

EMPOWERING TOMORROW'S ENTREPRENEURS: AN ERASMUS+ PROJECT REVIEW FOR NURTURING GREEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN TURKEY

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Abstract: Green entrepreneurship has been around for many years, however the emergence of the need for green initiatives is now more than ever. It is crucial to start these initiatives from very young age. In this article, an Erasmus+ project that was realized in Izmir city of Turkiye was taken for analysis. Throughout this analysis, a closer look to green entrepreneurship concepts such as greenwashing and green marketing was examined. The goal was to understand the effectiveness and the sustainability of the project throughout conducted workshops and focus groups. The results showed that there is a demand and a need for such projects that are in line with EU European Green Deal. Not only high schools but also other educational institutes should work towards educating tomorrow's entrepreneurs to nurture green entrepreneurship.

Key words: entrepreneurship, green entrepreneurship, ecopreneurs, Erasmus+ project, green marketing.

Introduction

21st-century society requires young people equipped with 21st-century skills to be innovative, environmentally sensitive, open to sustainable development individuals with high self-efficacy, who can keep up with the digital world, and those skills are also among the priorities of the Erasmus+ program. The goal is to raise pioneers and innovative individuals who are both serviceable and beneficial to the nation and state, so it is aimed at improving the success of the school on a national basis and increasing the quality of education accordingly. However, considering the global conditions in the 21st century, it was observed very clearly that those skills are lacking in the pupils (Geisinger, 2016).

The evolving dynamics of the emergent realities also affected the conceptualization of entrepreneurship. In more modern terms, entrepreneurship is defined as the endeavor to effect and impact change on a global scale through innovative solutions to address challenges of the societies. Establishment of new enterprises remain as an important example of entrepreneurial activities however the concept itself extends beyond that. It compasses the willingness to undertake risks beyond the usual measures and translating ideas into reality. Thus, it is an integrative reality that is fueled by an individual's business pursuits (Kiziloglu and Ray, 2021). The popularity of ecopreneurs can be attributed to various factors such as desire to effect global change, autonomy from fixed work structures, capacity to work from any location, passion for embracing risks, challenges in securing traditional employment, discomfort with the life, aspiration to generate ideas for future generations, and pursuit of self-decision-making (Dixon and Clifford, 2007). An important distinction

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needed to be made between the definitions of regular employees and ecopreneurs of today, see **Table 1**.

Table 1. Definitions of regular employees and ecopreneurs (developed by authors, 2023)

| Employee | Ecopreneur |
|--|---|
| Adapts due to job-related concerns | Adapts due to societal concerns |
| Avoids mistakes as a priority | Mistakes are learning opportunities |
| Job knowledge is imperative | Emphasis is on continuous learning |
| Strives to be the most knowledgeable team member | Assembles team of individuals for a better team |
| Objectives revolve around job promotion | Objectives revolve around the entrepreneurial journey |

Entrepreneurship is an ever evolving and dynamic concept, which is mostly associated with risk-taking, profit taking and being multifaceted. In the recent years, the term itself surely has undergone a paradigm shift. It now embodies a much broader meaning of addressing social problems and contributing to sustainable development activities. (Muo and Azeez, 2019). As we dive into dynamic global changes, we are witnessing also changes on how entrepreneurs handle different areas of business. The traditional approach to entrepreneurship was almost synonym with starting new businesses by taking calculated risks to generate profits. (Frese and Gielnik, 2014). In the contemporary context, this definition does not suffice to explain the entrepreneurs. An entrepreneur is someone who drives positive change by solving emerging social problems, in other words, the act of changing the world through innovative solutions. There are various forms of entrepreneurship, but the most commons are Commercial, Social, Start-up and Intrapreneurship.

Table 2. Common types of Entrepreneurships (developed by authors, 2023)

| Type | Capital | Main Purpose |
|------------------|-------------------|--|
| Commercial | Individuals | Profit generation |
| Social | Individuals/funds | Solutions to social problems such as access to education, food, finance... |
| Start-up | Individuals | Changing industries, disrupting solutions, rapid growth |
| Intrapreneurship | Individuals | Innovation within corporate, long-term success |

Conceptualization of Ecopreneurship

The main goals of ecopreneurs' include the preservation and sustainability of the environment which they live in. In addition to these, integration of societal and environmental values, integration of SDG with business values and the establishment of environmental protection as part of their vision (Moon,2018). Therefore, main motivation of an ecopreneurs include the potential for cost savings and increased profitability through green initiatives. The market value for businesses adopting environmental conscious practices is increasing day by day. The creation of employment opportunities by hiring adequate personnel and the alignment with consumer Preferences for environmentally friendly products and services are on demand (Gupta and Dharwal, 2022).

The Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on green initiatives were sizable. The prevailing global economic conditions have discouraged many initiations of new green business ventures. Nevertheless, the innovative and resilient entrepreneurs continued to leverage digitalization and opted for upskilling themselves in terms of coping with new realities (Karman et.al, 2023). Especially digital literacy amongst Millennials and Generation Z has witnessed an increase during the pandemic, almost doubling the likelihood of these generations aspiring to start their own initiatives. The importance of having these aspiring generations transcended the pandemic and positioned itself as a critical skill for the future (Vugec et.al, 2021). Ecopreneurs follow a green business plan, seek ethical financing sources, cultivate a sustainability culture, continuously adapt to evolving ecosystems, conduct audits, implement sustainable alternatives, establish teams that share the same green goals and market these efforts through effective communication (Propenko et.al, 2020). We asked pupils to associate words with the ecopreneurs. After studying the collected data, the below word-cloud was created using Platstack program, see Figure 1 below. The most common words were environment, issues and environmental.



Figure 1. Word Cloud of Ecopreneurship association (developed by authors, 2023)

The famous Business Model Canvas that was developed by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) has been widely used as a strategic management tool by many entrepreneurs.

The original Canvas involves 9 fundamental areas: Customer segments, value proposition, channels, revenue streams, key resources, key activities, key partnerships, Customer relationships and cost structure. With the rise of green entrepreneurship ideas and 2 more additions were made to the original Canvas, calling it Sustainable Business Model Canvas. The new additions were social and Environmental Benefits and social and Environmental costs. It is important to note that the Sustainable Business Model Canvas and any canvas reflects the changes and features of an organization and its operational environment. Hence, it should be regarded not a static but a dynamic entity, adoptable by change. The new canvas emphasizes the ongoing adjustments in alignment with the emerging challenges in environment as well as market conditions (Joyce and Paquin, 2016).

Green Marketing and Challenges with Greenwashing

Green Marketing is introduced as a concept aiming to Meet consumer demands and needs while minimizing Harm to the environment (Dangelico and Vocalelii, 2017). The main stages of green marketing development can be outlined in 4S framework: Satisfaction, Sustainability, Symbolism and Social Responsibility. In addition to this social acceptability of a product or business without causing Harm to living beings or nature and ensuring the safety of a product that should not pose risks to people's health can be added to the framework. While the increase in green marketing initiatives continues, the greenwashing becomes a Challenge for all. Recent investigations have revealed a concerning trend - fossil fuel companies are increasingly turning to influencers to promote their brands and products. Leaked internal documents from BP in 2020 shed light on the oil and gas industry's strategic shift. Their aim? To become "more relatable, passionate, and authentic" and gain the trust of younger generations. It is important to be aware of the ways in which fossil fuel companies are using influencers to greenwash their image. We can all play a role in stopping this by refusing to support influencers who work with fossil fuel companies and by demanding that regulators act against greenwashing. It's not only fossil fuel companies seeking to partner with influencers to improve their image. Fashion and fast fashion brands are also joining the influencer marketing trend. (Sailer et.al, 2022). The negative impacts of Fast fashion on the climate crisis is calling green initiatives and the demand for slow fashion. When businesses are asked for common excuses for ignoring sustainability the answers were time constraints, cost concerns, consumer demands and the perception that environmental protection is the Government's responsibility. Other challenges such as lack of financing, lack of time and prioritization are also presented as not implementing sustainability in their businesses (Terán-Yépez et. Al, 2020). During the project, pupils were asked about the common myths about why they are afraid to pursue a green entrepreneurship idea. The most common answers were, the expansion of solopreneur failures, the misperception that green entrepreneurs solely function as greenwashers, the Notion that hiring employees can lead to failure, and the revenue is on the Sole Focus in the end.

Ecopreneurs of Tomorrow Project Goals

Outstanding, beneficial individuals for their country, equipped with sustainable and green entrepreneurship skills, being a part of a team, and learning project management including creativity, perseverance, and problem-solving skills are among the common goals of our Project. Moreover, it is also among the primary needs for the students to acquire the skills of analytical thinking for the future. It was among the main goals to transform the skills, especially entrepreneurial skills, which students acquired, into "Green Entrepreneurship" as part of "The European Green Deal" to contribute to the world and our country as well as to the lives of our students as individuals (Fetting, 2020). The aim was to realize entrepreneurship to be greener by considering global problems in every project and product. On the other hand, it is seen that the future needs up-to-date skills, so the teachers need to create a sustainable society, produce solutions to environmental problems, waste management, and be environmentally and sustainably literate. Thus, it was decided to do a jobshadowing activity to an eco-school in Lisbon so that teachers would have the chance to see the ecological practices on site which also provided a guide to green entrepreneurship.

The main goals of the project were to establish a "Green Entrepreneurship" club and/or Workshops to reveal the capacity of the students, who are the future of modern Turkiye, as well as teachers and students equipped with 21st-century skills, to become global citizens. During one intensive training, students received training in entrepreneurship skills, which is also included in the framework. In this training, the students invested their entrepreneurial skills and knowledge. In addition to this knowledge and skills, Green Entrepreneur candidates are to ensure the continuity of the club, to carry out meetings, workshops, Workshops, and Green Entrepreneurship activities in the school and the garden for the 9th and 10th-grade students. While all these activities were carried out, the effort was made to create a perception of entrepreneurship in students. In short, by developing the entrepreneurial school spirit, the school aimed to raise students considering their phase of age. Under the guidance of mentor teachers for whom each small group was responsible, the students' knowledge of the subject was increased and the problems were addressed with innovative and sustainable solutions. Thus, it was understood that school is not just a place that provides academic information, but rather life itself. In this respect, schools needed to acquire digital literacy, innovative thinking, and entrepreneurial skills, which can follow technological advances and economic changes in the world, rather than merely transferring information.

Two participants were determined by considering the green entrepreneurship activities and grant costs. While creating the project, basic needs, and short and long-term goals were determined within the framework of the Erasmus+ program priorities, Izmir Provincial MEM, Education Vision, and the strategic plan of the institution, and the School Education Gateway platform were used to determine the appropriate school that would develop personnel in this direction. The eco-school, Agrupamento de Escolas Póvoa de Santa Iria was contacted. The purpose, outcomes, and expected outputs at the end of the jobshadowing activity for the participants by

the host institution were obtained during the communication established, and their consistency with the activities to be implemented was checked. Green Entrepreneurship education aims to develop the skills and mindset of students to turn creative ideas into action. Thanks to this visit, active teachers, who are open to developing creative ideas, catch up with the necessities of the era, and receive training from an experienced institution in EU standards, has been a condition for future projects.

Sustainability and the KPIs of the Project

An activity observation report examining the activities to be carried out throughout the project was prepared by the project team, and monthly observation reports were filled in for each activity in the planned activity calendar. Whether the targeted goal has been achieved or not was determined by a separate report covering all of these observation reports. The criteria and measurement parameters were determined according to the standards in the monthly activities to be carried out. In addition, before the project started, a pre/post-test was applied to our students and teachers to determine whether our project had reached its goal. Within the scope of the program, the students worked on their small-scale projects under the mentorship of business world volunteers and the guidance of their teachers. They had to establish their companies with zero capital, produce and sell real products/services within the school boundaries, and participate in national/international fairs. The number of workshops within the club enabled the blending of previous knowledge with new developments. Particularly, current developments were shared on the project blog and social media channels that were created at the beginning of the project, and as young people of our age live digitally-centred lives, it was ensured to reach as many young people as possible. The dissemination plan was to periodically conduct surveys on social media after the activities carried out in line with the activity calendar were shared. Since the project is carried out in line with the ideas and needs of the students, the desire to embrace the project and create a greener and more sustainable school will never end. During the project, it ensured the continuation of the sustainable entrepreneurship that is being created in the school by signing various protocols with the province and universities at the end.

Methodology

To this research, mini focus group and case study methodologies were used. Mini focus group that is part of the focus group methodology that is conducted with 4-5 participants and guided by a single moderator. This method is found its usage widely in qualitative research in understanding participant perspectives on a specific topic (Wilkinson, 1998). In the study, pupil's reactions to green entrepreneurship practices were examined and through "why" and "how" type of questions. To have a wider range of viewpoints, pupils were selected from different ages.

In addition to mini focus group, case study methodology was applied to the research. This method used due to its effectiveness to provide in-depth examination of a single

Organization or a project. Within this study, it is found valuable for data Collection and analysis where more complex issues could be resolved (Johansson, 2007).

Future of the Project and Limitations

Through this project, where the ideas of Green Entrepreneurship and Green Schools will be laid and implemented, it is also among plans to make a student-centred project, which will be applied in the next year. It is planned as one of the main activities to train students who can work with the logic of the company, with the invitation of experts and personnel courses at the feet of the school and teachers via this project. In this context, our students will acquire and practically experience cooperation, teamwork, innovation competence, and problem-solving skills in line with our goals. With the network of teachers to be established by our teachers who will receive on-site and applied training, they will not only enable other teachers in our school to adopt the project spirit and logic but also have the opportunity to develop themselves in the professional field. With these goals, our activities include establishing a club on the subject, providing the transfer of the targeted topics to the club students in the presence of a subject expert, and conducting green initiative activities according to the needs of our school by forming small groups and/or workshops within the club and observing the progress of the activity. With the "Ecopreneurs of Tomorrow" Project, it is planned to make sustainability more permanent in the EU criteria in the next year. In addition, it is planned to prepare a program to select in-house mentors among our students and teachers who receive training with the KA1 project and to guide our students who will come in the new academic year. In this context, our project aims to establish institutional sustainability in our school. Thus, when our project is finally completed, the effectiveness of the activities carried out will be permanent.

Conclusions and Further Investigation

Although the project has been a good success for marking an important Point integrating sustainable business practices in line with European Green Deal, there are areas of improvement. From the analysis and the feedback given by participants, it is identified a green entrepreneurial mindset among pupils. This only does not Foster an environment where sustainable business concepts are understood but also actively put into practice. The enthusiasm and the active participation shown by all the parties involved are Proof to the program's relevance and the growing demand for education that needs to be aligned with Environmental sustainability goals and SDGs. The project inspired and educated while creating an awareness and action towards ecopreneurship.

Looking forwards, it's crucial to continue and Build upon the foundations that are established by this project. Future research should Focus on the sustainability and the long-term impacts of this initiative on the participant's entrepreneurial journeys. Translating these green entrepreneurial skills unto real green businesses is important. Furthermore, the scalability and the expansion of the project in different regions and cultures can be explored. Another area of investigation is also the integration of

green entrepreneurship into the education curricula in different levels. Therefore, it is recommended to apply different pedagogical approaches to enhance the effectiveness of teaching green entrepreneurship. These areas of research will not only contribute to the Legacy of the project but also to the broadening the aim of achieving a sustainable future.

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