

ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING FOR UNIVERSITY STAFF AND STUDENTS THROUGH ELECTRONIC PLATFORMS – THE PREMIO EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: Universities have scientific and technical competences which provide them capabilities to develop innovative, high-tech products and services. Successful implementation of these capabilities in the economical environment request entrepreneurship competences and abilities. Premio e-platform addresses the issue of developing an entrepreneurial culture among candidates from higher education (students, teachers, researchers) in a transnational perspective. The paper presents a transnational entrepreneurship training course and a mentoring model with the participation of European specialists. The project is foreseen as an efficient solution to motivate, train and support entrepreneurs, thereby encouraging the success of e-learning in higher education.

Keywords: education, e-learning platform, entrepreneurial training, innovation, business plan, mentoring

1. INTRODUCTION

In a global economy where enterprise sustainability and employability is uncertain, the task of successfully creating a new company requires the best knowledge, application of good practices and the mastery of the most advanced methodologies in enterprise management. In this context, it becomes essential to develop abilities and to deliver proper tools adequate to the necessities of these entrepreneurs. This was recognized by the European Commission in the Report on the implementation of the Entrepreneurship Action Plan, that generated a remarkable set of Good Practices. Higher education, where some of the most advanced know-how in the scientific and technical fields exists, is the ideal environment for nesting highly advanced technological and scientific entrepreneurship and innovation.

PREMIO is a Transnational European project, developed by several partners from Portugal (Tecmaia - Maia Science and Technology Park - the Project Promoter, Maieutica / ISMAI - Maia Higher Institute, MAIAINOVA - Association for Innovation and Development of the Maia Municipality and APCTP - Porto Science and Technology Park Association), Romania ("Eftimie Murgu" University of Resita, Activity foundation for human resources and sustainable development Resita) Estonia (Tallinn University of Technology, Estonian Federation of Engineering Industry) and Greece (Foundation For Research and Technology - Hellas, Technical University of Crete), targeted to potential entrepreneurs and innovators from these countries, with the support of the Lifelong Learning Programme Erasmus of the European Union, aiming to promote entrepreneurship and innovation by focusing on the development and individual promotion of entrepreneurs as well as on helping them go successfully

through the first phase of formation of the company until it has a sustainable existence, based on three major concepts:

- Training Entrepreneurship and Innovation Course
- Mentoring
- Incubation

The partner's professional experience in the market of entrepreneurship training and support services allowed PREMIO to provide substantial input in the development and management of an e-learning platform - an innovative multi-language electronic platform that enables PREMIO to manage learning and collaboration activities, organize on-line courses, workshops, seminars, conduct consulting and support services, with specific focus on management competences development, thus assisting SMEs, professionals and unemployed individuals at a business start-up phase, effective and efficient management of enterprises as well as strengthening of their organizational structure.

2. THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

The platform's support is Moodle software, which is a free and open-licensed learning management system (LMS) package for producing internet - based courses and web sites, a course management system (CMS), a software package designed using sound pedagogical principles, to help educators create effective online learning communities. Moodle is a world-wide, ongoing development project designed to support a social constructionist framework of education. Moodle has a large and diverse user community with over half a million registered users on this site alone, speaking over 75 languages in 193 countries. The Moodle software allows for several access levels, used in the project as follows:

Table.1 Premio's platform levels of access

Administrator	Administrators can usually do anything on the site, in all courses. Also, administrators can view the IP addresses of participants at the
Course creator	Course creators can create new courses and teach in them. Course creators have access to the menu shown in the image, right. Course creators can assign other participants the ability to edit the course by setting accounts to function as teachers.
Teacher	Teachers can do anything within a course, including changing the activities and grading students.
Non-editing teacher	Non-editing teachers can teach in courses and grade students, but may not alter activities.
Student	Students generally have less privileges within a course.
Guest	Guests have minimal privileges and usually can not enter text anywhere.
Authenticated user	All logged in users.

PREMIO platform is an excellent tool to organize the work, tasks and coordination between the leader of each work line and the participants. Technical dictionary work like is using it to coordinate, distribute, send and receive info, docs and tasks. The way it works is like a course: the administrator is the teacher who sends the tasks to be done and the other partners are the students (who have to “do the homework”).

3. PREMIO system concept

PREMIO training course is targeted to all University students, professors and researchers wishing to transform an innovative idea into a technological based spin off or start up enterprise.

By integrating a transnational entrepreneurship training course and a mentoring model with the participation of European specialists, the project is foreseen as an efficient solution to motivate, train and support entrepreneurs.

PREMIO platform addresses the issue of developing an entrepreneurial culture among candidates from higher education (students, professors, researchers) in a transnational perspective. The main objective is to develop generic attributes and skills that are the foundations of entrepreneurship, complemented by imparting specific knowledge about business and management.

3.1. Motivation

The University context should look, at a first site, a privileged environment to incubate entrepreneurs, due to the existing scientific and technological knowledge as well as for the academically and researcher spirit that should promote autonomy, innovation and pioneer. However, current entrepreneurship development initiatives, except for some exemplars cases, have not been very successful in the University context due mainly to the exacerbation of the academical model and to the lack of linking to the entrepreneurial world.

Thus is necessary to create a new strategic model of promotion of the entrepreneurship at the University level that promotes the effective linking to the surrounding enterprise reality and that maintains the accompanying

(mentoring) and training of the entrepreneur, not only in the initial phase but during the whole process of launching the company, which nowadays is very often thoughtless. Each entrepreneur must receive training and motivational counselling in the pre-incubator phase and on enterprise aspects in a second phase, including the obligatory use of Technologies of Information and Communication to prepare for the competitive global market. This must be a Training Plan highly specialized and personalized that prepares the future entrepreneurs for the challenge to manage a business in its different dimensions but also promoter of the success of these initiatives, since that it guarantees the solidity of some structural conditions for its development.

By developing pedagogically-rich learning content and recruiting non-traditional learners, PREMIO directly engages the stated target group and offers them a unique opportunity to lever entrepreneurial training. Such learners also benefit from third-party engagement and interaction through stakeholders outside the university, when being confronted with an assessment on their proposed business ventures.

3.2. Training

To address the entrepreneurial skills of learners, the project offers dedicated pedagogically-rich education and training. In order to achieve this, it deploys well-grounded didactic and technological models as founded in distance education. Students receive specific training on how to start (and run) a business, including the capacity to draft a real business plan and the skills associated with methods of identifying and assessing business opportunities. Students will be thought how embryonic business ideas can be supported (for instance by referring to special loans, business facilities, mentorship, etc.), and what the process is of putting projects into practice and on the market.

Training of academic staff is prerequisite and relies on workshops in which professionally coached and interactive sessions move all attendants towards the development of entrepreneurial attitude and skills. How the actual “learning by doing” by prospective student entrepreneurs is organised, is addressed by the design, configuration and planning of an the e-platform. It deals

with the organisation of business planning inside a supportive and incubating environment, an environment which strongly fosters knowledge acquisition, exchange and creation processes, able to provide for a real learning experience.

The themes to be addressed are Enterprise, Financing of New Business, Marketing, Internationalization and Localization, Business Plan, Innovation Management, Project Planning and Intellectual Property. Training courses are based on a blended regime, with attending (20%) and online (80%) components. The e-learning platform is depicted in figure 1.

The complete program includes the following modules, integrated in two courses:

- **Company:** Knowledge and contexts of company; Characteristic of the entrepreneur; Motivation and development of characteristics of the entrepreneur
- **Financing:** Possible strategies for financing (risk capital, capital seed, access the financing

sources, etc....)

- **Marketing:** Definition and study of the market; The Product and its positioning in the market; Commercial Strategy
- **Business-plan:** How to elaborate a business plan; Definition of a work plan to implement; Viability of enterprise project; Definition of business areas; Definition and strategies for the implementation of the project; Financial Analysis; Necessary administrative and legal procedures to the legal constitution of the company;
- **Innovation:** Management of Innovation; Innovation in the Products, Processes and Organizations; Innovation and Quality; Innovation and New Technologies; Creativity
- **Industrial property:** Legal protection of products/processes
- **Internationalization**

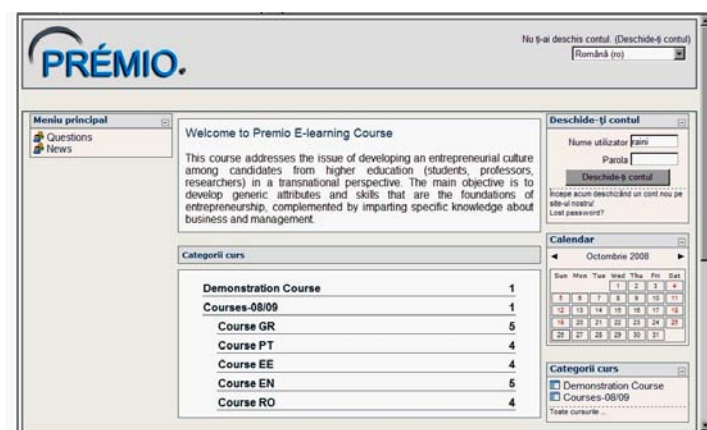


Figure 1. Platform courses in different languages

The course has a total duration of 200 hours divided in 8 modules with 25 hours each. Each module will have 20 hours e-learning (the trainee will access the e-learning platform on-line and will perform the course) and 5 hours will be attending on-site sessions in the form of workshops, respecting the following hierarchy: course, module, lesson.

The followed steps performed in elaboration of course's materials were:

- **module sheet**, starting with an introductory page with something compelling (e.g., powerful quote, compelling story, etc.) that will create a motivation for learning (explaining the interest in the module/lesson); This page also includes the expected completion time for the module/lesson;
- **detailed description**, where for each topic and each session where detailed described the skills needed to be achieved. For example:
- **the content**, realized after a "pedagogical model guide", which provide the context for the practice activity (relate it to a concept or job skill in introductory text) and that they are directly linked to learning outcomes (i.e., terminal and/or

enabling learning objectives), provide first try and second try feedback for practice exercises; the activities (individual or group) for each lesson include discussion forum, chat, case study, problem based learning, videos, activities for exploitation of contents, questionnaires, links for further research and simulation activities.

3.3. Mentoring

In the case of the PREMIO project, formal mentoring in the frame of a mentoring program is designed to promote business plans development and to assist the pre-incubation phase will be used. The mentoring process aims to support the trainees in developing realistic, sustainable business plans, and to support them in the pre-incubation phase, leading to the establishment of successful enterprises. The target group is planned to be formed by 10 university teachers/professors and/or researchers and 30 students.

The role as a mentor is serious and it has to be seen as an important professional tool. The mentor's role is to be facilitative, supportive and developmental. This is

important to note as mentoring relationships are between equals: a mentor should have no supervisory responsibility or authority over a mentee. This definition

also emphasizes that the benefits of the mentoring relationship are mutual.

Table.2 Content of the detailed description table

Session Title	Duration (hours)	Skills		Contents	Activities	Pedagogical material	
		Hard	Soft			Examples	Self-Assessments
Session 1.1 : Title: Division of positions according to organisation's structure and subdivision's tasks	1	Skill of calculation of optimal number of positions and number of employees	Planning / organizing	E-materials	Case study: establishing own company	Examples	No

Drawing up the plan for the mentoring program developed in frame of the PREMIO project includes the definition of aims, the desired outcomes, how long the program will run, a timeline which allows for planning, preparation, publicity, conducting information sessions, selection of participants, how many mentees will be in the program, how to select mentees, how many mentors will be in the program, how to select mentors, performance indicators for evaluating the program, who and how the evaluation will be done.

The advantages of mentoring, may be highlight as a catalyst to reflect upon one's own practice, a way of developing personal and professional skills further, opportunities to network with other professionals, job satisfaction and increased self-esteem and new opportunities for career and professional development.

The benefits of the chosen ones to be mentored aims to form a point of personal contact other than usual, to be a source of support and guidance, a critical friend with whom weaknesses can be explored and addressed and achievements shared and built upon regular meetings a chance to explore teaching and learning in a non-assessed and non-threatening environment.

4. CONCLUSION

Entrepreneurship has become a global trend and is anticipated to create common value, giving hope for brighter tomorrows. By building up an e-platform of entrepreneurship training and in doing so spreading seeds which may grow into thriving companies, we created a sustainable development environment for the PREMIO's electronic platform users.

A main benefit for the learner is the added value which is created in each one portfolio concerning acquired entrepreneurial competence. In the end, the learner is better equipped for successful business start-up, as well as for innovation inside traditional companies. PREMIO fills the blank spot for the platform users where traditionally investments in education and training are few, where traditionally no flexible entrepreneurial learning approaches are present. In reaching the lifelong learner, conventional universities may especially benefit from the transfer of pedagogically-rich learn styles, from distance

education, having the potential to contribute to private sector development, especially the SMEs sector.

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