreneurial

culture in Europe by fostering the next generation of entrepreneurs. These recommendations were driven by the need to create more entrepreneurs who can stimulate growth and increase employment. Since 2008, Europe has faced its worst economic downturn in 50 years, with more than 25 million unemployed and most SMEs still unable to recover (European Parliament, 2013).

Introduced in 2016, the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (EntreComp) defined entrepreneurship competence that comprises 15 competences allocated in three areas: ideas and opportunities, resources, and action-taking. EntreComp aims at creating a common understanding of entrepreneurship and serves as a tool for individuals, educators, trainers, employers, and policymakers. Fostering entrepreneurial capabilities is a major EU policy goal, leading to the creation of this framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016). In 2018, the European Commission promoted a strategic policy framework for entrepreneurship education, providing member states with guidance for incorporating entrepreneurship into national curricula (Council of the European Union, 2018). This was crucial since professionals faced obstacles such as lack of resources, threat of commercialism, systemic barriers, assessment challenges, and conceptual ambiguity (Lack us, 2015). In 2020, the European Skills Agenda emphasised reskilling and upskilling regarding entrepreneurial competences, highlighting lifelong learning and the role of these skills in the digital and green transitions that are driven by changes like telework during the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2020).

Several studies have investigated entrepreneurship in education. Each one focuses on different aspects, uncovering various key findings, and identifying impacts on entrepreneurial competences (Table 1). For example, Pasic et al. (2022) explored service-related competences in the tourism sector, emphasising the enhancement of sector-specific entrepreneurial skills at the tertiary education level. Vu ijak (2018) examined practices in entrepreneurship education among engineering graduates in South-East Europe and Russia, demonstrating improvements in entrepreneurial skills through the REBUS project. Marinkovic (2015) focused on the development of an entrepreneurial culture in Western Balkans by establishing specific creative frameworks at primary and secondary educational institutions to promote a broader entrepreneurial culture.  o kalo et al. (2017) identified trends and factors affecting youth entrepreneurship in tertiary education, addressing challenges and creating opportunities for young entrepreneurs. Radovi -Markovi  (2019) analysed the role of globalisation in fostering entrepreneurship in small countries, highlighting the enhancement of entrepreneurship competences through global exposure. Pekovi  et al. (2017) discussed the support offered by initiatives, such as the REBUS project, for boosting entrepreneurship competencies in innovative sectors in Montenegro.

Bogdanovi  et al. (2022) emphasised the importance of financial literacy and entrepreneurship education in Serbia and Northern Macedonia, enhancing skills in risk

Table 1. Previous studies

Paper Title	Author(s)	Education Level	Focus	Key Findings	Impact of Entrepreneurial Competences
Service Related Competences Education Practices in South East Europe	Pasic et al., 2022	Tertiary	Tourism sector	Emphasis on tourism-related competences	Enhances sector-specific entrepreneurial skills
Practices in Entrepreneurship Education in South East Europe and Russia	Vučijak, 2018	Tertiary	Engineering graduates	Promotion of entrepreneurship competences through REBUS project	Enhances entrepreneurial skills among engineering students
Fostering an Entrepreneurial Culture in Western Balkans	Marinkovic, 2015	Primary and Secondary	Educational frameworks	Establishment of creative frameworks in schools/universities	Promotes a broader entrepreneurial culture
Analysis of Possibilities for Improving Entrepreneurial Behaviour of Young People	Čockalo et al., 2017	Tertiary	Youth entrepreneurship	Identifies trends and factors affecting young entrepreneurs	Addresses challenges and opportunities for youth entrepreneurship
The Impact of Globalization on Entrepreneurship in Small Countries	Radović-Marković, 2019	Tertiary	Globalization effects	Role of globalization in fostering entrepreneurship	Enhances entrepreneurial competences through global exposure
The State of Entrepreneurship and Innovativeness in Montenegro	Peković et al., 2017	Tertiary	Innovativeness	Support from initiatives like REBUS project	Boosts entrepreneurial competences in innovative sectors
Financial Literacy and Entrepreneurial Education as a Prerequisite for the Development of Entrepreneurship in the Republic of Serbia and Northern Macedonia	Bogdanović et al., 2022	Primary, Secondary, Tertiary	Financial literacy and Entrepreneurial Education	Importance of financial literacy for managing resources, need for comprehensive entrepreneurial education, challenges in practical training integration	Enhances skills in risk assessment, business planning, and financial management, fosters an entrepreneurial mindset
The Youth Entrepreneurship as Response to the Youth Unemployment - Examples of Western Balkan Region	Vutsovaet al., 2022	Not specified	Youth entrepreneurship	Young entrepreneurs face challenges such as lack of experience and practice, and difficult transition between education and the labor market	Entrepreneurship is seen as a tool for reducing youth unemployment, supported by national and international initiatives, creating a new milieu for steady eco-innovation systems and job opportunities.

assessment, business planning, and financial management across primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels. Finally, Vutsova et al. (2022) investigated youth entrepreneurship in Western Balkans as a response to youth unemployment, noting that entrepreneurship can reduce unemployment and create job opportunities despite challenges such as lack of experience and difficult transitions from education to the labour market. However, none of these studies has conducted a comparative analysis of the development of entrepreneurship competences in primary and secondary education within the formal educational systems of Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, and North Macedonia. This gap in relevant literature suggests a need for research that explores how entrepreneurship skills are cultivated in the education systems of these countries.

3. Results And Discussion

Each country promotes entrepreneurship education at primary and secondary schools through various frameworks and strategies, curriculum integration, teachers' training, government support, key competences, and extracurricular activities (Table 2). Albania has adopted the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (EntreComp) and implemented the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2019-2022, along with Law 25/2022, which promotes start-up growth and development (Lula, 2023). Bulgaria focuses on the National SME Strategy 2021-2027, Youth Act, National Education Strategy and the National Youth Strategy 2021-30 to strengthen entrepreneurship education (OECD, 2023). Greece has integrated Skills Labs into its mandatory curriculum, covering 21st century skills, life skills, digital citizenship, and entrepreneurship skills (Law 4807/2021, Article 52). North Macedonia implements the Entrepreneurial Learning Strategy 2014-2020, which is supported by the Agency for Promotion of Entrepreneurship and the Fund for Innovation and Technologies (Polenakovik & Sutevski, 2014). Romania's entrepreneurship education is a key component of the vocational education system, guided by government policies to develop social, civic, and entrepreneurship competences (Web-2).

Curriculum integration also varies across the countries studied. In Albania, secondary school curriculum emphasises practical and project-based learning, integrating entrepreneurship education into six subjects (Instituti i Zhvillimit të Arsimit, 2015). In Bulgaria, an ordinance established 20 general education subjects for primary school. One of them fosters "Technologies and Entrepreneurship" and is offered to students of all grades. Instruction begins in the first grade and is concluded in the twelfth grade, adapted to the courses to the students' educational level at each stage. The specialised courses of the curriculum include mandatory entrepreneurship classes focusing either on Entrepreneurship and Information Technologies or on Entrepreneurship and Geography & Economics (Web-3). Greece combines cognitive curriculum perspectives with skill development through Skills Labs, including activi-

ties such as project-based learning, planning and presenting projects, creating games, and participating in drama-in-education plays and virtual business simulations (Law 4807/2021, Article 52). In North Macedonia, entrepreneurship is integrated into six primary education subjects and is further highlighted in the 9th grade subject titled "Innovations." Secondary education includes compulsory subjects, e.g. "Business and Entrepreneurship" (Министерство за образование и наука, 2015b). Romania's 11th grade curriculum focuses on practical skills and real-life applications, covering social education, economic and financial education, Romanian language and literature, and career counselling (Ministerul Educației, 2023).

Teachers' training programs also vary. In Albania, teacher training helps educators convey principles of entrepreneurship, innovative thinking, risk-taking, and business planning (Ministria e Arsimit dhe Sportit, 2020). Bulgaria supports teachers through training courses offered by the Bulgarian Centre of Training Firms (European Commission, 2014). Greece's Institute of Educational Policy provides resources and lesson plans to assist teachers. North Macedonia's government supports teacher training through the Agency for the Promotion of Entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2024). In Romania, teacher training courses focus on adopting methodologies for diverse needs and promoting the use of digital resources and innovative strategies (Ministerul Educației, 2023). Government support is significant in these countries, with Albania's Law 25/2022 and the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2019-2022 (Lula, 2023), Bulgaria's National SME Strategy 2021-27, Youth Act, National Education Strategy and the National Youth Strategy 2021-30 (OECD, 2023), Greece's Skills Labs supported by the Ministry of Education, (Law 4807/2021, Article 52) and North Macedonia's initiatives by the Agency for Promotion of Entrepreneurship (Polenakovik & Sutevski, 2014). Romania emphasises the development of social, civic, and entrepreneurship competences in professional education through government guidelines (Web-2).

The extracurricular activities in these five countries focus on different ways to promote entrepreneurship education. In Albania, the emphasis is placed on practical and project-based learning, which is integrated in the secondary school curriculum and offers students a hands-on experience in entrepreneurship (Instituti i Zhvillimit të Arsimit, 2015). Bulgaria extends its support through extracurricular programs that offer training, access to business incubators, and start-up funding, thus helping students turn their ideas into real ventures (OECD, 2023). In Greece, the approach involves interactive activities, such as project-based learning, creation of games, drama-in-education plays, and virtual business simulations, which encourage the development of 21st century skills and entrepreneurial mentality (Law 4807/2021, Article 52). In North Macedonia, there are extracurricular activities in entrepreneurship, such as competitions, fairs, and events, e.g. garage sales (Penaluna et al., 2020). Romania incorporates a mix of project work, risk assessment, and personal and professional

Table 2. Comparative Analysis

Country	Framework and Strategies	Curriculum Integration	Teacher Training	Key Competences Focus	Extracurricular Activities
Albania	Adopted (EntreComp), National Employment and Skills Strategy 2019-2022. Law No. 25/2022 promotes startup development.	High school curriculum based on practical and project-based learning. Entrepreneurship education integrated into six subjects.	Teacher training programs convey principles of entrepreneurship, innovative thinking, risk-taking, and business planning.	European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (EntreComp) outlines 15 key competences.	High school curriculum emphasizes practical and project-based learning.
Bulgaria	National SME Strategy 2021-27 and Youth Act, National Education Strategy and the National Youth Strategy 2021-30	"Technologies and Entrepreneurship" course, structured across several stages. The course begins in first grade and continues through twelfth grade, tailored to the students' developmental levels. Specialized subjects support the curriculum, with mandatory entrepreneurship classes focusing either on Entrepreneurship and Information Technologies or on Entrepreneurship and Geography and Economics.	Training courses offered by the Bulgarian Centre of Training Firms.	Focus on creativity, innovation, business skills, and entrepreneurial thinking.	Extracurricular support through training, business incubators, and start-up funding.
Greece	Skills Labs integrated into mandatory curriculum. Four cycles covering 21st-century skills, life skills, digital citizenship, and entrepreneurship abilities.	Skills Labs combine cognitive curriculum with skill development. Activities include project-based learning, constructing and presenting projects, creating games, participating in theatrical plays, and virtual business simulations.	Institute of Educational Policy publishes resources and lesson plans to help teachers.	Focus on 21 st century skills, life skills, digital citizenship, and entrepreneurship abilities.	Activities include project-based learning, constructing and presenting projects, creating games, participating in theatrical plays, and virtual business simulations.
North Macedonia	Entrepreneurial Learning Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia 2014-2020. Agency for Promotion of Entrepreneurship (APERNM).	Primary education includes entrepreneurship in six subjects and 'Innovations' in 9 th grade. Secondary education has 'Business and Entrepreneurship' for the fourth year and 'Innovations and Entrepreneurship' for first, second, and third years.	Government formed the Agency for Promotion of Entrepreneurship (APERNM).	Focus on entrepreneurship skills and concepts across educational levels.	Competitions, fairs, and events like garage sales.
Romania	Government guidelines emphasize social, civic, and entrepreneurship competences development in professional education.	Entrepreneurship education is a key component of the professional education system. Curriculum aims to develop social, civic, and entrepreneurship competences.	Teacher training programs help adapt methods to diverse needs and promote digital resources and innovative strategies.	Focus on social, civic, and entrepreneurship competences, communication skills, and practical skills.	Educational activities include projects, risk evaluation, and personal/professional development.

development activities, targeting the development of entrepreneurial, social, and civic competences (Web-2). Each country uses distinct methods to foster an entrepreneurial mindset and teach practical business skills among students.

Best practices from other countries can serve as valuable examples for teachers and contribute to the improvement of entrepreneurship education. Estonia's Chamber of Commerce and Industry established a round table, involving government bodies, schools, NGOs, universities, and industries who collaborate to develop entrepreneurship education. Similarly, Spain's EJE/EME projects promote entrepreneurship in primary and secondary education with a focus on skills development through practical, hands-on experience. The EJE project for secondary students (15-18) develops initiative, decision-making, creativity, and teamwork and teaches business creation and management. The project also connects students with local entities, fostering a deeper understanding of European citizenship. These examples underscore the importance of practical experience, stakeholder collaboration, and real-world business engagement, demonstrating that a strategic, hands-on approach enhances students' preparedness for future challenges (YES, 2012).

In addition, a multifaceted approach of teachers' training is necessary for the enhancement of entrepreneurship education. Workshops and webinars allow for sharing best practices and engaging in interactive sessions, e.g. case studies. Online platforms with courses and fora, along with e-learning modules and mobile apps, offer flexible learning and networking opportunities. Mentorship programs provide continuous support, while collaborative projects facilitate international cooperation. Comprehensive curriculum guides and multilingual resources ensure accessibility. The establishment of professional networks and online communities fosters a sense of community using platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook, which facilitate resource sharing. Continuous feedback and research investment ensure the effectiveness of these programs and help teachers promote innovation and entrepreneurship in student communities worldwide.

4. Conclusion

The European Union implemented several key strategies to enhance entrepreneurship education. Initiatives, such as the Oslo Agenda for Entrepreneurship Education in Europe, the "Small Business Act for Europe" (European Commission, 2006) and the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan emphasise the importance of developing entrepreneurship skills at all educational levels to stimulate economic growth, create new businesses, and generate employment opportunities (European Parliament, 2013). The European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework (EntreComp) was introduced to define and promote entrepreneurship competences (Bacigalupo et al., 2016). In the Balkans, countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, and Romania adopted various strategies to integrate entrepreneurship education into their

national curricula, with the support of government policies and teacher training programs. These efforts aim to develop key competences and practical skills, ensuring that students are equipped to thrive in their future careers. Studies have shown that such education content significantly improves youth community involvement (Akin-tolu & Akinsola, 2019) and entrepreneurship skills (Din et al., 2016), thus addressing challenges such as youth unemployment and fostering entrepreneurial culture (Martín-Gutiérrez et al., 2024).

Entrepreneurship education in the Balkan region constitutes a pivotal asset in addressing several critical economic and societal challenges. The limited start-up activity in this particular area, compared to other parts of the world (StartupBlink, 2024), and the continuous struggle of employers to find people with appropriate soft skills, such as communication and teamwork (ManpowerGroup, 2024), underscore the urgent need for comprehensive entrepreneurship training, which can develop students' soft skills (Humsona & Yuliani, 2018). As a result, entrepreneurship education not only equips young individuals with skills necessary for innovation and business creation but also fosters a mindset conducive to active and informed citizenship. This is crucial in regions of the Balkans where economic revitalisation often depends on the emergence of new businesses and the entrepreneurial spirit of their peoples.

Moreover, the integration of entrepreneurship education in interdisciplinary teacher training programs is particularly significant. By fostering an entrepreneurial mindset among educators, we lay the groundwork for more profound and widespread acknowledgement and understanding of the importance of entrepreneurship education. Teachers equipped with an entrepreneurial mindset are better prepared to develop these competences in their students, thereby amplifying the impact of educational initiatives aimed at fostering entrepreneurship. Educators can progressively build their understanding and appreciation of entrepreneurial principles through targeted teacher training initiatives. This, in turn, enables them to impart such values and skills to their students more effectively. This type of cyclical enhancement of capabilities enriches both individuals and the societal fabric, thus leading to a more resilient and innovative economic landscape.

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