

ROUNDTABLE REPORT

SME Week: Should entrepreneurship studies be mandatory?

Panellists

Simone Baldassari – DG Enterprise, Entrepreneurship Education
Jeroen Meens – Serial entrepreneur & Owner of Cynex
Madi Sharma – European Economic & Social Committee
Suat Lemi Sisik – YES Secretary General
Lorenzo Mulè Stagno – Entrepreneur & SME Week Ambassador
Catie Thorburn – President, Generation Europe Foundation
Simon Ulvund – Co-founder of the Hub, Brussels (Moderator)

Roundtable

On the first day of this year's SME Week, 25 May 2010, the European Confederation of Young Entrepreneurs (YES) in partnership with Generation Europe Foundation (GEF) organised a roundtable on entrepreneurship education hosted by the representative office in Brussels of the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD).

The roundtable debate entitled "Entrepreneurship; should studies be mandatory?" aimed to look at how the European education system can further encourage an entrepreneurial spirit in young people. By holding this debate stakeholders aimed to gain a better insight into entrepreneurship education: how it is taught, whether it can be taught, whether it is effective, how it can be improved and whether it has a place within educational curricula.

In order to address the subject from different perspectives and encourage a genuine debate, stakeholders from various relevant backgrounds were invited to provide insights and share their ideas. Practitioners of entrepreneurship education, policymakers and young entrepreneurs alike engaged in an enriching debate that led not so much to a definite conclusion as to an urgent call for a shift of mentality.

Entrepreneurship Education and Irresponsibility

"Entrepreneurship is the last refuge of the troublemaking individual." –Natalie Clifford Barney

Catie Thorburn (President, GEF) opened the roundtable debate by inviting all present in the room to describe entrepreneurship in one word.

Risk, Values, Fantasy, Uncertainty, Commitment, Guts, Training, Sharing, Opportunity, Stress Development, Creativity, Freedom, Inspiration, Motivation, Progress, Culture, Courage, Passion, Challenge, Action, Vision, Imagination, and Perseverance were just some of the words that participants associated with entrepreneurship.

Whereas the word “entrepreneurship” evokes by and large positive connotations, Catie Thorburn added “irresponsible” to the list by suggesting that an entrepreneur inevitably takes a risk, which is often associated with irresponsibility. Following this logic, could it then be argued that asking teachers to teach entrepreneurship in schools is tantamount to encouraging our children to be irresponsible?

Knowingly taking a risk may be irresponsible, but what about a calculated risk? As mentioned by Suat Lemi Sisik (Secretary General, YES) European culture has a tendency to avoid uncertainty and risk, and any degree of irresponsibility is frowned upon. Could entrepreneurship education alter the European perception of risk taking or do innate barriers make Europeans too responsible for their own good? According to Mr Sisik, this cultural trait could be corrected by the right education, providing potential entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and encouraging them to tackle the challenges Europe faces through innovation and creativity.

Simone Baldassari, responsible for entrepreneurship education at the European Commission's DG Enterprise and Industry, stated that before addressing entrepreneurship education, it is important to define entrepreneurship. Whereas it is not necessary to introduce a subject in schools called “entrepreneurship”, what is important is that a “new way of thinking about all subjects” be introduced.

Currently, according to the owner of Cynex, Jeroen Meens, the educational system does not encourage initiative or creativity. Children and students are told to colour within the lines and parrot what they learn from books assigned to them. “In school you get a lesson, and then you get a test. In life, you get a test and then a lesson.”

Following on from this, Madi Sharma insisted on more relevant education for young people, rather than learning from syllabi written by civil servants “who typically do not have entrepreneurial experience”.

There was an overall consensus around the table that “entrepreneurship as such” can't be taught and should not be taught, but that a new approach to teaching existing subjects and encouraging creativity and innovation within the classroom could go a long way in instilling an entrepreneurial mindset in young people. Within the current system, according to Lorenzo Mulè Stagno, teachers have a strict curriculum to follow and simply do not have the time to allow for creativity.

Encouraging a spirit of enterprise

“My son is now an ‘entrepreneur’. That's what you're called when you don't have a job.” –Ted Turner

As young people leave the school or university benches, society and the job market in particular judge them by their diploma rather than by their talents. A good diploma combined with a decent score on an IQ test gets you far in life... but says nothing about your skills, talents and entrepreneurial spirit.

When asked what they wanted to come out of the roundtable debate, all speakers seemed to agree on one thing: “a culture change to go please...”

According to Madi Sharma of the European Economic and Social Committee (and a successful entrepreneur in her own right), Europeans don't celebrate success. What Europe needs is a European Dream, a change of culture.

Lorenzo Mulè Stago, an entrepreneurship teacher and entrepreneur, agreed with the need to develop an entrepreneurial culture based on the American way. What is currently happening, according to him, is the exact opposite. Rather than encouraging entrepreneurship, European leaders portray entrepreneurs as exploiters of workers.

In terms of policy and regulations, most speakers agreed that the removal of red tape and barriers to entrepreneurship should be the priority, rather than instatement of proactive policies aimed at promoting entrepreneurship. The less involvement by authorities, the better.

A few suggestions of government policies were put forward which could be beneficial for the development of entrepreneurship in Europe, such as the creation of funds to rethink education or certification of schools excelling in entrepreneurship education. However, these initiatives would face

similar problems in terms of assessment and certification by policymakers who are not entrepreneurs themselves.

Rather than focusing on “education” a preference went out to creating opportunities for young people to take initiative and use their creativity. Catie Thorburn and Jeroen Meens both mentioned initiatives where young people are given a small sum of money to set up a business or develop an idea. The only requirement is for them to return the initial sum after a given period.

Other alternatives to education included interaction with “role models” and the sharing of experiences on a less formal level. In this regard Suat Sisik suggested the idea of a European “Curricula-Free Day”.

In an ideal world...

...Madi Sharma would like to see an educational system that doesn't just focus on getting a job and acquiring the qualifications needed to succeed in the job market. This will be an uphill struggle according to her since we live and operate in a system based on income tax. It is therefore in the interest of governments and authorities, and the state in general, to perpetuate a system where citizens are tax-paying employees. Instead we should move to a system where, instead of preparing young people to enter the job market, governments have an incentive to empower them through creativity and initiative.

Catie Thorburn is convinced that within an adapted educational system teachers can play a crucial role as facilitators who provide young people with the tools and the opportunity to engage in creative activities.

Jeroen Meens, on the other hand, predicts a slightly different future where entrepreneurs will engage in self-organised, informal learning activities. Basing himself on the notion that “innovation never comes from the inside but always from outside,” he believes entrepreneurs will organise themselves.

In an ideal world, the panellists would see the development of an educational system in Europe that allows for creativity, independent thinking and innovation. Fostering an entrepreneurial spirit in young people, according to these experts, does not require the inclusion of “entrepreneurship education” in national education curricula, but would benefit greatly from a new open and creative approach to teaching methods of existing school subjects.

Rather than more government involvement in the promotion of entrepreneurship, the creation of a favourable climate for entrepreneurs by removing administrative red tape, tax burdens and other barriers will lead to greatly reduced role of the government and benefit entrepreneurship as a whole.

A much-needed mindshift would automatically follow from these measures and allow for self-organised “networks of networks” to guide and support future entrepreneurs.

See pictures [here](#).



YES – the European Confederation of Young Entrepreneurs is the main association of young entrepreneurs in Europe, representing around 40,000 young entrepreneurs under the age of 40. YES aims at improving the economic and social performance of young entrepreneurship in Europe. Its members include the major national associations of young entrepreneurs in the field of industry, trade and services from 16 countries.

GEF – Since 1995 Generation Europe Foundation educates and empowers young people to be better informed of their rights and responsibilities as European citizens in a fast-changing world. GEF is committed to help young Europeans shape their future and to facilitate mutual understanding among policymakers, decision-makers and tomorrow’s leaders. GEF enables a variety of stakeholders from both the private and public sectors to reach an adolescent target audience and to engage them in interactive dialogue.

List of Participants

Marie-Laure Bach	Agency Partners
Simone Baldassari	DG Enterprise - European Commission
Jordi Bataller Mompó	YES – European Confederation of Young Entrepreneurs
Ana Bovan	Bovan Consulting
Patrick Brady	Entrepreneurs’ Organization
Vladimira Briestenska	GEF Ambassador
Chiara de Caro	YES – European Confederation of Young Entrepreneurs
Pascal de Meyer	Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen
Leo Exter	Weststartup
Cristina Fancello	Generation Europe Foundation
Gary Finnegan	Euractiv
Annie Goimbault	Agency Partners
Jennifer Haynes	Small Business Europe
Alin Vasile Horj	Ca’ Foscari University
Arnaud Houdmont	Generation Europe Foundation
Anita Kalmane	AEGEE-Europe / European Students’ Forum
Hanna Kinnunen	Helsinki EU Office
Anotine Larpin	FD Blueprint
Moise Lumande	Ambassade de la RD Congo près le Royaume de Belgique
Jeroen Meens	Cynex
Ross Melzer	EurActiv
Naima Mouali	United Chambers of Commerce and Industry
Agata Patecka	AEGEE-Europe / European Students’ Forum
Daniel Renson	Future-Based Consultancy & Solutions
Jos Saerens	Economische Raad voor Oost-Vlaanderen
Ilaria Savoini	EuroCommerce
Audra Shallal	BOSS Consulting
Madi Sharma	European Economic and Social Committee
Suat Lemi Sisik	YES – European Confederation of Young Entrepreneurs
Lorenzo Stagno	Business Marketing Services Ltd / SME Week Ambassador
Catie Thorburn	Generation Europe Foundation
Cristina Tomin	DG Education and Culture - European Commission
Simon Ulvund	The Hub - Brussels
Yann Verbeke	Generation Europe Foundation
Veronica Zilli	European Parliament

Press Coverage

“Can entrepreneurship be taught?”, 27 May 2010, EurActiv
<http://www.euractiv.com/en/enterprise-jobs/can-entrepreneurship-be-taught-news-494547>